

The Calls for proposals system at PWCB – Current issues and recommendations for improvement

October 2011

1. Introduction

In July 2010, following a year-long review of Canadian Partnership Branch, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) launched a new Partnerships with Canadians Branch (PWCB) to structure “a new approach to engage Canadians and organizations in international development.” The promise is to “streamline the application process and reduce the administrative burden for project applications” to ensure effective and measurable results on the ground. In doing so, the application process switched from “responsive programming” in which CIDA would receive proposals from civil society organizations (CSOs) based on the latter’s priorities, to a system in which CSOs need to respond to periodic calls for proposals based on standing programs (under \$2 million and over \$2 million, for example) and *ad hoc* initiatives (e.g. the Haiti Reconstruction and Development Initiative and the Muskoka Initiative Partnership Program). All calls are guided by the government’s own thematic priorities and countries of focus.

The promised streamlining has not occurred and administrative delays are becoming standard. Development is compromised and there is a high degree of frustration among many applicants about the process. Critical programming needed on the ground in developing countries is on hold or has been cut. Partner organizations, often with vulnerable funding conditions, have been left in limbo. Staff positions have had to be cut. And contingency plans for new funding have had to be put in place with no clear timelines. While there are continued additional concerns about how unpredictable competitive funding cycles affect local ownership, and development results, more broadly, in the short term CIDA could make a number of simple changes to the call for proposals (CfP) system that would help relieve many current problems and improve development impacts.

2. CIDA must respect its own deadlines for decisions, just as CSOs do in submitting proposals

Part of the rationale given for switching from “responsive programming” to a CfP system is to provide much clearer timelines for processing, and deciding on, proposals. Such predictability is essential to effective and responsible programming. However, under the new PWCB system, the processing and announcement of outcomes from the calls have been subject to substantial and challenging delays. The Muskoka Initiative announcement was delayed by almost four months. The Over \$2 mn announcement is now overdue by two months (as of mid-October); the Under \$2 mn announcement by two weeks. Furthermore, the “Review Process” for all of the CfP clearly states that all “applicants will be advised of the results by [X date]. A PWCB officer will then contact successful applicants to discuss the contract details.” This was not the case for the Muskoka Initiative, with only successful candidates advised privately, and unsuccessful candidates only learning the outcomes a month later through a press release. In addition, though CIDA has communicated to applicants for the under and over \$2 M that it will not be

meeting its deadlines, it has not recommitted to new dates, leaving all those who have submitted proposals at a total loss as to how to manage the additional waiting time. Finally, it is also unclear what impact these delays will have on subsequent calls.

What could be done?

- In the short term, CIDA could set, communicate and then respect new deadlines immediately for the under and over \$2M processes.
- CIDA should notify ALL applicants – successful and not – at the same time. This process could move forward independently from the public announcements.
- CIDA could review the timelines for future calls, disclose a schedule for upcoming calls and meet these timelines.

Outcomes of the CfPs to date

Call for Proposals	Known number of applications (and accepted)	Application deadline (expected processing time)	Expected Announcement	Actual announcement (delay)
Haiti Recovery and Reconstruction	(15 accepted)	November 16, 2010 (3½ months)	February 28, 2011	March 2, 2011 (2 day delay)
Muskoka Initiative	60 (28 accepted)	January 31, 2011 (4 months)	May 31, 2011	September 20 (3½ month delay)
Partners - Over \$2M	50 (not known)	March 31, 2011 (4½ months)	August 15, 2011	Not announced (two month delay)
Global Citizens – Aboriginal Youth Internship	Not known (8)	April 8, 2011 (just under 5 months)	September 30, 2011	June 21, 2011 (three months ahead of schedule)
Partners - Under \$2M	161 or 168 (not known)	April 29, 2011 (5 months)	September 30, 2011	Not announced (two week delay)
Partners - Knowledge partners	Not yet launched			
Partners - Volunteer Cooperation	Not yet launched			

As of October 15, 2011

3. CIDA needs to enhance the level of transparency around applications and selection

For any one call, only the names of successful candidates are known. There is no information on the following issues: number of applications received; the total demand for funds in each call; the total available funds from PWCB for each call; the profile of the organizations submitting (both size and sector); and how decisions reflected stated parameters (for example thematic priority and country of focus quotas).

What could be done?

