



**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

# EFFECTIVELY RESPONDING TO USAID FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES TRAINING MODULE

## **SLIDE 1: Introduction**

Welcome to the “Effectively Responding to USAID Funding Opportunities” module of the “How to Work with USAID” training series.

This module will be of particular value to organizations with limited or no experience working with USAID. But, *any* organization that needs to better develop complete and successful responses to Agency announcements of funding opportunities will find this information useful.

## **SLIDE 2: Learning Objectives**

The learning objectives of this module are to increase your understanding of:

- Where to find USAID funding solicitation documents;
- The main components of a solicitation;
- Key elements to be included in your response and how to incorporate best practices as you prepare to partner with USAID;
- The process the Agency uses to evaluate submissions and select an award recipient; and
- The underlying U.S. Government and USAID regulations applicable. Please note that at the end of the module, we will provide helpful links to these and other resources.

## **SLIDE 3: Why USAID Partners with Organizations**

USAID partners with thousands of organizations around the world to fulfill its mission leading the U.S. Government’s international development and disaster assistance efforts on behalf of the American people. Partnerships and investments assist USAID to:

- save lives

- reduce poverty
- strengthen democratic governance, and
- help people emerge from humanitarian crises and progress beyond assistance.

## DIVIDER SLIDE: Funding Opportunities

USAID is aware that researching and exploring funding opportunities takes time and energy, and provides this training series module to help you make the most of your efforts.

Let us begin.

## SLIDE 5: Types of Funding Opportunities

USAID offers two main types of funding opportunities—assistance and acquisition—that address different needs. These are detailed in Module 1, “Understanding USAID Awards,” but we cover them quickly here.

**Assistance** is when USAID awards funds through a grant or cooperative agreement to a recipient organization to help achieve a public purpose, functioning as a financial supporter with limited involvement. To be considered, an organization must submit an application or a concept note.

**Acquisition** is when USAID awards funds through a contract to purchase or procure goods and services from a contractor for USAID’s own use or to implement an Agency Activity. Under acquisition, USAID is an involved buyer and provides primary direction to the contractor under strict terms and conditions. To be considered, an organization must submit a proposal.

## SLIDE 6: Regulations and Policies

Assistance and acquisition funding opportunities are governed by U.S. Government regulations and policies.

The U.S. Government regulations are:

- The **Code of Federal Regulations**, or C-R, which governs assistance grants and cooperative agreements, and
- the **Federal Acquisition Regulations**, or FAR, which are the primary rules that guide acquisition of supplies and services.

Additionally, there are two sets of USAID policies that are relevant:

- The **Automated Directives System**, or ADS, outlines operational policies covering all Agency and partner Activities. Assistance awards are covered by ADS Chapter 303, titled

“Grants and Cooperative Agreements.” Acquisition awards are covered by ADS Chapter 302, which is titled “Direct Contracting.”

- **USAID Acquisition Regulations**, or AIDAR, govern how the Agency administers public funds.

Many of the questions you may have can be answered by referencing these regulations and policies.

## **SLIDE 7: Find Opportunities**

USAID publicly posts solicitations for applications, concept notes, and proposals. These solicitations are made through different platforms, so knowing where to look is important and it is a good idea to search the relevant platforms on a regular basis. It is recommended that you focus on those opportunities that align best with your organization’s location, mission, capabilities and organization type.

- The USAID Business Forecast, found on USAID-dot-gov, is a searchable database of funding opportunities in the planning stages of all Agency Missions and Bureaus. Please note that not all planned funding opportunities become actual opportunities or awards. Additionally, be advised that the Agency will not accept applications, concept notes, or proposals at this stage.
- SAM-dot-gov is where USAID announces open acquisition opportunities. These announcements are called Requests for Proposals, or RFPs.
- Grants-dot-gov is where assistance opportunities are announced through Annual Program Statements (APSs), or Requests for Applications (RFAs).

More information can be found in Module 1, “Understanding USAID Awards.”

## **SLIDE 8: Read the Opportunity Carefully**

When you find a solicitation announcement that looks interesting, first read the entire document carefully. Then, it is suggested you review several key sections.

