SMO CALL FOR PRELIMINARY PROPOSALS
Designing a better system for SMOs – December 2018

On November 28, 2017, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) launched a Call for Preliminary Proposals for Small and Medium-Sized Organizations (SMOs) for Impact and Innovation. This was a part of GAC's five-year pilot initiative that seeks to engage Canadian SMOs in international assistance efforts in areas consistent with Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy. GAC received **196 applications from SMOs**, totalling **$280 million in funds requested**, **ten times** the established funding envelope for this first call. Clearly there is a high-level of interest and demand from the sector.
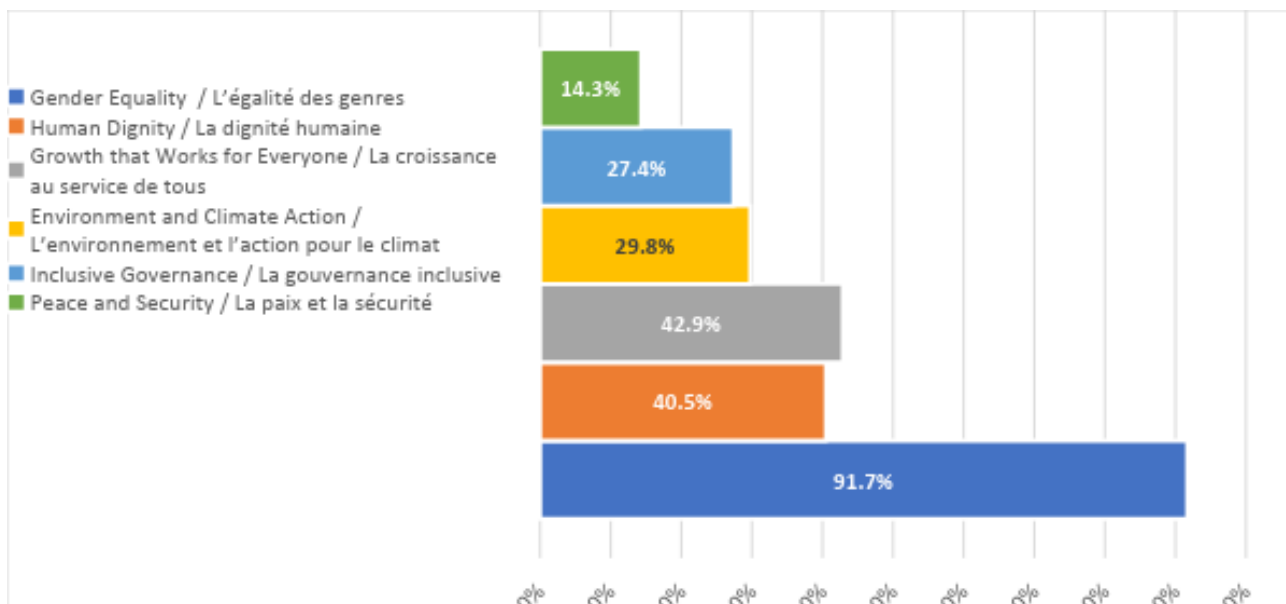
In December 2018, the Inter-Council Network of Provincial and Regional Councils for International Cooperation (ICN) and the Canadian Council for International Co-operation prepared a survey to gather feedback on the process to-date from applicants and prospective applicants. Feedback gathered would inform concrete recommendations for improvement and to develop collective responses to the current challenges and capacity-building needs identified.

SURVEY RESPONDENTS (116 ; 84 RESPONDENTS)

A total of **116 SMOs completed the survey**. Of these, 84 applied to the SMO Call for Preliminary Proposals, **and 80 responded to almost all questions** in the survey, representing a significant level of interest in what was a long survey.

