

**ILO-Employment Sector  
Youth Employment Programme**

**TECHNICAL NOTE<sup>1</sup>**

**Lessons learned from the review process of the  
Youth, Employment and Migration window of the  
UNDP-Spain MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F)**

**31 January 2008**

**Introduction**

This note draws some lessons from the review process conducted by the Technical Sub-Committee of the Youth, Employment and Migration (YEM) thematic window of the MDG Achievement Fund (MDG-F). The Executive Director of the ILO Employment Sector, José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs, was the Convenor of that Technical Sub-Committee.

The note is intended to be helpful to ILO staff, in particular employment specialists, as well as colleagues from UN Country Teams, as they engage in preparing future proposals under this and other thematic windows of the MDG-F.

The note is divided into three parts. Part I sheds light on the review process. Part II focuses on the technical quality of the proposals such as ensuing from the assessment of the Technical Sub-Committee. Part III provides some guidance and suggestions for preparing future proposals under the MDG-F.

**I. The review process**

The Youth, Employment and Migration (YEM) thematic window of the MDG-F generated high interest (and raised many expectations) in eligible countries, as confirmed by the high number of proposals submitted (i.e. 52 out of 57 eligible countries).

The Technical Sub-Committee (TSC) set up to review the 52 proposals conducted its work between mid-November and mid-December 2007 (the window officially closed on 2 November). The Steering Committee (made up of representatives of UNDP and the Government of Spain) discussed the recommendations of the TSC and made its final deliberations in January 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> This Note was prepared by José Manuel Salazar-Xirinachs, Executive Director, ILO Employment Sector, and Giovanna Rossignotti, Coordinator, ILO Youth Employment Programme.

## WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- **The TSC is made up of 1 Convenor and approximately 12 experts**, of whom half are designated by UN agencies at the request of the MDG-F secretariat and half include independent experts jointly identified by the UN designated experts as well as Spanish Government experts. Before starting the review process, the TSC develops the two review criteria specific to the thematic window – the other three being common to all thematic windows/applications.
- **The process is driven by clear rules of technical soundness, transparency and accountability.** From the outset, all proposals are made available to the experts/reviewers through an online secure website. Each reviewer is requested to make a technical assessment of a selected number of proposals, such as allocated by the Convenor, on the basis of the five established review criteria. The same proposal is reviewed by several experts. Experts do not exchange among each other on the specifics of their respective review – only the Convenor knows who is reviewing what and is the only one who can see all comments and scores by the different experts. However, they do not work in complete isolation – the TSC meets several times through teleconferences to discuss general trends and problems, if any.
- There are 3 possible **final outcomes** for each proposal - (a) suitable (b) unsuitable in its present form but encouraged to resubmit in a future round following revision or (c) unsuitable.
- The **final recommendation** – (a) or (b) or (c) and accompanying assessment – is made by the Convenor on behalf of the TSC, based on the reviews submitted by the designated experts for each proposal. The final recommendation is transmitted to the UNCT, if and when endorsed by the Steering Committee.
- The Steering Committee **does not make any recommendations, nor set any quotas whatsoever** (e.g. numbers of projects, level of budgets, country preferences, etc.) for the TSC or the Convenor to guide them in the technical review process.

## II. Technical quality of the proposals

In general, the submissions fitted the terms of reference of the YEM thematic window. Sometimes, however, they drew heavily on them, resulting in the same generalities being repeated in the different proposals rather than in convincing adaptations to local conditions.

## WHAT DID NOT WORK

*Youth, employment and migration specifics*

- Hardly any proposal approached the link between youth, employment and migration in an innovative and integrated manner. A striking aspect of the

proposals was their paucity to deal convincingly with **migration** issues. Few also dealt convincingly with effective youth employment interventions.

