WIEGO

Women in Informal Employment
Globalizing and Organizing

Tips for Writing Effective Fundraising Proposals

Based on the experience of WIEGO and some of its partners, here are some general tips and suggestions for writing effective fundraising proposals.

1. Finding the Right Donor

There are many different donor organisations – different shapes, sizes, policies, etc. How do you identify the ones that might be good for your organisation? There are several factors to take into account. How demanding are their reporting or administration requirements? How flexible are they? What size grants do they typically give? (There's no point going to a donor that deals in millions, when you only need a few thousand, and vice versa.) Do they support projects in your country or region? Do they demonstrate an interest in supporting workers' organisations? One effective way of identifying the most suitable donors is by asking similar organisations to your own who they've found to be most helpful and supportive – asking around at conferences, meetings etc. Some organisations might be reluctant to share this information, but most will be happy to share this information. Sometimes organizations also post this information in their newsletters or online.

2. Know the Donor – Adapt to Their Needs (or Not)

Each proposal you write should be adapted to the specific needs and requirements of a targeted donor. Review the donor's website and any details in their call for proposals (if this exists.) Talk to the donor if you can, or to other groups who know this donor, and try to assess if this donor will be a good fit for your organization. If the aims and perspective of your organization are different from the expectations and objectives of the donor, it may not be a good fit and you may want to consider looking elsewhere for funds. Not all donors are right for every project or organization.

Once you've read the requirements, make sure your organization can demonstrate that it can meet them and be sure to follow all of the instructions given in the application instructions or call for proposals. It's a good idea to read the application guidelines several weeks to even months in advance in case something will be required that may take you some time to prepare, such as project consultation meetings or organizational documentation you don't yet have in place.

3. Create a Proposal Template – Then Modify As Needed

Although each donor has their own needs and requirements, such things as your organization's mission, vision, programme, objectives, history and structure will not change. Having these things already written down in a proposal template will make it easier to raise funds because when you hear about a call for proposals or an opportunity to approach a donor, a good deal of the work will be done in advance and you can just "cut and paste." This template can be updated and adapted with each new fundraising proposal.

Many fundraising proposals are requested to be submitted in English (or sometimes another UN language is appropriate), particularly for government agencies or large Foundations in the UK or US. If you have the above information prepared in advance, you could consider having a native English speaker review it for you to catch any translation issues.

4. Be Clear About Who You Are

A key element to any proposal is a clear and concise explanation of your organization's mission, vision and programmes. (It may help to think of the vision as the kind of world you would like to achieve and the mission as the specific role your organization plays to achieve this world. Your programmes should lead naturally from these.) If you have a strategic plan in place which provides some goals or objectives for the short, medium, and/or long term, then having concise statements of these will also be helpful. If you don't have a strategic plan or specific goals in place, then you may find yourself having to create these for some funding proposals, which can lead to a danger if your goals are always defined by what donors are looking for.

5. Be Clear About the Need and Your Proposed Solution

In any fundraising proposal, you will be asked to define the need. Sometimes you will be given a lot of space to do this, and other times you may be asked to summarize it very briefly. The need should be related to your organization's primary mission and goals. This is a good place to refer to research on the informal economy that may be relevant for your occupational sector, country or region. The donor will want to hear that you have sufficient expertise and a thorough understanding of the problem – but they will also be looking to see that they agree with your assessment of the problem. It can be useful to refer back to the donor materials and application guidelines to see if the donor is coming at the problem with a specific lens, angle, or theme, such as gender, small enterprise development, social protection etc.

Once the need is clearly stated, the next task is to outline precisely how your organization would address the problem. This is a strategic overview that demonstrates why your organization is in fact the best positioned to address this particular problem, followed by an outline of the specific project activities you are proposing.

One thing that almost all donors want to see is a clear statement about exactly who will benefit from the project activities. You need to say what kind of people you will work with, where they live and how many they are. Donors will also want to know exactly what changes you are hoping will be made in their lives as a result of the project activities. Donors really want to see numbers!

6. Build a Budget

Each project will require its own budget. Sometimes donors will have their own budget format for you to follow, with specific categories, and sometimes they will allow you to establish the budget categories according to your project.

If your organization does not have an overall budget for how it will cover its operating requirements, then you may want to create one – this will help you ensure that your organization is sustainable and not just running from project to project. (Some organizations have an "ideal" budget for costs they would ideally like to cover if they could raise the funds, and a "basic minimum" budget of the absolutely essential costs.)