RESPONDENTS (116)	SIZE OF ORG (84)	THOSE WHO DIDN'T APPLY (32)
There was **at least one respondent from all eight provincial and regional councils and the national council**. The greatest number of respondents came from the *Ontario Council for International Cooperation (16.4%), the Association québécoise des organismes de coopération international and the Canadian Council for International Co-operation* (both 12.9%). Respondents who were not members of any Council represented 31.9%.	**Two-thirds** of the organizations that applied to the call **had between one and four staff** (34.5 % or 29) **or five and 15 staff** (32.1% or 27). Organizations with zero staff represented 14.3% of survey respondents (12 respondents), with between 16 and 50 staff represented 11.9% (10 respondents), and over 50 staff represented 7.1% (6 respondents).	The most common reasons for those who didn't apply to the call were that they: ▪ Didn't have the staff capacity at the time (9 or 28.1%) ▪ Weren't aware of the call (6 or 18.8%) ▪ Didn't qualify in the financial parameters of the process (over $5 million) (5 or 15.6%) Results on whether these respondents would apply to the next call are mixed, with only 13 (out of 29) signalling yes, and 16 signalling they were unsure.

FOCUS IN PROPOSALS ON ACTION AREAS (84 RESPONDENTS)

Legend:
- ■ Gender Equality / L'égalité des genres
- ■ Human Dignity / La dignité humaine
- ■ Growth that Works for Everyone / La croissance au service de tous
- ■ Environment and Climate Action / L'environnement et l'action pour le climat
- ■ Inclusive Governance / La gouvernance inclusive
- ■ Peace and Security / La paix et la sécurité

Bar values: 14.3%, 27.4%, 29.8%, 42.9%, 40.5%, 91.7%

USE AND UTILITY OF GAC WEBSITE (80 OUT OF 84 RESPONDENTS)

	All	Percentage
1 - 2 / 1 à 2 fois	9	11.3%
3 - 5 / 3 à 5 fois	21	26.3%
6 - 10 / 6 à 10 fois	24	30.0%
More than 10 / Plus de 10	26	32.5%
	80	
		100%

Most people used the GAC website FAQs on frequent occasions. For example, **62.5% of organizations consulted the website more than 6 times**, and almost one third (32.5%) more than 10 times.

Most respondents (**82%) found the website extremely (7.5%), very (27.5%) or somewhat effective (45%)**. Respondents who found that the website **not at all (5%), not (8.8%) or only somewhat effective** were possibly impacted by their perception of how useful the content on the website was (See below). There is no clear correlation between the number of times people visited the website, and how useful or effective they found it.

Some respondents **wished the FAQs had kept being updated** when the submission deadline was extended.

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WHICH GUIDANCE NOTES DID RESPONDENTS USE (80 OUT OF 84 RESPONDENTS)
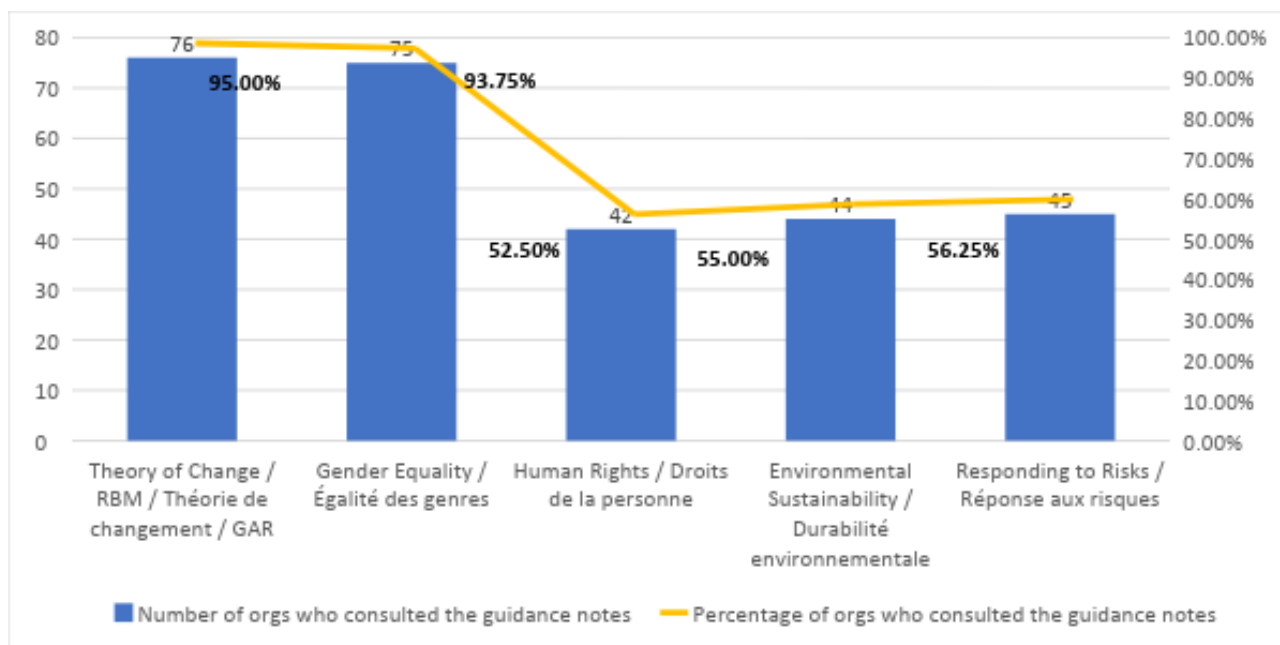
WHAT FURTHER GUIDANCE IS NEEDED? (80 OUT OF 84 RESPONDENTS)

