

ACBAR commissioned ATR, an Afghan research and capacity-building agency, to train two groups of eleven National NGO (NNGO) members part of the Twinning Programme on proposal design. ATR delivered four two-day courses to each group from July 2016 to November 2016. In December 2016, ACBAR extended the training by two two-day courses to each group. The six courses were delivered in Kabul by Ms. Lola Cecchinell, ATR's Senior Director. This report is intended to inform the design of future training activities in Afghanistan, based on results and lessons under the ACBAR programme.

Training Afghan NGOs: what works?

Targeting

Selecting the trainees well ensures cost-efficiency and gender-balance

- Select trainees with good English oral and writing skills (if the instructor is an English-speaker), or recruit a national instructor if trainees cannot meaningfully engage using the English language;
- Select trainees with proposal writing responsibility, previous proposal writing experience and management responsibility in their organisations to ensure knowledge is trickled down;
- Assign quotas for women to participate in training sessions, and therefore ensure they have equal access to increased knowledge and skills than men

Organisation

Organise the training considering trainees' capacities

- Keep **groups small** (8-10 participants) to maximise learning and interaction with trainees;
- Organise groups according to their **capacities** and adapt the training content to each group, even when that involves changing the training agenda; better to cover less topics, making sure that trainees integrate learning, rather than rushing to cover all the topics in the agenda;
- Rely on **group dynamics**: identify trainees with high potential and include them in groups that can use their potential, pair trainees with different capacities in groups during practical work;
- Use different methods and techniques to foster *trainees' autonomy*; lecture and theory-focused methodologies create passive listeners and prevent effective learning;

- **Practical work** (exercises, tests) should be dominant in training modules developed for NNGO trainees, and contextualised based on Afghanistan's realities;
- Focus on equipping trainees **with systematic methods and tactics** to guide them throughout RFP reading, proposal design and writing processes;
- Invite **guest-speakers** from different organisations to engage with trainees and challenge them on specific key issues (gender marker, project sustainability, food security etc.).

Format & Timing

Short sessions spread out over the long-term maximise learning:

- Trainees unanimously reported that training formats involving one-shot course over consecutive days was not effective; they put limitations to trainees' learning and the instructor's ability to adapt the training content to the trainees' needs and capacity. ACBAR chose to spread out the training over six months which allowed the development of a two-way learning relationship. The trainer and the trainees work together to find the basis to create and build on new knowledge;
- Take into consideration participants' span of attention; best practice recommends scheduling a maximum of 4 to 5 hours a day with regular breaks.

Attendance & Regularity

- NNGOs shall commit to assign the same person to attend all the training sessions; This must be compulsory otherwise it is a waste of resources for both the NNGOs and the instructor;
- Regularity of participation should be a condition for future attendance in training courses: regular attendance, punctuality and participation in class shall be rewarded.

What are Afghan NNGOs other training needs?

Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) is the core area where trainees need support. They unanimously reported at the end of the training course that while they had made progress in understanding the content of logframes and objectives/activity and indicator design, their M&E theoretical and practical knowledge is poor. This translates into inconsistent proposal design as well as inadequately monitored projects. This training area shall encompass the design of monitoring plan, methods of data collection, quality assurance, analysis of data as well as reporting against indicators.

"We need to know more about logical frameworks and M&E. It is not taught in school, but only in short workshops and training sessions. Now I understand that M&E is more than just tools and verification, it's the foundation of a project"

Hayat Sadat, M&E Officer, RCDC

Other skills are fundamental for NNGOs to be able to define a Theory of Change, conceptualise, plan and implement sound interventions in the first place, and lay them out in a clear and effective manner in their proposals. They include **logic and reasoning**, **knowledge of development**, **analysis** and **synthetic writing**. This requires a longer-term approach in supporting NNGOs and commitment for the development of a local capacity for the design, delivery and evaluation of humanitarian and development interventions in Afghanistan.

What do they recommend to donors?

- **Simplify** the language of the RFPs and **standardise** the proposal formats, and thus reduce potential for confusion and misunderstanding of requirements;
- **Increase the involvement of NNGOs** in reflective discussions and knowledge-sharing events about humanitarian intervention and development. NNGOs would benefit from greater exposure and participation in discussions with INGOs, donor institutions and government. In turn, NNGOs could share valuable experiences and ideas, in particular on how to design interventions;
- **Improve NNGO-donor interactions** around RFP and proposal expectations during and after the tendering process to reduce the risks of RFPs being misunderstood, and to provide constructive feedback to NNGOs that did not qualify.

What do they recommend to ACBAR?

- ACBAR's support was praised by all trainees in the following areas: policy development, advocacy to the Government, protecting NGOs' interests. Trainees unanimously ask to pursue these efforts through the Twinning Programme, and expand it through **long-term training and coaching** on project cycle management, monitoring and evaluation, and project design;
- Assign a qualified and native English-speaker proposal or grant reviewer to the Twinning Programme team to assist NNGOs throughout the design and writing process.

What changed for trainees before and after the training?

- **Using systematised methods and tools to read and analyse a RFP, identify the key elements of a RFP (objectives, timeline), and decide whether an organisation is qualified or not to respond**

« Before I did not understand donor requirements in a RFP, I read everything but could not see the important points »

Tawab Naqshbandi, Managing Director, ADEO

« I always use the 'Go / No-Go' tool to decide about proposals.

Before, we submitted many proposals and only 5% were accepted but now we focus on the ones that we can win”
Dr Ghafoori, Managing Director, RAADA

- **Identifying, differentiating and understanding the logic between activities, outputs, outcome and goal.**

“Before I did not know what to understand behind ‘activities, outputs, outcome, goal’, but now, I can differentiate them and identify activities in my proposal which are related to the RFP objectives”
Hataullah Khan, Deputy Director ARPD

- **Gaining confidence to take on the task of designing a proposal from scratch, building an articulated and thought-through logical framework.**

“The training was different compared with others because it invested in trainees doing work themselves, now we are confident (···) The indicator design session gave me ideas as to making my projects more specific”
Sorhab Shuja, Program Manager AHDA

- **Acquiring the skills to critically review proposals developed by others , identify mistakes, provide tips and guidance to colleagues**

“Now I can make comments on my other colleagues’ proposals, and they incorporate my comments. I can also work on proposals on my own. I even got my first project to manage as a result of the new skills I got”
Maliha Sadat, Program Officer TLO

“I have recently reviewed a proposal for WFP and made comments on it, which we won”
Bahirullah Saleh, WSTA



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ATR is an international agency bringing together expertise, practices and ideas to advance development and security in conflict-affected environments.

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