First, review the “Statement of Work” or “Program Description,” which defines the purposes and objectives and specifies what Activities USAID wants to fund. Consider whether your organization has the ability to deliver what is sought.

Next, the “Eligibility Information” section specifies the requirements for organizations that can respond to the specific funding opportunity. Make sure you are eligible before investing more time and energy evaluating the opportunity.

Finally, check the deadline. Consider if you realistically have enough time to put together the required information and develop and write a compelling application, concept note, or proposal. If not, it may be best to look for another opportunity.

If you think your organization can compete for the award, further consider your organization's level of readiness to meet other criteria listed. It is essential that your submission include responses to all requested information. Leaving out required information can result in USAID judging your submission to be "non-responsive," which will remove it from consideration.

## **SLIDE 9: Understand the Evaluation Process**

Solicitation documents will explain how USAID will assess submissions to select a partner.

If a point system is utilized, study the scales and recognize that different sections may be relatively more important and thus have more points than other sections.

Sometimes, there will be no numerical points or scales used. Selection factors in this case will be listed. Read carefully to understand if factors are prioritized or not. For example, if factors are prioritized as "Technical" first, followed by "Staffing," then "Experience and Capabilities," and, finally, "Past Performance" it would mean the the most important factor in making the award decision is the strength of competitors' technical plans and the least important factor would organizations' past performance. Remember, though, that *every* factor listed is considered and your submission should therefore address all factors, not just what is prioritized. Other factors may be included, other than the ones we have just listed. For instance, you may be asked to explain your approach to monitoring and evaluating your work or how the program creates local sustainability. You also want to check for any requirements to include local organizations or small businesses as subcontractors or subawardees, depending on the type of solicitation.

## **SLIDE 10: "Best Value" ( GRAPHIC)**

Some USAID solicitations, such as the example shown here from USAID/Sri Lanka, are based upon what is called "best value." You will notice in the highlighted text that the competition is full and open, any firm may compete, and proposed costs must be appropriate, realistic, and reasonable, and that the best value determination will be based on the technical proposal along with the cost proposal.

## **SLIDE 11: Ask Questions**

The "open question period" is the time during which any interested organization may submit questions or a request for clarification regarding a solicitation. This period falls before the final submission deadline, although answers may not be provided until close to that deadline.

- Be sure that you reach out *only* to the contact identified in the solicitation document, as no one else in the Agency is permitted to respond to applicants during the open solicitation process.
- All questions must be submitted in writing and cannot be taken over the phone.

Responses to submitted questions will be made public through an addendum to the solicitation and posted on the site hosting the solicitation (such as Grants.gov or SAM.gov). This ensures that no organization receives an unfair advantage by gaining access to information that is not publicly distributed.

## **SLIDE 12: Funding Opportunities (Summary)**

Here are main points we have covered so far:

- Be sure you read and understand regulations and policies regarding USAID awards.
- Funding opportunities are posted on different platforms and you should search for those that align well with your organization's location, mission, capabilities, and type.
- Read solicitations carefully and take particular note of the objectives of the program, eligibility requirements, and deadlines.
- Submit written questions during the "open question period."
- Prepare your submission to make the most compelling case for selection, based upon the selection criteria specified in solicitation documents.

## **DIVIDER SLIDE: Key Elements**

Next let us talk about what a well-prepared submission to a funding opportunity includes.

## **SLIDE 14: Application Instructions**

In the application instructions section of a solicitation, you will find detailed information about the requirements for your specific response.

These may include:

- a cover letter;
- table of contents;
- acronyms list;
- technical proposal, with executive summary and appendices; and
- cost proposal, budget narrative, and appendices (as needed).

The majority of your submission will focus on the technical and cost proposals.

## **SLIDE 15: Cover Letter**

A cover letter states the title of the Activity or award, solicitation number, and provides the name of the organization(s) submitting the application, concept note, or proposal. It also includes the names, titles, and signatures of the primary and alternate contact people and the names of any proposed subrecipients or partners.

In the example shown here, the contact person is the head of the organization. Cover letters typically come from the president, chief operating officer, or other senior officer, even though others may execute the technical work.