- CIDA could enhance the level of transparency with respect to the outcomes of each of the calls, including information related to the various factors outlined above.

4. CIDA needs to include the criteria used for assessing proposals

One of the biggest challenges for organizations in submitting proposals to CIDA is how these proposals are evaluated. It has an impact on the design of the proposal and what elements organizations should emphasize. Equality between men and women is a cross-cutting theme, but how much of a priority is this in CIDA proposals? CIDA has noted that 80 percent of all projects funded must be within CIDA thematic priorities and 50 percent in the countries of focus. Are proposals that are outside of the priorities and countries of focus at a necessary disadvantage? Does including more of the priority themes and only countries of focus bias the chances of success? In terms of criteria, CCIC was only able to get the criteria used for evaluating proposals for the Haiti Recovery Initiative (and the weighting given to each criteria) through an Access to Information request. CIDA has now finally disclosed the criteria, including weighting, for its most recent call for proposals to Canadian Universities. It is not clear, however, what influence the inclusion of priorities or countries of focus has on the outcome.

What could be done?

- All future calls for proposals could include the criteria by which the projects will be evaluated, including weighting, and clearly indicate whether including countries of focus and thematic priorities has any bias on the application process.

5. CIDA needs to develop a more manageable process.

Developing CIDA proposals is hugely time-consuming and expensive. CIDA should consider developing a staged process with an initial lighter “concept paper” submitted by all interested candidates, followed by a heavier “proposal” for candidates that pass this first hurdle – all still within reasonable timelines. As part of a survey on the outcomes of the various calls for proposals, CCIC and the Provincial and Regional Councils will be canvassing members on what they think are reasonable timelines for this, and will establish member’s views on whether they feel being asked to submit a proposal can be read as a guarantee of success – a key concern for CIDA. Managing applicants’ expectations is important. CIDA can be clear on what applicants can expect to address this issue.

What could be done?

- CIDA could further explore the idea of a two stage process with an initial concept note, followed by a more substantial proposal only for candidates that pass the first hurdle.

6. The “unsuccessful” candidates deserve a debriefing so that they can improve future applications and learn from this experience

CCIC finds it difficult to understand the response given by some CIDA officials who claim that debriefings would give some organizations an unfair advantage in future CfP. Allowing individual organizations to learn from their mistakes and improve on future proposals is essential to ensuring high quality development proposals. An aggregate response to all applicants has limited value. The best projects and best development outcomes will come from an iterative learning process that the CfP procedure should help facilitate. CCIC is encouraged to hear that unsuccessful candidates will receive a letter that indicates areas of weakness in their proposal.

What could be done?

- Within a manageable process, CIDA could incorporate a mechanism to allow for meaningful feed-back to all those involved.

7. A medium term strategy for partnerships and strengthening civil society

The foundation of good development practice and outcomes is long-term partnerships, responding to the needs of counterparts in developing countries. Many Canadian organizations have benefitted from such partnerships with CIDA. Their partners in developing countries have benefited from stability and predictability, two essential ingredients for achieving development results. The quick transition from a responsive funding mechanism to a competitive system over the past year has challenged the financial viability of many organizations and the long-term relationships with their partners, leaving future outcomes uncertain for many. When there were delays in funding between one contract and the conclusions of rigorous negotiations for a further contract, Partnership Branch used to provide “bridge funding”. The transition at PWCB has provided no such bridge, but instead a sudden end to institutional program funding on which many organizations – and their partners – had relied on for decades and in an uninterrupted manner. Dependency on CIDA funding is something that needs to be addressed within the sector, and many organizations have reduced this dependency over the years as a result of the generosity of Canadians. But CIDA also needs to consider how it exits out of relationships with partners, when it chooses to do so, in a manner that is sustainable and supportive of effective development practice. Furthermore, annual disbursements through Partnership Branch between 1995 and 2008 (in 2008 dollars) show a steady decline (and an even sharper decline relative to the fairly constant status of other Branches). It is unclear whether this is coincidental or intentional. CIDA needs to have a clear strategy that lays out future directions for PWCB towards the Agency’s commitment to strengthening civil society as development actors.

What could be done?

- In the short term, CIDA could develop terms, conditions and appropriate procedures for winding down partnerships with all existing and future partners.
- In the medium term, CIDA could develop a strategy for PWCP that more clearly articulates future directions with respect to funding civil society organizations.