

Capturing USAID's Attention with Concept Notes

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Potential Partners

Tips & Guidance



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Let's say your organization is innovating approaches to environmental resiliency in a rural community of the Sahel. To advance your progress and ensure long-term sustainability, you're seeking additional donor [funding from USAID](#). You discover your organization's environmental work is a [priority for USAID](#) in your region, and you're ready to present your revolutionary idea, but you don't know where to begin. You might feel discouraged, and this hinders you from taking that first step to USAID partnership.

What if 2–5 pages could change that? This is the power of a well-written concept note.

USAID requests concept notes from potential partners as part of the assistance funding process. Requests for these notes can vary based on specific funding opportunities, program cycles, and Agency needs. Learn more below about how concept notes can help your organization determine if your proposed activity aligns with the Agency’s priorities before submitting a full assistance application.

What Is a Concept Note?

A concept note is typically a 2–5 page document that outlines an organization’s idea for a project or activity with USAID. Potential partners submit these notes at the initial stage of the solicitation process, in response to a request issued by USAID. Requesting concept notes helps USAID scope out how it may address a particular development challenge. The short format of a concept note enables USAID to review a focused summary of an activity, and it helps partners condense their pitch and receive early feedback before a lengthier submission. Concept notes also allow USAID to determine whether your activity aligns with their development priorities and warrants further exploration. This first step can help your organization and USAID shape the collective approach to an opportunity.

USAID submits calls for assistance funding under specific mechanisms, such as an [Annual Program Statement \(APS\)](#), a [Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#), a [Request for Information \(RFI\)](#), or a [Broad Agency Announcement \(BAA\)](#). It’s important to emphasize that concept notes are typically submitted for assistance funds—these are opportunities where USAID awards funding for a grant or cooperative agreement to support specific development opportunities. It is rare for USAID to request a concept note for an acquisition award—these are USAID-funded contracts for specific goods or services from a partner and are announced through a Request for Proposal (RFP).

Low Risk, High Reward

Submitting a full application to a USAID solicitation can be costly for small, local, or nontraditional partners, in time, funds, and staff capacities. However, if USAID requests concept notes, you can present your organization’s work with less risk and potentially high reward in a simple and straightforward way. Actions like this can be one of your [first steps on the pathway to partnership](#).

Agency staff will evaluate concept notes to determine whether the presented idea is worth pursuing. This saves both USAID and its partners time and energy by allowing the Agency to determine the suitability of an idea by dialing in on the alignment with USAID objectives, strategic goals, technical approach, available Agency resources, organizational capacity, and cost effectiveness. If USAID determines your idea is worth pursuing, they may invite you to submit a full application or proposal or to engage in a co-creation process, which could potentially lead to funding for your project or activity.

Additionally, if your concept note is determined to be unsuitable for USAID’s funding portfolio, you’ll receive early feedback from USAID, helping you avoid committing time and resources toward a solicitation response that may not be a good fit for you. You will also find that submitting concept notes helps you build rapport with the Agency, which can assist you with this or future [funding opportunities](#).

Keys to a Strong Concept Note

Concept notes can be USAID's first impression of your organization, so the details matter. It's common for the Agency to request that specific information be included in your concept note. Details will vary depending on the activity, location, and development priority, but here are a few things that will help your concept note stand out:

1. **Review requested information:** Specific guidelines provided in the request for concept notes are your guide to a strong submission. Be sure to review these closely and develop a plan for your response.
2. **Provide a clear overview:** Craft a concise and impactful title and summary of your activity, not forgetting to mention how it aligns with [USAID's Country Development Cooperation Strategies \(CDCS\)](#) in your country. Highlight your goals and objectives and share an estimated budget. Additionally, weave in how your organization's capacities can help you achieve these projected outcomes.
3. **Share your problem and solution statements:** Describe why this is an issue your organization is trying to solve—backed with evidence or data—and the strategy you'll use to solve it, including methodologies, innovations, and expected outcomes.
4. **Specify who and where:** Paint a picture of the community or people this project will serve and any projected long-term impacts, along with where it will be implemented. Also share brief information about stakeholders, partners, or collaborators who will participate in the implementation.
5. **Triple-check your note:** Underscoring the point that details matter, carefully review everything USAID is requesting, and ensure you've answered each point. Do not overfluff your submission with irrelevant details that consume these 2–5 pages with information that USAID can't use. Most importantly, be sure to triple-check your work for thoroughness, conciseness, and correctness. This is your chance to wow the Agency, so take a little extra time to fix your grammar and the flow of your narrative; it makes a difference.

Getting the art of concept notes right can make you stand out from the crowd. USAID is looking for innovators like you, and we want to help you take that first step and build meaningful relationships with the Agency.

Ready to start preparing concept notes? Keep an eye on [USAID's Business Forecast](#) to track upcoming opportunities and the [WorkwithUSAID.gov Funding Feed](#) for current opportunities. Additionally, visit our [Resource Library](#) to find curated tools to help you strengthen your capacities and your potential concept notes.

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