- The large majority of the proposals failed to reflect a full understanding of the **integrated approach** underpinning an effective strategy to promote employment for young people. Many focused on labour supply interventions, failing to acknowledge the importance to match those with appropriate demand-side interventions in order to achieve sustainable results.
- The capacity of the **private sector** to expand growth and job opportunities for young people was by and large overlooked, and this was an important criterion in the selection process. Many proposals did make reference to entrepreneurship programmes, enterprise development and some specifically included public-private partnerships. However, hardly any proposal suggested groundbreaking paths to tap into the potential of the private sector as a major engine for job creation for youth, and few linked the joint programme approach to specific economic sectors.
- Very few proposals addressed substantive issues related to the **quality of employment** of young workers – an issue underpinning the goals and objectives of the YEM window, such as specified in its terms of reference. Even in proposals from countries with huge informal economies, the diagnosis and proposed interventions tended to place excessive emphasis on unemployment and pre-employment interventions, with little or no attention to measures to upgrade the poor working conditions of many young workers.
- There was often insufficient recognition that **young people are not a homogenous group**, which in turns calls for tailored interventions targeted specifically at those youth who, because of their pre-work background, are at a disadvantage in the labour market. Many proposals just identified “youth” or “young people” at large as beneficiaries of the proposed joint programme.

#### *Other critical issues*

- The **assessment of the current situation** – which was critical to set the background and rationale of the joint programme – was largely weak or inadequate. Statistics on the youth labour market were often partial (e.g. focusing only on unemployment even in countries with a huge informal economy; not disaggregated by sex thereby overlooking that young women and young men fare differently in the labour market) or outdated. Importantly, many proposals failed to include substantive information on current public policies and programmes, their relevance, effectiveness and lessons learned from their implementation, which made it difficult to assess the adequacy of interventions proposed under the joint programme.
- A majority of proposals emphasised **national and general measures and actions** rather than clearly focusing on well-defined regions and geographical areas.

- One of the biggest shortcomings of most proposals was their weak or lack of focus on **gender** issues. In most cases, the special needs of young women were not highlighted in the diagnosis, and completely ignored in the proposed interventions. The majority of the proposals did not include sex-disaggregated indicators to monitor impact of the joint programme.
- **Innovative and creative interventions**, though pilot in nature, were absent from most proposals. The approach underpinning most proposals fell short on innovation and was often centred on general policies or traditional-type measures such as training, seminars and policy dialogue.
- Many proposals involved **large UN teams**. Even when this was not the case, the value added of a UN inter-agency endeavour was not always clear. In general, proposals involving many agencies tended to lose focus and to lack leaderships and accountabilities. In several cases, interventions by the different agencies seemed to be just the sum or combination of action agencies could have undertaken on their own.
- A relatively important proportion of **budgets** (i.e. 25 per cent or 13 proposals) were in the two-digit (million) range, which suggested that they were overestimated. Not in all cases was the budget information complete. In addition, many budgets seemed to be heavy on costs for personnel, consultants, equipment with lower resources being allocated to achieve concrete results and clear outcomes for the direct beneficiaries of the joint programme.

## WHAT MADE PROPOSALS SUCCESSFUL

The proposals which were ultimately recommended and selected for funding were those that did not reflect the above-mentioned shortcomings. These proposals were not perfect either, but stood out because they:

- didn't try to address all the different dimensions of the terms of reference, but focused on some that were relevant for the local situation and tackled them creatively through a specific and somewhat unique angle;
- included a concise though exhaustive assessment of the overall problem and accordingly proposed interventions that were relevant to address that problem;
- included well-defined and justified interventions, which in total or in part had elements of innovation likely to make a change in the country situation;
- presented a clear and credible strategy, including in terms of sustainability and scalability;
- showed genuine integrated efforts by the UN participating agencies, building on respective strengths and identifying clear accountabilities;
- requested budgets that were deemed realistic and justified for what the joint programme aimed to achieve;
- format-wise, followed closely the thrust of the terms of reference of the YEM window as well as the structure proposed in the "Concept Note Format"

document, and presented information in a clear and widely accessible style (e.g. avoiding UN jargon as well as generalities).

### III. Preparing for future windows and/or rounds

We have learned a lot from the review process of the YEM window of the MDG-F. And it is important that we capitalize upon these lessons to avoid making the same mistakes and, importantly, to do better in the future.

