The Key Information for All Applications – the 14 Questions

Learning Outcomes

As a result of following this session, you should be able to:

- understand the principles of good project design.
- understand the key questions that donors are likely to ask.
- develop a concept note which addresses the donors' key questions.
- develop a strategy for acquiring essential donor information from internal sources
- understand the basic principles, processes and terms of monitoring and evaluation.

Those Fifteen Questions

"I think I'd make a good trainer for your business."
"Oh really Anne, but we run courses in resource mobilisation and our trainers are specialists – with the greatest respect, you're a clinical trials manager and I'm not sure our participants will get why you're the trainer."
"I know that's my job title, but everything I do is about securing the resources."
"OK, this train is speeding into London, we've got 15 minutes before we arrive, convince me."

"So, Bill, what do you think is the most important factor in deciding whether a clinical trial takes place?"
"Good medical science, I hope."
"Sometimes, but 100% of the time, it's down to whether you can find the funding. Now there are only a few major funders for the medical trials we run, so I visited their websites and downloaded their application forms. It was only a handful, so I mashed them up into one composite form. Their questions are pretty similar. I then entitled it: 'Clinical Trials Control Form' and asked all the researchers to complete it, before we went any further with the trial."
"Now this is interesting."

"I used to ask them to help me with the various bids, but it was such hard work getting them engaged – somehow getting the money was seen as grubby task, beneath them. Now they innocently believe they are filling in an essential management document and I have all the information to fill in those funding application forms."

"That's brilliant – let's take this further."

Somehow, Anne never did become a trainer when she retired from the Medical School, but it did inspire me to repeat her achievement. Whilst there may be only a few funders of medical trials, when you are helping organisations all over the world, there are many more funders to consider. To find consistency across their application forms was a challenge, but not impossible.

So, I set about an exhausting study of the application forms of nearly 100 of the largest grantmakers across the world, including governments and foundations. It took weeks, but, after a while, a pattern emerged, revealing a set of common 14 questions. The simplest form covers just these fifteen questions. For the most complex ones, with dozens of questions, you can trace them all to one of these 14 – they are just variations on this theme.

If you can prepare your organisation to answer these questions, as a standard part of project development, you should have sufficient information to complete the application forms of even the most sophisticated of funders. If the funder doesn't tell you what they want to know, imagine they are asking these questions.

The Fourteen Questions:

	Beneficiaries
1	How many people will benefit from the project (primary and secondary)?
2	What is their specific need (opportunities to education, health, disability etc)?
	Organisational Context
3	What are the overall aims of your organisation?
4	How do your organisational systems engage and reflect your beneficiaries (in terms of governance, staffing and consultation)?
	Relevance of External Environment
5	How does your project fit in with the work of other organisations? How do you complement their work/policies and not duplicate?
6	What is the relevance of the project to our funding criteria and policies?
	Project Details
7	What are the aims of project (SMART* outcomes required)?
8	What are the key activities?
9	When does the project start and what is the timescale for completion?

10	How much funding is required, for what (the inputs)?
	Monitoring and Evaluation
11	How will you monitor the project (in terms of outcomes and/or process)?
12	How will this info be used – the evaluation processes?
	Continuation Plans
13	If the project continues beyond our funding period, how will you fund it in the long term? Or…
14	How will you disseminate the results if it ends when our funding ceases?

Question 6 – how does this project meet our funding priorities – will need to be adjusted for each application. Most of the other answers can be compiled from standard information, used for all applications.

* SMART Outcomes are:

Specific
Measurable
Attainable
Relevant or Realistic
Timebound

Not every form, in fact very few, followed this order, but there is a logic to this sequence. Questions 1-6 about the context of the project – the development conditions around it. This the preparatory, design phase of a project. Questions 7-10 are about the implementation of the project. Questions 11-14 initially overlap with implementation, but then move on to the future of the project – its dissemination and sustainability. There's a chronology to this form. In this way, the requirements of funders and the components of good project design are the same.

There were some questions which were very common, but we didn't include them in the checklist. We wanted to concentrate on universal questions and to keep the number manageable – otherwise the checklist would be too long and over-complex. Common, but non-universal questions included: 'what are risks to your project?' and 'how will the project impact upon its environment?'

'This checklist really works – I make sure that all our projects are laid out in Concept Notes, so that they answer these questions. As a result, we have better projects and can quickly and easily respond to funding opportunities.'