There was a high degree of unanimity among survey respondents with respect to where they had the most difficulty in their applications – **44 organizations identified just one area of difficulty**, nine signalled two, and only four signalled multiple. The biggest challenge for organizations was the **theory of change (40),** followed by the logic model (9) and managing for results (7).

That said, in the area for comments, people said they found the application process **too convoluted and demanding for a preliminary process** (5); that the Theory of Change was overly complex and convoluted (4), especially with the format they were given to work with (4), and the lack of clarity of instructions (4).

Areas where there is **clear need for better guidance and support**, including through **further training, capacity building workshops, and webinars,** can be determined from looking at where a) the guidance was most used, b) but people felt it still needed improvement, and c) where organizations fell short in their applications.

GUIDANCE NOTES MOST USED	GUIDANCE CONSULTED; MORE CLARITY STILL NEEDED	WHERE ORGANIZATIONS FELL SHORT IN PROPOSAL
Theory of change / Results Based Management (95%) **Gender equality (93.75%)**	**Theory of Change (38.2%)** **Responding to risks (33.3%)**	**Managing risk (21)**
Responding to Risks (56.25%)	Human rights (23.8%)	Managing for results (16)
Environmental sustainability (55%)	Gender equality (21.3%)	Environmental sustainability (13)
Human rights (52.5%)	Environmental sustainability (13.6%)	Human Rights (12)
		Rationale for the initiative (11)

Whether groups had consulted guidance notes or not, they still wanted further support in the following:

GUIDANCE AREA	FEEL FURTHER GUIDANCE NEEDED (GENERAL)	PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL RESPONDENTS
Theory of Change	**31**	**38.8%**
Organization ability relevant to the initiative	27	33.8%
Managing for results	25	31.3%
Rationale for the initiative	23	28.8%
Management of plan	23	28.8%
Responding to risks	23	28.8%

Survey respondents also appreciated **webinars (13), technical support (9), and ongoing communications** and status updates from the Provincial and Regional Councils.

LEVEL OF EFFORT (78 OUT OF 84 RESPONDENTS)

Almost half of survey respondents (38 or 48.7%), and all of whom had submitted a preliminary call for proposal, **felt that the preliminary call was much more effort** relative to other funding application processes that they had used. Only 2.6% felt it was slightly less effort, and 23.1% neither more nor less effort.

Furthermore, among those organizations who were successful in stage 1, a higher proportion (57.1% or 16 of 28) felt the process was much more effort, than organizations who weren't successful in stage 1 (44% or 22 of 50).

"The effort required, especially for a 'preliminary proposal,' surprised us."

Although not a lot of respondents articulate the basis for their comparison relative to this call, where they did, they mentioned multilateral funders, other government donors, Provincial government funding windows, other preliminary calls and other funders.