#### WHAT YOU SHOULD NOT FORGET

- There are 57 countries eligible under the MDG-F. By January 2008, five thematic windows have opened (and closed). Practically all UNCTs and the ILO have submitted proposals under more than one window. At present, in some countries experts from UN agencies (including the ILO) are working on the development of the fully-fledged programme document (for approved proposals). In others, they are attending to the revision of the proposals (in the case of proposals selected for resubmission under a new round of the same window). ***Think realistically about existing capacity (in particular human resources) to meet standing commitments, when deciding whether or not to engage in a new window. You may wish to focus on those countries where potential for “success” is highest.***
- The terms of reference of any MDG-F window provide the substantive framework for preparing country proposals. Inevitably, they encompass a wide range of issues, some of which might be more relevant than others depending on national circumstances. ***Don’t try to address all dimensions raised in the terms of reference but only those that are relevant for the country situation and, in that context, identify and focus on a niche (or niches) where the UNCT and the ILO can make a real and substantive contribution. Use the terms of reference as a “source of inspiration” but adapt them creatively taking account of national circumstances.***
- When preparing the country proposal, it is not the terms of reference only that matter. ***Follow closely the guidance provided in the “Concept Note Format” and remember that the TSC experts will assess the proposals against the “Review Criteria”.***
- Each country proposal consists of: (i) A Concept Note Narrative (5-6 pages); (ii) A Log frame (2 pages); (iii) A budget (1 page); (iv) A Capabilities Statement (1 page). Additional documents can be attached as annexes. ***Bear in mind that the experts of the TSC will review all these documents for any proposal assigned to them. Therefore, make sure that the above documents (i) to (iv) are clear, well written and follow the format requirements because these are the documents TSC experts will scrutinize. The experience shows***

*that given the amount of work TSC experts actually rarely read the additional annexes.*

- Related to the previous point, coherence and consistency across these four documents that make up the proposal are a must. ***Don't underestimate the importance of clearly defining the intended beneficiaries and the geographic areas of intervention of the joint programme, which in turn should clearly inform the focus and outreach of the expected outcomes, outputs and activities (i.e. on the same beneficiaries and areas). This will enhance the likelihood of concentrating – rather than parcelling out – efforts and the impact of the joint programme.***
- A good and explicit definition of the monitoring and evaluation system is a gauge of the seriousness and soundness of the joint programme. ***Look carefully at this dimension and make sure that the M&E system of the proposal has a clear result-based management orientation, including clear impact indicators (i.e. results or changes in the underlying reality) rather than monitoring indicators only (i.e. implementation of foreseen activities and outputs). Remember to include sex-disaggregated indicators that would allow for assessing the differentiated impact of the joint programme on women and men.***
- Innovation is the mantra of the MDG-F. And it is not innovation per se, but innovation that leads to concrete results on the ground. Your proposal can of course include traditional-type interventions such as policy dialogue, training and workshops. ***But it is essential that it also includes innovative interventions that are likely to make a significant change in the local situation and that, if adapted, could be replicated in other places.***
- As mentioned earlier, the members of the TSC include staff from UN agencies, Spanish Government experts and independent experts. The latter often being drawn from the academic community, they have recognized knowledge of the topic (and/or of a specific region) but not necessarily of the UN. ***Make sure that your proposal is technically sound because this is what they, in particular, will look at and assess. Furthermore, avoid generalities that could apply to any country as well as too many acronyms, UN jargon and “langue de bois”, which will not be accessible to many of them.***
- One of the underpinning goals of the MDG-F is to support and reward UN agencies that are demonstrably working effectively as a team. In the final assessment by the TSC experts, this issue is as important as the technical soundness of the proposal. ***Therefore, avoid “fake” collaboration and partnership across UN agencies because it will not pay off. Look for those partnerships where participating agencies are genuinely willing to work together, building on their respective mandate and through an appropriate division of work. A good relationship with UNDP at the country level seems in general a promising start!***