Often, this letter is not counted toward the total page limit, which is listed in the solicitation document. Please note that you must adhere to page limits for individual sections as well as the submission overall. Also, be certain to use acceptable fonts and font sizes, which will also be defined in the solicitation document.

## **SLIDE 16: Table of Contents**

A table of contents helps guide the reader to specific sections and may need to follow a specific structure and numbering system. If so, it will be explained in the instructions.

Your response's numbering system and section titles should match the instructions.

## **SLIDE 17: Acronyms List**

Be sure to include a list of all acronyms you use in your submission and explain what each acronym means.

For example, an entry on your list might be GOA: Government of Angola.

Do not assume that USAID knows what acronyms and abbreviations used by your organization are intended to represent, even if they seem obvious to you.

## **SLIDE 18: Technical Proposal**

The technical proposal provides a description and rationale of your proposed approach, which addresses the challenge or opportunity outlined in the solicitation. This will include programmatic interventions; your monitoring, evaluation, and learning approach; organizational experience and capability; examples of previous work; management and staffing plans; and a summary work plan.

To the degree possible, demonstrate that your organization not only has a good idea, but also can reasonably be expected to carry it out.

## **SLIDE 19: Technical Proposal: Executive Summary**

Write an executive summary that provides a clear and complete, yet short, version of what is covered in detail in the technical proposal.

It should present the proposed goals, objectives, strategy, plan, interventions, management structure, and anticipated results. The application instructions usually specify page limits, which generally run between one and three pages.

## **SLIDE 20: Technical Proposal: Appendices**

Appendices are supplementary materials that provide the reviewers with a more detailed explanation of technical approach you propose, and may include staff CVs or resumes; letters of support; skills matrices of staff, consultants, and partners; and an organizational chart.

Instructions in the solicitation will indicate which information should be included in the appendices versus information that should be included in the main body of the technical response. Sometimes, information in the appendices is used for scoring your application.

## **SLIDE 21: Cost Proposal**

The cost proposal is usually a separate section of your overall response to a solicitation. It is important to follow instructions that may cover how to present a budget; a budget narrative that explains categories and descriptions and justifications for your line items; any appendices that are allowed or needed to support your pricing, costs, or estimates; and any required certifications and standard forms as detailed in ADS Chapter 303.

Note that your budget and budget narrative need to align and should be presented in U.S. dollars.

You may also be asked to provide a cost-share plan, which will detail the resources you would contribute to the total cost of an agreement. The cost-share becomes a condition of an award if it is part of an approved award budget.

The “Preparing Budgets for Assistance Awards” and “Preparing Budgets for Acquisition Awards” modules listed at the end of this module have more information.

## **SLIDE 22: Key Elements *(Summary)***

Here are the main points to consider as you prepare the separate pieces of your response:

- Read and follow the application instructions, including for formats and length, for every section.
- Use the technical proposal—plus any supporting appendices—to describe what you plan to do to address the challenge outlined in a solicitation.
- The executive summary should include all major themes discussed in the technical response.
- A cost proposal, or budget estimate, may be required as a separate component and must follow the forms and formats as specified in the solicitation.

## **DIVIDER SLIDE: Technical Proposal**

As we noted earlier, the technical proposal section is the core of your solicitation response. In the following slides we will discuss the types of information your organization can use to demonstrate its technical approach and experience.

### **SLIDE 24: Four Sections Will Be Evaluated**

As you prepare your technical proposal, consider the criteria USAID will use to assess it. These criteria are provided in each solicitation, including a note on how important each section is. This will help you determine where to focus your efforts.

- The *technical approach* is the most important and carries the most weight in the evaluation process. It describes an organization's understanding of the programming context and how expected results will be achieved.
- Next is the *management approach*, which is the second most important section USAID evaluates. Here, you will describe the roles of the various partners, how their expertise contributes to a comprehensive approach to achieve the overall goal, and how you will ensure coordination among them. Also include details on how your organization will monitor, evaluate, and apply learning throughout the program.
- Third is the *staffing plan*, which outlines how you will identify and use skilled and experienced personnel to successfully achieve the objectives. Also include your plans to rapidly mobilize to implement the program.
- Fourth, USAID considers your *previous work* of comparable size, complexity, or country context to assess your organization's ability to implement the proposed Activity. The Agency may look at the quality of products or services, cost controls, timeliness and completion of milestones, your relationships with subawardees or sub-partners, and your ability to promptly address problems.



