

Lessons learned from funding for FLEGT

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FERN has a long history of supporting civil society in Africa in using the European Union Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (EU FLEGT) action plan to campaign for improved forest governance. Substantial progress has been made as a result of the negotiation of the FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs). In all countries that have concluded a VPA, civil society organised themselves in platforms, which allows them to speak with one strong voice. Working together towards a shared vision and common objectives is a more efficient and successful approach than working in isolation. The platforms engaged in the FLEGT VPA process have and will continue to play a significant role in ensuring that key interests and priorities of civil society as a whole - including local communities, indigenous peoples and citizens - are on the agenda and integrated in/part of planned legal reform and VPAs as well as other national processes that impact forests and peoples.

Additional advantages of platforms include: strengthening capacities among its members, sharing information and experiences, and developing and implementing joint strategies to provoke change in favour of common interests. For platforms to be successful and have influence and impact, they must be pro-active, well informed, position themselves strategically and have strong advocacy skills. In order to be operational, platforms need human and financial resources. Resources should be looked for to meet the needs of identified objectives. Fundraising for activities, salaries or running costs is therefore an integral part of campaigning, but one that should only be pursued after the strategy of a platform (or an organisation) has been clearly identified.



Some FLEGT platforms have chosen to be informal and thus have no legal entity, others do. Not being a legal entity means that the emphasis is being put on strengthening the capacity of the members instead of on the capacity of the platform itself. The platform is used to facilitate meeting the goals shared by their members and to create space for consultation, but without a legal basis it cannot directly apply for funding or be responsible for implementing proposals. Platform members (alone or in coalition), in line with the overall platform strategy and with the strengths of each individual organisation, will take the role of developing proposals, seeking funding and implementing them.

The intention of this briefing note is to take stock of the lessons learned from the past to encourage platforms and more specifically its members to pro-actively identify needs and proposals that would help achieve the platform's objectives and to plan more strategically for necessary funding. While there are numerous opportunities for funding activities that fit within FLEGT objectives, the timing of the calls for proposals and the size of the grants available may not be those that best fit the needs of civil society platforms. Good planning is crucial to seize the opportunities that are out there to avoid gaps in resources and to ensure campaigns can be implemented smoothly.

Lessons learned

Be pro-active, seize opportunities, have eye for details and respect deadlines

- **Be proactive in lobbying the donor** to ensure your priorities are taken up in calls for proposals. Donors are part of the system you want to change in your campaigning, so do not neglect them when developing your strategies. You can use platform statements and strategies to back your exchanges with possible donors about the needs in your country and where they should be putting their funding. In addition it is useful to communicate with donors prior to submitting your proposal so they can help provide direction. If you are successful, you will have much better chances for the proposals of the platform to be funded. Having a strong relationship with a donor can also be very useful when doing advocacy work.

Box 1. Funding for FLEGT: FAO and EUD calls for proposal

Both the European Commission and EU Member States have made funding available for civil society to help implement the FLEGT action plan. Local civil society in VPA countries has two major streams of funding for FLEGT work at national level: the local call for proposals on FLEGT by the respective EU Delegations and call for proposals by the EU FAO FLEGT Programme. At the global level, partners can be part of larger proposals from their EU partners under ENRTP funding.

FAO calls for proposals are relatively easier and more straightforward, short term (one year maximum) funding that is not too large (EUR 100,000 maximum). This funding can be used to cover clearly identified activities that directly support aspects of the VPA process and are flexible enough to demand minimum forward planning. EU Delegation calls are much more elaborate, include lots of administration and require a lot of time and rigour for the form to be completed correctly and the grant to be implemented. These funds are also larger and so they could cover multiple year activities, therefore allowing for long-term planning. EU Delegation proposals require a much more in depth understanding of the FLEGT VPA process.

For information on the EU FAO FLEGT Programme, see <http://www.fao.org/forestry/eu-flegt/78024/en/>

For information on the EU Delegation calls for proposals on FLEGT, contact the responsible person at your Delegation or see <https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/europeaid/online-services/index.cfm?ADSSChck=1284977262222&do=publi.welcome&userlanguage=en>

- Lobbying for financial support for civil society requires time, energy and a lot of effort. At the same time **processing proposals and project management by donors requires a lot of investment** from often very small and overworked teams. This is often the case in EU Delegations, where FLEGT is more often than not only a very small dossier among many that the responsible staff needs to deal with. So, if civil society organisations do not demonstrate in their application to a call for proposals that they are reliable, interested and willing to exploit their potential, this window of opportunity will close quickly. When an opportunity is left unexploited, second chances are few and new calls for proposals unlikely.



- **“The devil is in the details”.** Be aware well ahead of time of all administrative requirements to fulfil to submit a proposal and prepare the necessary files well in advance. Exceptions are not allowed, late submission is not accepted and incomplete proposals non-negotiable. Rigorous preparation is the way to go.
- **Do not submit a last minute poor-quality proposal** as a desperate try. Allow for enough time to submit a high-quality proposal that demonstrates better preparation of the proposal, clear views and high likelihood of effective implementation and real impact. A poor quality proposal that gets denied reflects badly on the organisation and can decrease future changes for funding.

