Tips on Making Your Solicitations
Invite Context-Driven Adaptive Programming

These tips are part of a series of tips and resources to support context-driven adaptation in programming. For other resources, see the Context-Driven Adaptation Collection at https://usaidlearninglab.org/context-driven-adaptation-overview

Most USAID programming is managed by implementing partners (IPs) in response to solicitations issued by field Missions or USAID/Washington operating units. The way that these solicitations are crafted conveys strong signals to IPs concerning USAID's expectations around program implementation and management. As the Agency promotes more adaptive approaches to tackling development challenges, it is important that solicitations communicate to potential partners a clear sense that USAID wants them to take context carefully into account in an ongoing way, and to adapt activities to stay relevant and effective.

Adaptive management doesn't happen in a vacuum. It requires the underlying project/activity theory of change to consider power dynamics, incentives, relationships and norms central to its success; ongoing context monitoring; and a collaborative relationship between USAID and IPs. Clarity in solicitations creates the enabling space for context-drive, adaptive programming.

These tips are designed to help staff improve their solicitations to match context-driven, adaptive designs and intent. The tips in this document can be tailored to acquisition or assistance approaches. There is no evidence that context-driven adaptive programming is better suited for a particular award type. The tips are laid out across several common sections or aspects of solicitations, though the format of solicitations can vary widely by the type of award anticipated.

Within Background

1. *Acknowledge History* - Be clear about what has already been done or tried, how it worked or didn't, and how that informs the purposes of this design. Liberia example
2. *Frame the Issues in Context* - Be clear about how the situation has evolved and may continue to. The Political Economy Analysis (PEA) Framework sections (foundational factors, rules of the game, here and now, dynamics) offer an elegant and succinct way to describe the political economy of the context. The 5 Rs from the Local Systems Framework also is a clear way to describe a context more broadly, with political economy infused into its details. Senegal example

Within Hypothesis and Objectives

3. *Hypothesize About Power* - As part of your activity's hypothesis, it should embed notions of why and how change will come about - what will either change incentives or align with existing ones to enable the activity to succeed, and/or how will it discover those. Liberia example, Bosnia example, Serbia example, Vietnam example
4. *Value the Valuable* - As part of your activity's logic and expected results, define objectives or outcomes such that shifts in incentives, relationships, or consensus "count"

in themselves, where programming contributes to them. Where these are vital steps to change happening, they must be acknowledged and monitored as valuable outcomes. Vietnam example, Armenia example, Guatemala example

5. *Recognize The Need to Revisit Your Initial Theory of Change (TOC)* - A TOC represents USAID's understanding - at the time of project/activity design - of the most likely pathways to achieving programmatic objectives. Lag time between design and activity start-up, coupled with the fragile and dynamic contexts in which we work, may necessitate adjustments to the initial TOC. Build in 'everyday' political economy analysis and regular reflection points to validate or revise the TOC.

Within Technical Approach

6. *Make Guiding Principles Useful* - Many solicitations include guiding principles or other statements around how programming should work. These should be reflected in how proposals respond to the core challenge and approach, rather than serving as separate topics for response. The more that the solicitation can invite proposals to interpret guiding principles and describe how applying them will drive outcomes, rather than "write to the principles" as values, the more they will help you to differentiate between proposed approaches. Cambodia example, Bangladesh example, Serbia example, Colombia example
7. *Define What We Mean By Adaptive Management* - Adaptive management is the new black, and the term is showing up more in solicitations and proposals. How this is interpreted and what it means operationally, however, varies widely. Be sure to articulate what you mean by adaptive management, and be clear about the level of specificity you are seeking from offerors in explaining their understanding and operating approach. This should be reflected in the SOO/SOW/PD, evaluation criteria and instructions to bidders. Liberia example
8. *Less Is More* - A solicitation that places its emphasis on results rather than illustrating activities toward those results is often stronger and leaves space for the proposal to define its best ideas. This is true for any solicitation but matters particularly when trying to be context-driven and reflect power dynamics, where illustrative activities may reflect untested assumptions and sway your audience unintentionally by implying a USAID perspective on power dynamics. A Statement of Objectives (SOO), for example, provides high-level objectives for inclusion in a solicitation in lieu of a more detailed Statement of Work (SOW) or Performance Work Statement (PWS). With the SOO approach, USAID sets out the outcomes and results it wants to achieve and asks offerors to propose their own solutions, creating space for innovative approaches and non-traditional actors.
9. *Show Don't Tell* - Related to the above, where results are defined, they should be described clearly in ways that thread power dynamics through them. Rather than "mobilize citizens to press for XYZ Policy" a result of "consensus around XYZ Policy strong enough to spark independent citizen action" actually makes the result language sensitive to context. The first phrase defines the result as a simple step to be taken by the implementer - an output. The second phrase defines the result as an outcome and makes clear that it is only possible to achieve through navigating the context, because it

depends on what consensus is strong enough to spark citizens to take their own action, which is not known in advance. This allows you to select partners based on how they would approach achieving the results, following guiding principles, rather than on their simply listing what steps they will take. Liberia example

Within Instructions

10. *Instructions to Describe How They'll Work* - Instructions primarily tell someone the expects sections of their proposal, including page lengths, charts and annexes, and the like. As part of the instructions, consider asking for language or an applied example around how they intend to read and navigate power dynamics - for example, a section on approaches to be applied to learning and collaboration. Zimbabwe example
11. *Embed Context in How* - Instruct that cutting across how proposals describe their technical approach, management, and MEL, they should illustrate their context understanding as well as their adaptiveness. Context understanding and adaptation should therefore not be separate sections but elements across the proposal. Liberia example