RESOURCES MOBILIZED (78 OUT OF 84 RESPONDENTS)

Most organizations (40 of 78) estimate that they spent around 76-150 people hours on developing the proposal. Across the 78 organizations that completed the survey, this accounts for **a total amount of person hours of between 8,278 and 13,059**.

The **78 organizations** who completed this part of the survey estimate that they **spent around $620,000** in total completing the surveys – in many cases not accounting for volunteer time. If we extrapolate these figures and apply them to the **196 organizations that applied to this call**, this equals an investment of **approximately $1.56 million in proposal development.**

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GLOBAL AFFAIRS CANADA

Beyond the numbers, comments throughout the survey helped create a better understanding of the fundamental concerns and key challenges faced by SMOs with respect to this process. Many of these recommendations may go above and beyond what GAC might expect to do for larger organizations, but this underscores the unique situation and needs of SMOs – for a simpler, more supportive process with greater guidance and direction that helps create greater opportunities and chances for success.

1) The process needs to better match the realities, while building the capacity, of SMOs

Working with SMOs means meeting them where they are at, providing guidance tools that they can access, understand, digest and use; and a proposal process that is simpler, phased, more supportive, and can respond to the lower capacity (but still full ability) of these types of organization.

And while providing funding for SMOs is helpful, this needs to be accompanied by efforts to build the skills of these organizations through ongoing training. Such training should enable SMOs to build their capacity to better respond to future calls with quality submissions that fulfill the range of criteria that GAC requires.

Respondents made a number of recommendations for how GAC could improve this situation.

> "We need more time to consult with partners and beneficiaries in order to truly make the project participatory."

- Not announce calls during the holiday season. For small and medium-sized organizations, who are already overstretched, this is a particularly busy time in terms of fundraising during the holiday season, staff holidays and closing the financial year.
- Allow for more time for SMOs to respond to each phase of the process, commensurate with the information requirements of each phase.
- Some organizations also suggested rethinking the definition of SMOs to increase the limit of overseas spending to higher than $2 million, feeling that some medium-sized organizations were getting squeezed out.
- Provide very intentional and ongoing training for SMOs to help them better develop their organizational development and technical skills, including around the core elements of successful proposal application, and design better and more impactful projects and programmes.

2) Not so preliminary - a call that mismatched expectations

Numerous respondents signalled their frustration with the lack of the preliminary nature of this call. They felt it was more of a full-on proposal, with countless sections that required a significant amount of detail, and substantial time and energy from organizations to complete. Others complained that they had treated this like a preliminary call, not providing as extensive information as they could have, but were then critiqued for having fallen short in areas where the proposal didn't ask for specifics. Clearly people's expectations of what a preliminary call looks like and what information was required at this stage, compared to what GAC expected, were sorely mismatched.

That said, the notion of having a phased approach seems to continue to carry strong support. Numerous organizations suggested making the concept note phase short and to the point, providing core ideas and reducing the number of requirements in phase 1. The deeper program design can then

take place in subsequent phases. This would also allow organizations to better plan for the amount of time, effort and resources they would need to invest in each phase, an important consideration when success is uncertain. A much clearer and less burdensome first phase, with clear eligibility and success criteria, would also help quickly identify a smaller pool of candidates and minimize the overall costs of the process, in particular for unsuccessful applicants. At this early stage, organizations signalled not wanting to have to provide details on theory of change, results-based management, activities, financial audited statements, and environmental and human rights considerations.

Respondents made a number of recommendations for how GAC could improve this situation.

- Be very explicit in terms of your expectations of applicants from the process in general, and the different phases of the process in terms of level of effort.
- Have clear criteria spelling out what is expected of applicants in each section, and how much weight is given to each and the level of detail and effort required in each.
- Graduate these criteria and expectations according to which phase in the process you are soliciting this information, from less to greater as you move from light concept notes towards full proposals.

"For a preliminary proposal we feel that the […] analysis requested was too cumbersome, and especially difficult for SMOs to complete without additional resources. That stage would perhaps be better performed in the final stages of an application."