USAID will also conduct a cost evaluation. The Agency assesses whether your overall costs are realistic for the proposed work, reflect an understanding of the requirements in the solicitation, and are consistent with your technical application. If your technical response is determined to be unacceptable, a cost analysis may not be performed.

Now, we will review what each part of the technical proposal entails.

## **SLIDE 25: Technical Approach**

The technical *response* is the overview of your proposed Activity, and your technical *approach* explains the specifics of how you will execute your proposed intervention.

The technical approach is the largest section of your technical proposal—and the one that carries the most weight when USAID is scoring submissions to select a partner. Here, you will provide a detailed description of how you will achieve the results described in the solicitation.

- First, you should demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the programming context and the roles and responsibilities of key stakeholders, including government entities, nonprofits, and the private sector. Describe how you will engage these actors and foster partnerships.
- Explain how you plan to achieve the objectives identified in USAID’s funding opportunity description. Outline the specific challenges, your general strategy and plan to achieve Activity objectives, and what results you expect to achieve.
- Include what you will do to monitor, evaluate, and learn from your approach. You should be able to report on the progress you make in concrete and measurable ways.
- Propose a clear vision and specific interventions to achieve the Activity’s goal. Explain how you will maintain flexibility and adapt to evolving conditions and uncertainty.
- Finally, outline how you will maintain the soundness of your approach and the ability to test, document, and share best practices and lessons learned.

## **SLIDE 26: Management and Staffing Plan**

In this section, you will describe how you will manage and carry out the work you are proposing. Describe how you will use your organizational structures and staff skills to complete key tasks.

For example, this section will describe your relationship with partners or subrecipients and the proposed approach for managing them. Here you will include partners’ expertise and their roles in implementation of the award.

Describe how the proposed staffing (including key personnel and core technical and non-technical staff) will contribute to successful implementation. Explain how you will obtain any additional technical

expertise, with a focus on avoiding unnecessary staffing. Rather than identifying individuals, instead focus on the roles and responsibilities of positions.

Outline the lines of authority and decision-making, as well as communication and reporting within your team.

Finally, explain how you plan to transition any technical support or key functions to local partners before the close of the project.

## **SLIDE 27: Organizational Capability and Experience [Graphic]**

Let us look at the next sections of your technical response: “Experience and Capability” and “Past Performance.”

These terms can sometimes be a little confusing. However, USAID solicitations generally differentiate between the two categories.

“Experience and capability” requires you to demonstrate the ability to perform the work requested by describing past experience and current capacities. In this instance, you would include a description of current and ongoing programs that have a direct relationship to the proposed Activities under the solicitation.

In contrast, “past performance” refers to the degree to which you previously completed work successfully. This includes whether you have satisfied stakeholders and partners and have complied with relevant laws and award terms and conditions.

## **SLIDE 28: Previous Work**

Your organization’s previous work can be presented in a variety of formats, through narrative writing, charts, bulleted lists, and more. The solicitation instructions may specify the use of a particular format or template.

You may also ask the designated USAID point of contact for the solicitation if there is a preferred template. If there are no specific requirements on how you should present your previous work, consider a format that works best for your organization.

- A simple spreadsheet could include customer names or partner organizations you work with; brief descriptions of work you completed, including dates and locations; award or funding details; and the names, emails, and phone numbers of references.
- Alternatively, a brief one- or two-page performance report could include details on the work or services your organization provided. It might have a section that enables a customer or partner

organization to provide comments on your organization's effectiveness, quality of work product, timeliness, and ability to control costs.

These categories and formats are merely suggestions. Regardless of the format you use, be sure your information is concise, compelling, and connects to the funding opportunity and work you plan to do.

## **SLIDE 29: Work Plan Elements**

Another component of your technical response may be a work plan. Remember that this is a supplement that outlines how you will implement the proposed Activity.

Check the solicitation instructions to see if they specify the use of a work plan format or template.