Be Strategic and Realistic

- **Strategic decision making** within the platform needs to be done during meetings where needs, priorities and action plans can be defined and provide a solid basis for future proposals.
- Make sure that use of requested funds is **in line with positions** or statements made by civil society, **timely** with the existing VPA roadmap and **relevant to the context** and challenges at the moment of applying.
- The most important for donors is the **clarity in the formulation of objectives and activities** as well as pointing out how results obtained will be an added value for the national VPA process.
- Ensure full **understanding of the VPA process** and demonstrate explicitly how your proposal will have the intended impact. Your proposal needs to be able to convince the donor that the applicant fully understands the complexity of the VPA process and the role that it can play through a relevant, pragmatic and feasible approach.
- **Be realistic.** The proposal needs to be in line with the existing skills and competences of your organisation(s). If you can demonstrate previous experience in similar activities or point out previous successes, this will help your application and increase likelihood of success. If different skill sets are required, consider partnerships with other organisations that have complementary experiences that can strengthen your proposal with a clear indication of responsibilities of the applicants. The most common comment from donors when rejecting a proposal is: “not realistic, too ambitious”.

In particular with the limit of budget and time, it is important to have very concrete and well defined proposals with clear outputs.

- **Learn from past failures.** If previous proposals have been rejected, do not give up trying, but avoid making the same mistakes twice. Seek to understand why the proposal was not accepted and show willingness to address the weaknesses in the future. It is worth asking feedback from the donor, especially if it is a local call, but do not get offended if you don't receive an answer. Due to time constraints (with hundreds of proposals in their hands) the donor may not be able to respond individually. In that case it may be good to seek an external opinion from a more experienced partner (FERN, etc.) or resource person if this was not done in preparation of the proposal.
- Allow for **sufficient time** for project implementation. Depending on the criteria of the call for proposals we recommend that proposals should ideally cover 24 months, but at least 18 months. Experience has shown that one year programs are often not sufficient to launch, implement and evaluate the project.
- **“More action, fewer workshops”.** Too many projects focus on organising meetings and workshops because it is easy and common. There is a clear lack of new innovative ways to contribute to the process as well as a lack of creativity to get things done.

Coordinate within the platform

- Avoid competition with allies and **ensure coordination and transparency between platform members** prior to designing and submitting proposals. Proposals on joint collaboration are stronger and more likely to be accepted as several stand alone parallel ones.
- **Coherence between separate proposals**, both fitting under the larger platform vision is key. Proposals that reflect the views and the work of the platform are more likely to be accepted as there is a greater consensus on the objectives. Moreover, coordination of activities with the platform under proposal are favoured. It is also important to ensure it **builds on ongoing or previous initiatives** (funded by different donors) to avoid reinventing the wheel and duplicating efforts. Make reference to these and indicate how your proposal will be of added value.



- **Coherence between partners, between government and industry needs.** Proposals need to demonstrate an understanding of the overall FLEGT VPA process in the country and not only focus on a small action envisaged. It is important that the proposal builds synergies with the bigger picture.
- **Be aware of competitiveness** of other national and international NGOs with stronger fundraising skills. Therefore it might be useful to ask for support from EU partners like FERN and Well Grounded or work in partnership with an international 'ally' NGO to support you with developing the proposal and to help endorse your proposal. It is more comfortable for a donor to see that backstopping from an international NGO is foreseen as it shows transfer of competences and also gives more credibility to the proposal.
- **Synergies and coordination are key to success.** Donors such as EU Delegations and EU FAO FLEGT programme coordinate their calls to ensure best impact, selection of appropriate projects and that projects build synergies and do not duplicate. It would therefore be useful for NGOs to coordinate as well from the beginning for the greatest likelihood of success in either selection process.

Box 2: Some real life examples:

- NGO X has worked on a proposal for four weeks. It is a joint proposal by three members. They submit the proposal ten minutes after the deadline and the proposal therefore gets refused. -> Handing in a proposal according to all clearly stipulated rules and procedures gives an indication of the level of professionalism of an organisation. Be proactive in identifying funding needs, ensure enough time to complete the proposal and factor in a few extra days for unforeseen circumstances (power cuts, email connection problems, personal reasons).
- NGO Y has applied several times but has never managed to get a proposal approved by the delegation, no other NGO did either. Hence the delegation closed the opportunity and no calls for proposals will be available next year. -> Ask the donor for feedback on why your proposals have been rejected in order to learn which weaknesses you need to address to avoid future refusal. At the same time ensure that funding opportunities are not left unexploited, which risks them not being repeated afterwards.
- NGO Z proposes a project on a particular topic on which NGO A has been working intensively for a number of years. NGO Z does not mention the work of NGO A in the proposal. This reflects badly on the proposal. -> It would have been much better to articulate clearly what NGO A has already done and will do, and how the activities of NGO Z complement it. This shows you have a good understanding of what is going on, the overall context and the added value your organisation can bring.

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