3) SMOs will require greater guidance and support in the application process

Many SMOs were challenged to complete the preliminary call for proposal, struggling with the timelines, competing priorities of staff, shifting requirements in the calls, not having the expertise to complete certain more specific areas, and struggling with forms that didn't accommodate the content that was required of them, among other things. Much of this has to do with capacity challenges; but a lot of it also has to do with the lack of orientation to the process, the requirements, and appropriate guidance and support. When SMOs receive this, they are able to generate high-quality proposals.

Respondents made a number of recommendations for how GAC could improve this situation.

- Include examples of common problems, faults or issues to avoid, as well as strong proposals, based on what has been learnt from this pilot call.
- Organize a webinar, keep a recording of that on-line, or provide someone in the initial phase who can help orient organizations to the key pieces of information they may require for the different phases of the application process and to the different elements of the application. (see also 4) below).
- As noted earlier, enhance existing, and develop new, guidance notes and training on theory of change, results-based management, managing and responding to risk, and organizational ability, in particular, as well as on gender equality, human rights and environmental sustainability in general. Some respondents noted in their comments also having clearer guidance around innovation.
- Link clear and comprehensive guidance notes (not in draft form) to the relevant sections of the application process
- Provide templates in a format that's easier to work from and easier for collaboration – like providing forms in both a word and pdf format.
- Make sure the application forms are functioning properly and be prepared for instances when they don't by having protocols in place to address errors.
- Provide greater clarity on GAC thematic and country priorities (including if there aren't priority countries).
- Allow for the GAC system to signal when forms are not completed properly.

4) GAC needs to substantially enhance its communications on a number of levels

Countless respondents talked about their frustration with the significant delays in receiving any news about the different stages of approval, about not getting feedback when projects weren't approved, and about waiting to get contribution agreements signed once approved.

These delays don't just have implications for proposal development, they also have knock-on effects on planning, human resource allocation, managing funds and in-kind contributions, maintaining relationships with partners, and the need to potentially redesign projects once finally get approved - given rapidly changing contexts on the ground.

"We found ourselves waiting for an extremely long period of time, which, for a small NGO, can really hand cuff our operations."

Global Affairs Canada needs to maintain ongoing communications with the Councils and applicants about the proposal process, providing regular and timely information, guidance, updates and feedback (as much on successful proposals as unsuccessful). Having very clear and regular communications allows SMOs to better manage their time, human resources and often competing priorities; conversely, organizations complained that a lack of such communications impacted their organizational capacity and productivity (as above). Organizations talked about having to cancel

holidays; schedule and then reschedule time to work on proposals, often foregoing other opportunities only to face again further delays.

Respondents made a number of recommendations for how to improve this situation.

- Clearly lay out the timelines for the different phases of the process up front, from initial concept note to signing contribution agreements, updating these and notifying participants as timelines shift.
- For any given call, communicate the number of (or a range of the number of expected) successful proposals to allow organizations from the outset to determine their chances, and whether they think it would be worth applying.
- Organize webinars going through some of the details of how to complete the application process, with opportunities for participants to ask questions on different parts of the application process.
- Allow applicants to continue to get answers to any questions from GAC throughout the process, in particular when timelines are adjusted – through both on-line portals and in person communications.
- Confirm receipt of documents when applications are submitted.
- Have service standards in terms of communicating the results with respect to different phases of the call process.
- Provide opportunities for feedback from an individual at GAC on unsuccessful applications at different phases of the process, so that organizations can better understand the reason for being rejected and learn from the process.

5) Unsuccessful calls represent a huge learning opportunity

"In order to learn and improve in the next round of funding, we would appreciate an opportunity for a full debrief."

Not being successful in a call is frustrating. Not being able to learn from the process is even more so. Numerous respondents signalled their frustration that the only communications they received from GAC were just broad categories where their proposal had fallen short. What they would have really valued was an opportunity to learn from the process so that they could improve their proposal the next time around, investing in areas that really needed improving. In some cases, organizations said they would think twice about engaging with GAC as a result of this lack of feedback.

Respondents made a number of recommendations for how to improve this situation.

- Throughout different phases of the process, provide each organization who requests it explicit and clear feedback of where their proposal fell short.

KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE COUNCILS FOR INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

Comments throughout the survey indicate a strong appreciation for the support the Councils for International Cooperation provided to member organizations around this call for preliminary proposals. Survey respondents also offered clear suggestions for how the Councils could further support SMOs in responding to funding opportunities. Some comments also signalled that Council members expect the Councils to take on roles and responsibilities with respect to Global Affairs Canada and the Calls process that are not necessarily possible. In this vein, the Councils need to more clearly articulate the parameters of what they can do in order to manage expectations, provide appropriate support, and help organizations direct their requests and queries to those at GAC who are best placed to respond to them.

The following are the principal areas of support that SMOs would like to receive from the Councils.

1) Communicating and sharing information on GAC considerations, expectations, eligibility and selection criteria and timelines

Many organizations expressed a lack of clarity and knowledge of GAC priorities, expectations and processes. They also indicated a lack of capacity and contacts to be able to directly communicate with GAC representatives.

Organizations hoped for clarity and information on Global Affairs Canada's:

- Parameters for each call - such as the differences between various types of calls, their focus and purpose, the size of the funding envelope for each call, and the expected number of successful applicants;
- Expectations - on the types of proposals GAC is seeking (concept note, preliminary proposal, full proposal), and the various elements required of each, such as Theory of Change and RBM;
- Eligibility and selection criteria - whether this includes geographic distribution and size of organization, among other things; and,
- Timelines - real time information on the timing of calls, and responses at the different stages of the call process.

These gaps in understanding would be addressed through either:

- Offering direct support to individual organizations (upon request) – see below for details
- Providing practical training on certain subject matters, such as proposal-writing, Theory of Change and Results-Based Management using real examples and case studies – see more below for details; or,
- Interviews and events with the responsible GAC representatives, including funding and program officers.

Some of the suggestions around process (timeline, application, etc.) are addressed to the Councils, suggesting that members think the Councils themselves are responsible for determining these. In

reality, the Councils can help advocate for changes to the current process to address the concerns of members, and relay information that they get from GAC on changes to their members. But much of the changes themselves are strictly in GAC's purview and control.

2) Representing and advocating for SMOs

Many comments expressed frustration with what seems to be GAC's lack of recognition or appreciation of the context and capacities of SMOs. This includes an unreasonably and comparably heavy bureaucratic process, a disproportionate attention to finances and contracts over actual results, and short timelines for the application process, among others.

These organizations have requested ongoing support from the Councils to represent the reality of SMOs and generally advocate on their behalf.

Some organizations would like the Councils to share lessons-learned and to advocate specifically for a better process for a call for preliminary proposals - the intent of the survey and this report.

Some organizations hope for direct support from the Councils in communications with GAC. A number of comments indicated that organizations do not feel they have the capacity or relationships to be heard or responded to by GAC in a timely and fulsome manner, whereas the Councils do.

3) Providing learning and training opportunities

Survey respondents identified the following as key areas of future training (in order of popularity and priority):
- Proposal and Grant-Writing
- Theory of Change
- Results-Based Management
- Gender-Based Analysis
- Budget Template and Financial Management
- Risk Management
- Environmental Sustainability

Most requests for learning and training indicated the need for these to be in the form of real examples and case studies. Though there was general appreciation for webinars, particularly where an expert is presenting, there were also requests for in-person seminars, workshops, policy briefs and short videos. This training would need to be well-publicized and timely, held well ahead of the application deadlines.

4) Facilitating partnerships among member organizations

Many indicated that the Councils, with their broader perspective and relationships with organizations in the sector, are best placed to share information and facilitate communication with member organizations and to support opportunities for relationship and partnership building among organizations who might be working in the same field or towards similar objectives. This includes valuing and fostering a more collaborative versus a more competitive environment among organizations in the sector.

5) Providing the space to offer more direct support to individual organizations

Some organizations hope for direct project-specific support in the form of counselling or a helpline. They envision support including providing comments on the project proposal prior to submission, and possibly debriefing with the organization, once it receives a response. This likely falls more within the remit of Global Affairs Canada but is something that some respondents think Councils could help facilitate.