If not, you may use the following tips as a guide:

- Include realistic timelines.
- Plan concurrent events if possible. This demonstrates that you can plan multiple efforts simultaneously and effectively manage time and resources.
- Show that you understand the local context when scheduling Activities. For example, consider holidays, elections, school terms, rainy seasons, religious ceremonies, and even the World Cup.
- Ensure that there is alignment between your work plan and the rest of your technical proposal and the proposed budget.

Work you describe could include office logistics and staff recruitment and orientation. Also, think about deadlines for key deliverables requested in the solicitation. This might include quarterly reports or branding and marketing plans. Finally, consider monitoring and evaluation efforts such as site visits, data-quality assessments, reporting, and evaluations.

All Activities and deliverables described in your technical approach narrative must be included in the work plan.

Remember that the format for the work plan you develop when responding to a solicitation may differ from the one you eventually use if your organization receives the award.

## **SLIDE 30: Technical Proposal (Summary)**

Here are the main points to remember when developing your technical response:

- Focus on explaining your technical approach with a description of your management plan, past performance, and ability to accomplish the work.
- Provide information that is concise, compelling, and connects to the proposed Activity.

- A work plan should include the proposed interventions and deliverables described in your technical narrative.

## **DIVIDER SLIDE: Submitting Your Response**

Let us take a moment to cover ways you can become more effective in your response to a USAID funding opportunity.

### **SLIDE 32: Draft, Review, and Submit**

An effective response to a USAID solicitation involves researching many details and carefully thinking about how you will implement the interventions or services you propose. You will want to collaborate among different departments of your organization to ensure that all the pieces of your response are aligned.

First, make sure that you schedule enough time for your team to draft a response and review the entire package.

Then, assign drafting of the response to team members with strong English and writing skills.

Be sure your response is tailored to meet the solicitation's instructions. Follow the guidance on what outline or format to use, what to include in each section, and the deadlines. Take care to focus on restrictions and requirements, such as page limits, paper size, font size, page numbering rules, and section outlines.

Also, be sure to use the same terminology as the solicitation. For example, if the solicitation section title reads "Needs Assessment," use that wording as your section title.

Once the response and all supporting materials have been completed, ask team members with relevant expertise to review.

When you submit your response, take care to record that step:

- If you submit electronically, request an email to acknowledge receipt.
- If you mail in your response, get a legible postmark with the date and time mailed and send it certified or insured.

### **SLIDE 33: Learn and Improve**

Once the response is submitted, debrief with your team and try to learn from the experience. Staff should talk about what worked and what did not in your current response process—and how to improve for future submissions.

If you find you do *not* get funded, seek feedback on your response from USAID.

For acquisitions, write to the contact listed in the solicitation to request a debriefing. This request should be made within three days of receipt of the notice of exclusion from the competition.

Note that USAID does not provide debriefings under its assistance rules. In this instance, write to the listed contact to request a copy of the evaluation and comments on your response.

Use this Agency and team feedback as you consider steps to build expertise, enhance organizational systems, and reassess your alignment with Agency priorities and types of awards.

## **SLIDE 34: Partner with Other Organizations**

Your team debrief might reveal some aspects of your organization you would like to strengthen. Perhaps you have some, but not all, of the required qualifications for a funding opportunity. Maybe you have the technical expertise but not the operational capacity, or you have experience but not in the geographic area.

These are all good reasons to consider partnering with other organizations in what is called a teaming agreement. Partnering with a larger or a more experienced organization is also a great way for smaller or newer organizations to learn about USAID programming.

Partnering often happens when a consortium or group of organizations wins a large award. One partner, often called the “prime” partner or recipient, leads the effort, incorporating one or more sub-partners in the response and budget.

To explore working as a sub-partner with a lead, or “prime,” organization:

- Identify your organization’s value, or niche, within the funding opportunity;
- Research organizations likely to be prime partners and contact them to discuss a possible partnership; and
- Negotiate a role within the consortium, then sign a teaming agreement.

You can learn more about pursuing subawards in USAID’s “Building Strong Sub-Partnerships” training module.

## **SLIDE 35: Compliance**

When your submission arrives at USAID, staff will begin the review process with a compliance check.

Evaluators will check your organization’s solicitation response to ensure it meets three requirements.