It is worth replicating Anne's exercise and analysing the funders for your sector – they may have a different and more relevant under-lying pattern.
If you can produce a summary of your project (a Concept Note) which answers all of these questions (except 6) **before** you complete a single application form, then you will be able to adapt the core information for each separate funder without having to repeat the information trawl each time. This will leave only one question that needs to be adapted for each form – how your project meets their priorities.

It's worth looking into some of the questions in greater depth:

One	**How many people will benefit from the project (primary and secondary)?**

You must be precise over the numbers and types of beneficiaries. Numbers give donors a sense of scale. Where the donor is not an expert in your sector, they may not understand the detail of the work, but they will understand numbers (often they are business people, accountants or lawyers). They need to be fed with numbers and they need them to logical, verifiable and justifiable.

Most funders are used to dividing beneficiaries into two groups:

1. Primary beneficiaries. These are the people who are going to be directly affected by your project. The numbers can be small, but the project will have a high impact upon them. Many of the more sophisticated funders accept that the cost per beneficiary may be very high.
2. Secondary Beneficiaries. These are people who will have a less direct relationship with your project, but it will still impact on their lives. The precise impact of your project on secondary beneficiaries may not be easy to identify.

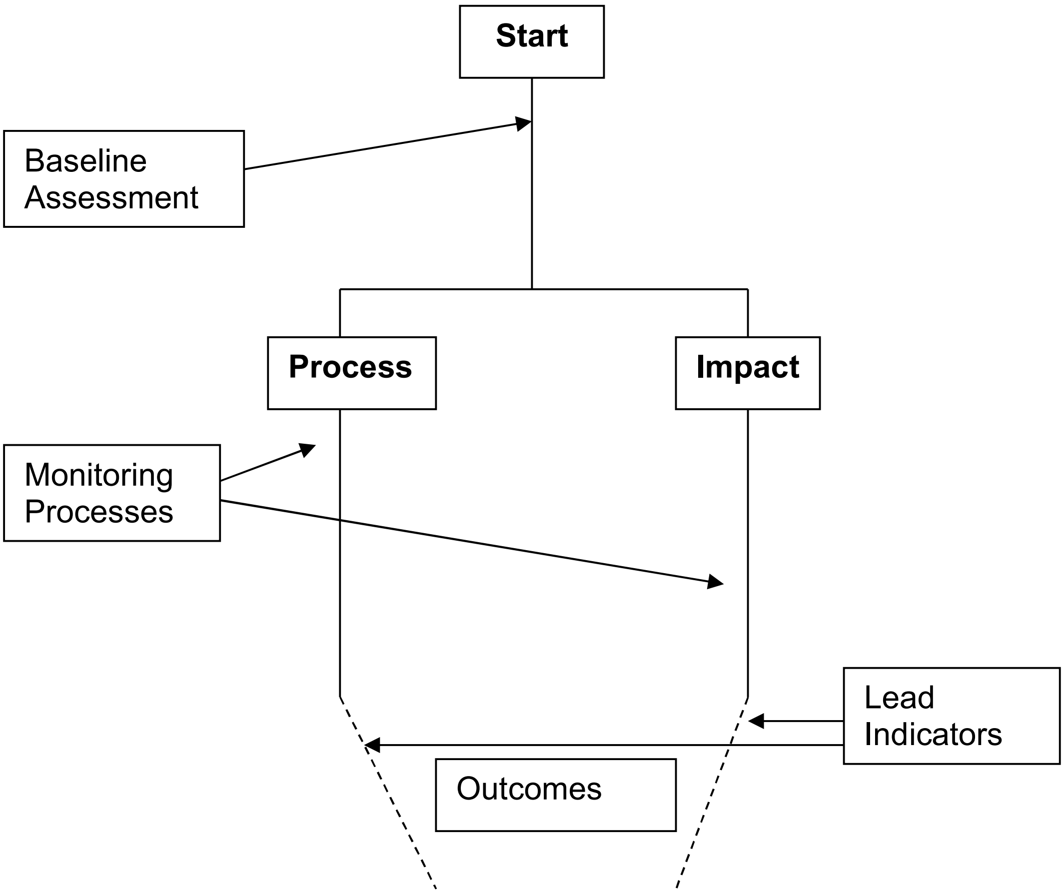
You'll need to decide whether you're going to claim a high impact on a small group of primary beneficiaries, with a high cost per beneficiary; or, whether you're going to include a wider group of people with a more diluted impact.