Within Personnel

12. *Require Context Awareness and Soft Skills* - Ensure that your requirements for personnel, key or otherwise, encompass their familiarity with the context or similar types, not just familiarity with technical areas. Consider asking offers to blend experts with local knowledge with those with relevant technical expertise, but experience applying it in similar (but not the same) contexts. Further, ensure that they have the skills in learning, synthesizing information, managing under uncertainty, facilitation, and other aspects necessary to managing adaptive programming. Cambodia example
13. *Seek Staffing Patterns Not Staff* - While much of the attention in solicitations is given to key personnel and their requirements, often equally important is the proposal's overall staffing pattern and how it conceives of the staff footprint and collective skills necessary to implement the award. This can be very insightful into their ideas around the real work entailed in implementation, and by implication, how they expect the activity to work and be adapted over time. This also prevents over-specifying a certain position and missing a great candidate because they don't match exactly. By asking for an effective overall staffing pattern and reserving the right to designate which positions are Key, you can evaluate at the level of the overall staffing rather than just the requirements for a chief of party, and get more insight into the thinking behind each proposal. Bangladesh example, Senegal example

Within MEL

14. *Talk About Learning* - Simply asking the proposals to describe learning objectives relevant to the program can both offer insight into their CLA approach and its relationship to power dynamics, and also signal that USAID values learning. Their answer should say how they will facilitate feedback loops for learning among interested stakeholders, not just extract information. Their replies will not replace a Mission learning agenda, though learning within activities can often contribute to a learning agenda at higher levels. Their

replies should offer useful insights into how they plan to use learning in programming, and what they think is worth learning about. Senegal example, Guatemala example

15. *Ask About Context Monitoring and Decisions* - In your solicitation, ask how applicants would plan to adapt to a dynamic implementation context over time, and what information about the context they would need in order to make those decisions. While many methods are available and often described in PPL/LER or other documents (sentinel indicators, systems mapping, etc.), a proposal's familiarity with how they can be used in adaptive management can point to depth of understanding. Cambodia example
16. *Do Away With Suggested/Illustrative Indicators* - To foster local buy-in and ownership, consider asking offerors to describe how they plan to systematically engage and involve local stakeholders in MEL. To the extent that you ask them to propose (initial) metrics that reflect their understanding of how best to measure progress, view these a useful as a lens into their thinking rather than as a starting point for measurement. The value is how their answer elaborates their understanding of when and how change will happen, and you'll get a better sense of this if you haven't already suggested "right" answers. Zimbabwe example

Within Management

17. *Managing Stakeholders Counts Too* - Solicitations often look at management purely in terms of internal efficiency and clear communication. However, as an aspect of management, consider asking for an advisory body or reference group, or simply asking implementers to describe how they intend to ensure the activity benefits from oversight and ground-truthing by a core group of diverse stakeholders. (For more on effective advisory bodies, see tips on advisory councils). You may also want to ask offerers to describe their proposed makeup for this group, and how they will engage them for maximum benefit. Proposals should articulate how they will not only respond to USAID but establish or link with existing feedback loops that foster downward accountability so that the programming is accountable to stakeholders. Liberia example
18. *Planning to Adapt* - A crux issue in adaptive management is how to know when to make a shift in direction. In your solicitation, ask not only for proposals to reflect plans to gather information and make adjustments, but specifically how such adaptation will be decided and at what levels, whose input will be considered and gathered, and how decisions will be documented. If possible, state how you will work with the implementer to support adaptation during programming. Cambodia example

Within Institutional Capabilities

19. *Value Capability to Adapt* - Institutional capabilities are often a grab-bag of internal tools and their past application. To the extent that proposals are asked to demonstrate capabilities, be sure to ask about the capability to adapt and adjust, not only to drastic changes in environment, but to more normal but still significant shifts in context. Reviewers should focus on proposals' outlined speed of sensing and interpreting, and integrity of overall approach to adaptation.
20. *Leading From Behind* - Again, to the extent that you ask for proposals that define institutional capabilities, ask about the ability to foster local ownership and facilitate

outcomes. An explanation in a proposal of what serves to justify this capability may be revealing, and it is another opportunity for an implementer to signal what they understand by context-driven and adaptive programming. Proposed approaches to facilitating across power dynamics can be powerfully revealing about how savvy a potential implementer is.

Reflecting in Evaluation Criteria

21. *Less Is More* - If you believe that the change you're aiming at requires difficult and holistic engagement across a dynamic context, make this clear by reducing how many priorities you set in evaluation criteria. Many solicitations list dozens of bullets of evaluation criteria within each major section they intend to evaluate. While this pays lip service to diverse issues, it limits the TEC's ability to differentiate proposals. View the sections to be evaluated holistically, with your points made in the earlier aspects through clear results and objectives that embed attention to power dynamics and adaptation to context, and you'll be better placed to select the partner most likely to succeed.
22. *Weave Through Rather Than Pull Out* - Do not pull realism or relevance into a separate section for evaluation. The realism of the approach, relevance of programming over time in the context, and the drive to learn and improve programming should be evaluated as integral aspects of the different sections (technical approach, MEL, management, or whichever ones you're using). Even if you have listed excellent guiding principles, do not evaluate them separately. Pulling them out implies that this is just one component of the program, and likely a less valuable one to get right; weaving them through all evaluation makes them necessary aspects of each element in the overall proposal. Senegal example