In every project, try to assess how much of your organizational costs a particular project can also contribute in addition to the funds for direct project activities. Essentially, any project activity places a certain operational burden on your organization and most donors understand that they should contribute something towards these operational costs. (Sometimes called "core" costs.) This may be in the form of a staff person's salary charged to the project (if that person will do some of the project work), or a percentage added for "overhead" or "operations" or "overhead." Check with the donor requirements to see how much can be charged and how they would like to see those costs reflected in your budget. Allocations of 8-10% for overhead/core costs on a project are not unreasonable if the donor guidelines will permit this.

If you have created an "ideal" budget for your operational requirements and you can find a donor who believes in your mission and your organization, then you may be able to secure funding that is solely intended to cover those core costs. This is worth trying!

When reviewing your budget, funders will be asking themselves these questions:
- Can this project reasonably be done with this budget? Based on our knowledge of the country/region, is the budget too high or too low?
- Is there anything missing from this budget?
- Is there sufficient budget detail and explanation to help us understand what is intended?

7. Gather Supporting Materials

Many donors will require appendices or supporting materials, and for each donor these required documents may be different. You should read the application guidelines carefully at the start to be sure you have all these materials or will be able to get them in the timeframe. Some examples of supporting documents requested by donors include: reference letters or letters of support, certification of non-profit or tax status, CVs for project leaders, bibliographies, tables/charts outlining project timing or project milestones, detailed budget spreadsheets, tapes or videos, evaluation reports for previous projects, commitments from partnering agencies, etc.

8. Ensure Your Organization is Strong

For funders in the global North, there has been a strong emphasis over the last decade on "accountability" and "results." Sometimes this can mean having to use certain templates for presenting information (such as logical frameworks), but generally it always means there is a strong emphasis on working with strong, accountable organizations.

You can demonstrate that you are a strong organization by having the following things in place:
- A democratically-elected Board of Directors and a written Constitution showing how elections happen
- An organizational bank account with at least two signatures required (as opposed to directing funds through personal bank accounts)
- Conflict of Interest guidelines to ensure your Board Members cannot receive personal benefit from serving the organization
- Financial systems that allow your organization to track all project expenditures back to separate project grants
- A summary of your organization's history of managing different projects

9. Consider Sustainability

Increasingly, donors want to know that the outcomes of the projects they fund will be sustainable. You may be asked to address this directly in the proposal, or you may benefit even if it isn't asked for if you can address how the impacts of the project will last beyond the timing of a specific project. Don't overpromise things you can't deliver but do take time to consider how your project activities might be made more sustainable and make those changes if they are not too onerous on your organization.

A donor may ask about the sustainability of your organization. In this case, they are likely particularly looking for information about other funders to assure themselves that you will not cease operations during the project period.
An important factor in sustainability is assessing how much your organization can reasonably handle in terms of both funding and project activity. It can be tempting to apply for large amounts of funding but you will need to have the systems in place to manage those funds and if your organization is not already strong and sustainable, large amounts of funding can sometimes cause significant problems.

10. Be Exact

When you have developed a draft proposal, it can help to go back to the donor guidelines again and ensure that you have responded to every question and included every required document. In larger competitions, proposals will be immediately excluded if all of the elements are not complete or the correct documents are not included. This can also involve getting live signatures from Board Members and delivering hard copies to an office, or submitting in an online format you may not be familiar with.

Some donors will have exact specifications for their proposals, such as paper size or font size, margins, requirements for cover pages, etc. Always read and follow the donor guidelines.

11. Write ~~Good~~ Well

Whatever language your proposal is in, review the final document to ensure that your language is clear. If possible, having a native language speaker read and edit the proposal may be helpful, particularly if you are applying to a large competition with many organizations that will have more resources than you currently have. Don't let your proposal go unfunded because the language was not clear to the donor.

12. In the End

Once your proposal has been submitted on time, then...you wait. Or, you may update that same proposal and submit it to another donor. Until you have written confirmation, you don't know if you've succeeded or not. Not all proposals will be successful but if you keep pursuing it and ensuring your organization is strong, you will find the funds you need for your work.

A Short List of "Don'ts" for Fundraising Proposals

- Don't submit after the deadline and expect to be given special consideration.
- Don't send a generic proposal template without adapting it to the specific needs and requirements of the donor.
- Don't send more pages/words than the application calls for.
- Don't use acronyms or jargon without explaining them.
- Don't get the email or mailing address incorrect. Don't send something by email when hard copy is requested, or vice versa.
- Don't leave your organization's survival in the hands of one donor or project proposal.

GOOD LUCK!