An example of the former could be an intensive health programme that works with people with complex conditions. An example of the latter could be an employability project where a small number of people get jobs (primary beneficiaries), but a large number of people (their families) gain from the increased livelihoods.

	Monitoring and Evaluation
11	How will you monitor the project (in terms of outcomes and/or process)?
12	How will this info be used – the evaluation processes?

It is worth having a rudimentary understanding of the principles of evaluation, both to be convincing with funders and to spot a sound answer from your operational colleagues. There is basic process to monitoring and evaluation:

A Simplified Evaluation Process



At the start of any project process, there should be a 'baseline assessment'. This is a measurement of the current situation, before the project has got underway. Without this it will be difficult to identify the changes that have taken place.

Evaluation of a project can often be split into two aspects: process and impact. Process evaluation seeks to assess the effectiveness of the methodology – this may show how the same way of working can be applied to other issues, a real 'spin-off' from a project. Impact evaluation seeks to measure the changes for the target beneficiaries. There can be 'outcomes' for both the process and the impact. It's important to know whether a project is to be evaluated for either of these aspects, or whether it will be a combination of both.

Funders want to see outcomes – genuine improvements and changes in the lives of your beneficiaries. Often these outcomes might not happen for a long time after the funding period. Furthermore, it becomes very difficult to decide your precise contribution to these outcomes, as, over time, many other factors might influence the changes.

One way of getting around this dilemma is to generate 'lead indicators' for the outcomes. These are short term signs that the eventual outcomes will happen.

Baseline Assessment and Lead indicators – a Case Study

Let's look at these elements in an example. A project to prevent children living on the streets had discovered that young people with a combination of three 'risk factors' were much more likely to become 'street children'.

1. Non-engagement with formal education
2. low self esteem
3. disrupted family environment, often leading to breakdown of the family systems

Therefore, a group of vulnerable young people were assessed as to their exposure to these risk factors. This was the 'baseline assessment'. These young people were then put through a unique programme that combined three forms of support - as an integrated service: family support, personal development programmes, and educational support. The evaluation of the programme aimed to look at the value of how the collaboration across these three services - for a single purpose (a process evaluation). This was intended to show whether this model could be used for this and other social problems. Another form of evaluation looked at how effective the programme was at reducing the risk factors within this group of young people (impact evaluation).

Ultimately it was virtually impossible to measure a real impact of this programme within the three-year time frame of the funding. Therefore, they established a number of 'lead indicators' which would show within a short time frame that progress was being made towards the ultimate outcomes.

The lead indicators were all evidence of positive changes in the risk factors, such as attendance at school. They were not measurements of the eventual outcome, but indicators of progress, with the 'stepping stones' towards the outcomes. They were measurable within the funding period and provided re-assurance that progress was being made, giving the funder the confidence that the outcomes would be achieved.

Review Questions

1. Which questions are relevant to the design phase of a project?

2. Which questions will need the most adaptation for different donors and which ones can be provided with universal and standard answers?

3. Allocate the following statements to different questions:

   a. 'We will engage 4,235 students, train 397 science teachers, 30 laboratory staff and150 academic managers. 15 schools will be supported with ICT and laboratory equipment and we will organise 10 regional science fairs.'

   b. 'Women's organisations continue to struggle with challenges related to internal organization, mobilization, leadership transition, safety and wellbeing. Given these internal constraints and external contexts, many organizations work on narrow short-term advocacy or urgent service-delivery, with little capacity to expand alliances, vision innovative strategies and be forward thinking'.

   c. 'We will conduct a Learning Needs Analysis, which will form part of a baseline survey, to be conducted prior to work commencing with the organisations. Information will be collected as part of AWDF's usual MEL framework and integrated into AWDF's general Results Management Framework. One key question we wish to answer is how strengthened leadership and governance capacities can be identified in and tracked through stronger work outcomes and improvements in the lives of women, girls and communities in areas supported by those strengthened organisations.'

4. 'We are unsure of funding environment in three years, when the project is completed. Therefore, it is difficult to predict how we will fund the continuation beyond this point. We have faced this problem many times before and have been successful in securing sustainable funding for most of our activities, such as the Ntcheu rural clinic outreach programme and the disability rights groups in Balaka District.' Is this an adequate answer to Question fourteen? What other answers can you think of?