- First, does it adhere to the submission deadline?

- Second, does it meet the eligibility requirements?
- And third, does it comply with the instructions for submission, including page limitations? Note that pages that run beyond the limit will *not* be evaluated.

Other compliance considerations may include your organization's policies and assurances for environmental considerations, plans for branding and marking, and commitment to gender, equity, and social inclusion.

## **SLIDE 36: Review of Responses**

After a response has passed the compliance check, USAID reviewers will consider three key factors to determine whether the response is complete and the organization meets Agency expectations.

The first factor is past performance. This information can help predict successful implementation. Ideally, your organization is able to stress any relevant and recent experiences in its response. However, if you are new to doing business with USAID, you may submit performance information that is not tied to government work. The key is to make sure your past performance is relevant to the funding opportunity to which you are responding.

A second factor in USAID's review is cost. The Agency aims to fund responses that offer the best value for high-quality programming. Successful responses focus work effort on program implementation and results.

The third important review factor is responsibility. USAID will consider the financial soundness and business integrity of an organization. It is essential that your financial records and management systems are functioning properly.

If Agency staff cannot make a positive pre-award responsibility determination, they may undertake a formal selection survey involving a pre-award audit of your organization.

See the Automated Directive System, or A-D-S, Chapter 3-0-2 for more information on USAID's assessment process.

## **SLIDE 37: Submitting Your Response (Summary)**

To summarize, the process of developing a response should be a team effort. Ensure your staff has time to draft and review a response that is tailored to meet the solicitation's instructions.

Know how USAID will evaluate your response. Understanding the evaluation criteria can help you prioritize information and effort when preparing your response.

Remember, USAID funding is awarded on a competitive basis. You will want to carefully assess whether your organization is ready to submit an effective proposal that fits with your capabilities and organizational plans.

Finally, schedule time with your team to review and learn from the experience. Do not give up if you determine that your organization is not ready yet; there will be other opportunities in the future.

## **DIVIDER SLIDE: Summary**

We covered a lot of information in this module. Let us review what you learned.

## **SLIDE 39: Key Points**

Here are some key points we covered in this module:

- First, regularly check the USAID Business Forecast. As you consider opportunities, prioritize those that align well with your organization’s mission and capabilities.
- When you have identified a good fit, read the entire solicitation carefully. Structure your technical proposal to align with the stated requirements. This will make it easier for the USAID evaluators to score or rate your proposal or application.
- Ask questions! Submit them to the listed point of contact during the open question period.
- Follow the instructions outlined in the solicitation, including how to submit your response. It is extremely important to comply with the solicitation when it comes to format, such as margins, length, and fonts. You can be disqualified automatically if you do not comply with these instructions.
- Create a strong response. This includes making sure you use appropriate and informed subject matter expertise and strong English writing skills.
  - Assign drafting of the response to team members with strong English and writing skills.
  - Focus on your technical expertise, past performance, and ability to accomplish the work.
  - Be specific—do not force USAID to make assumptions.
- Finally, consider partnering with an organization that has experience working with the Agency.

We encourage you and your staff to download the quick reference guide and other resources in this module so you can easily refer to the information you have learned here. You can find additional guidance in other modules of the “How to Work with USAID” training series.

As a closing note, we know that preparing a response requires a lot of staff and organizational resources. This module does not guarantee you will win an award, but we hope that it has given you a better understanding of the process and some best practices to maximize your time and effort in preparing a response on your path to working with USAID.

## **SLIDE 40: Resources**

Here, we provide some resources to help you understand USAID awards and funding opportunities in more detail.

## **SLIDE 41: Thank You**

Thank you for taking time to learn about USAID's requirements for responding to solicitations.

Remember: It takes time to develop a successful partnership that achieves both your organization's and the Agency's goals. Download the quick reference guide for this module to remind you of important guidelines and helpful hints.

## **SLIDE 42: Acknowledgement**

This module was produced by the United States Agency for International Development. The presentation team includes staff from USAID and the Partnerships Incubator. USAID thanks all the individuals who contributed their time and ideas toward the development of this training module. Please email any feedback and questions to [IndustryLiaison@usaid.gov](mailto:IndustryLiaison@usaid.gov).