



Lessons Learnt from USAID RMNCAH Proposal Development Process: A Case of Amref Health Africa in Kenya

This paper takes a retrospective look at a USAID RMNCH proposal developed by Amref, to identify lessons learnt by proposal development team composed of Amref staff. The emphasis is laid on rapid assessment/gap analysis, writing workshops, review and submission of the proposal. The focus is to uncover programming practices or operational approaches that Amref would want to promote, avoid or share with others. We simply think of this as ***“what would we do differently next time? And what would we do the same?”***

1. Rapid assessment/gap analysis

Rapid assessment is an intensive team based qualitative inquiry and quantitative data collection and analysis to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of health situation from the insiders perspective to inform proposal development. The insiders in this case were county health management teams from Kitui, Turkana and Samburu Counties in Kenya. Below are the lessons learnt from the assessment process;

- We learnt that sharing the RFA early in time with writers, holding brainstorming sessions and encouragement for everyone to read the RFA in detail are important in enabling teams in proper understanding of the RFA
- We learnt that assigning specific responsibilities to all team members, early communication to the proposal writing teams on the tasks, continuous updates on the writing process and good coordination of the writing teams result in better efficient team work
- Early engagement of CHMT members in proposal development help bring out real issues to be addressed in the proposal. In this case others felt that County representatives came too late in the process and took too much time. *“Did they add any more information than already collected during assessments?”*
- Findings from rapid assessments enables writers to be equipped with current information on the ground which is important in deepening their understanding of the issues in focus Counties as they draft the strategies. The assessment reports should be made simple and easy to understand and compiled in time to support the process
- The team learnt that rapid assessments tools can be designed better after thorough understanding of the RFA, planned with realistic timelines for data collection. The development of data collection tools should be participatory and thoroughly reviewed by technical persons for completeness but be cognisant not to collect excess data that might not be usefull in proposal development.
- It is important to leverage on existing projects in target couties to provide man power and needed support during data collection. This is critical in mobilization of respondents on the ground timely finalization of the rapid assessment process. Respondents should always be provided with transport reimbursements to avoid provoking unnecessary anger
- The exercise should include collation of County and Subcounty statistics on relevant indicators to inform the proposal development.

2. Writing workshop, proposal review and submission

- We learnt that organizing retreats out of work places enables teams to commit their time fully in proposal writing hence better quality proposals.
“Working as a team and out of the office in a comfortable environment helped us concentrate more and give it our best shot”
- A small team with distinct roles and responsibilities works well in refining the proposal put together by a larger writing team.
“Fantastic level of commitment and work ethic observed from the small team”
- Leadership, setting clear timelines and team work, sharing of lessons learnt from other projects is important in timely delivery of a proposal. This was remarkably excellent in this case.
“The team was dedicated and the leadership was superb. The early start of the whole process enabled the team to complete on time”
- Having a small and efficient team with clear roles and responsibilities including a full time administrative assistant to help with logistics of the writeshop is very helpful to teams.
“Far too many people were involved in Lukenya”
- Communication channels should be very clear and adhered to.
“Sometimes coordination and communication was poor. There was clear timelines but the consultant requested information directly without following the communication channel. This caused confusion making people to write a section when someone is already working on it or using an old version”
- We learnt that its important to coordinate the collation of comments from all reviewers for consideration. It is also important that reviewers give full concentration and actively involved in the review process. In this case, comments from reviewers were not properly coordinated and some might not have been considered when refining the proposal. Some reviewers might not have prioritized review of this proposal hence non-responses
- All relevant documents/policies/guidelines should be gathered before and during rapid assessment and a person assigned to read & summarize important issues. The team should have a shared folder/dropbox for such documents. In this case
“Staff responsible for sharing the relevant literature did a splendid job! We had so much to read from. The M&E team did a great job in analyzing the status reports through a data table that made work and reference much easier. This should be encouraged and shared to all Amref projects on a regular basis - say quarterly or half yearly so that staff can refer quickly from them whenever they need to quickly respond to RFAs even at short notice”
- As much as its important to organize retreats out of work place, its important to consider the costs involved and the people involved need not be too many- value for money.
“The cost is on the higher side and not everyone was productively engaged in the exercise. We can determine who exactly needs to participate in the workshops so that we get value for money”
- All reviewers and senior staff should be involved early enough during proposal design workshop
“Senior staff engaged in the process too late, making the last days extremely stressful and exhausting for everyone with the multiple changes demanded at the last minute”
- We also learnt that people working in small technical groups and sharing in plenary works well for consistency of the proposal.

- The roles and responsibilities of the consultant should be made clear and sufficient time given for consultant input to the proposal
- Avoid late submission and last minute rush to meet deadline by doing early preparations

Recommendations

- Collate statistics on basic standard indicators around Amref areas of programming which can then be updated regularly making work easier when RFA come out
- Develop proposal development guidelines for RFAs from major development agencies such as PEPFAR, EU
- Rapid assessments should be conducted much earlier with common knowledge of how the RFA might look like
- After rapid assessment, start with a Design workshop of 2 days to gather ideas of large team with technical expertise and geographic experience, then cut down to small team of writers, 1 for each technical area, able to contact others if needed, including M&E and finance. This will avoid last minute changes to pre-thought flow and ideas and teams required to provide write up before the strategies were clarified and shared
- Explore the possibility of developing stronger relationships with the funding mechanisms to get prior intel before RFPs are made public. This would be like a CIA role within Amref, whose primary role would be intelligence gathering from competitors, funders, etc
- We need to be more elaborate with competition analysis.
 - “I noticed we could have done it more deeply when I realized we knew organizations like palladium were bidding yet we had nothing about EMR”*
- As we write the Technical Approach, every statement about what we will do should be made authentic Amref proposition by clearly showing what work or experiences in Amref we are building on and how, as well as demonstrating how it is linked to problem we want to address and consultation with counties and assessment findings. Sentence like this is a simplified version of what we should be writing:

“In order to address [xxx insert the specific gaps we want to address xxx] information management gaps identified will be affecting % of HFs in [xxx] County as evidenced during our consultation with the CHMTs. We will strengthen EMRs in the County. To do this, we will build on Amref’s experience in [xxx] where we have done [xxx insert specific of what we did in the example that is of relevance xxx leading to [xxxx insert specific win achieved in the example given xxx]. Specifically, we will: (i) xxxxxxxx (ii) xxxxxx; (iii) xxxxxx.

The above sentence is believable as an Amref proposition. Even if we have not done something in the past, let us find evidence from elsewhere and cite.

- Use of active language is encouraged at the beginning of each sentence
- We should always plan to orient staff on how to write powerful proposals taking into account the use of short sentences, active language etc etc
- The assessments we do need to be more specific and done in a way we can easily quote them in the text. The questions should be specific and answered in detail enough to allow quotation
- People should be given certificates that they participated in proposal writing- this is motivating in addition to the recognition given to proposal writing team

- Engage different staff in proposal writing and not same individuals everytime
“The proposal writing team should have different people - you find that some people are constantly being engaged while others are not”