Activities

1. Look at the fifteen questions and rank them in order of importance. Which information is essential for project design and which information is desirable? Does your organisation easily generate the essential information? How can you persuade your colleagues to capture the desirable information (which is equally important for donors)?
2. Are some questions linked with each other? Which ones and in which ways?
3. Which questions would your organisation struggle to answer? How can you improve your capacity to answer these questions?
4. Take one of your proposals, ideally one not in an application form, and give it to a colleague/friend. Equip them to use the fifteen-question checklist and ask them to assess and 'score' your proposal.
5. Which questions are not fully answered in your proposals? Are the gaps due to presentational shortcomings – the information is available, but it was not included? Or, are the gaps due to substantial shortcomings – the organisation does not generate this information?
6. Decide how you can address one presentational shortcoming.
7. Decide how you can persuade your organisation to make changes, so that you can address the structural shortcomings.
8. Develop a Concept Note for a project, which answers all of these questions, except number Six (that gets inserted when a donor opportunity arrives!).

<u>Summary</u>

In this section we have unravelled the complex nature of application forms and shown that all of them are derived from 14 core questions. Developing answers to these questions will enable you to design robust projects and then easily convert this information into funding applications.

We have seen that good project design and good applications are very similar and should be produced in one smooth process. A well-designed project, considers its context – the needs of the beneficiaries and the role of existing actors; it is well structured, linking inputs with impacts, through activities, outputs and outcomes; and, furthermore, a good project learns from itself and considers its future. These are all the questions you will face on application forms – and they should be ones you have answered already.

'Using this checklist means that you can see the gaps in your projects and remedy them. Much better to become your own critical assessor and adapt accordingly than measure your weaknesses by the number of failed applications.'

You can measure your application of this idea by the number of prepared concept notes you have developed for your proposed projects. Having these in place will save you days, if not weeks, in developing proposals to open competitive calls.

You'll not miss deadlines and the applications will be accurate and internally accepted.

<u>Objectives</u>

As a result of understanding this session, you should be able to:

- understand the key questions that donors ask
- prepare information that will answer these questions - in advance of funding calls.
- develop strategies to address gaps in your organisation's ability to answer donor questions, whether they are presentational or structural
- understand the basic process and terms for monitoring and evaluation.
- develop concept notes for all of your projects in need of external funding.
- present an appropriate project description for a funder who has not been specific about what they need to know.
- be more successful in applying for funding.

Appendix One: Funding Scoring System

	Criteria	Points Available	Assessment		
	Beneficiaries		**A**	**B**	**C**
1	How many people will benefit from the project (primary and secondary)?	**1**			
2	What is their specific need (opportunities to education, health, disability)?	**1**			
	Organisational Context				
3	What are the overall aims of your organisation?	**1**			
4	How do your organisational systems engage and reflect your beneficiaries (in terms of governance, staffing and consultation)?	**1**			
	Relevance of External Environment				
5	How does your project fit in with the work of other organisations, how do you complement their work/policies and not duplicate?	**1**			
6	What is the relevance of the project to our funding criteria and policies?	**1**			
	Project Details				
7	What are the aims of the project (SMART outcomes required)?	**1**			
8	What are the key activities?	**1**			
9	When does the project start and what is the timescale for completion?	**1**			
10	How much funding is required, for what (the inputs)?	**1**			
	Monitoring and Evaluation				
11	How will you monitor the project (in terms of outcomes and/or process)?	**1**			
12	How will this info be used – the evaluation processes?	**1**			
	Continuation Plans				
13	If the project continues beyond our funding period, how will you fund it in the long term? Or…	**1**			
14	How will you disseminate the results if it ends when our funding ceases?				
	Totals	**13**			

Scoring

1 point	Sufficient information and good quality answer
0.5 point	Insufficient information or poor quality answer
0 point	No evidence or very poor answer

The Fourteen Questions (A Template Application Form):

	Beneficiaries
1	How many people will benefit from the project (primary and secondary)?
2	What is their specific need (opportunities to education, health, disability etc)?
	Organisational Context
3	What are the overall aims of your organisation?
4	How do your organisational systems engage and reflect your beneficiaries (in terms of governance, staffing and consultation)?

	Relevance of External Environment
5	How does your project fit in with the work of other organisations? How do you complement their work/policies and not duplicate?
6	What is the relevance of the project to our funding criteria and policies?
	N/A
	Project Details
7	What are the aims of project (SMART* outcomes required)?
8	What are the key activities?
9	When does the project start and what is the timescale for completion?
10	How much funding is required, for what (the inputs)?

	Monitoring and Evaluation
11	How will you monitor the project (in terms of outcomes and/or process)?
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