

## ***Common Shortcomings in Application Bids***

### **Introduction**

The East Africa Research Fund (EARF) considers only those proposal bids that have been submitted after a competitive call. The proposals submitted are undergo three levels of evaluation, namely compliance, technical and commercial evaluation. Reports are generated in each of these three stages. Outcome of evaluation in each of the three stages is provided to applicants to inform them of the performance of their applications and provide a basis of future improvement.

This document highlights some common shortcomings that contribute to areas of underperformance of the applications received. It is hoped that with making potential applicants aware of these shortcomings, the quality of applications will improve and hence increase competitiveness of the research supplier market. The document provides you with key questions that applicants should use to ensure they are submitting a complete and well developed proposal. A number of tips are provided in the form of highlighted notes that are critical to a competitive proposal.

The document will be periodically updated to highlight any new areas that need particular emphasis.

### **1. Compliance**

#### **1.1 Purpose of the Compliance Check**

The purpose of the compliance (or eligibility) check is to verify that research suppliers submitting bid documents in response to a research call have provided all the information that is required based on the description provided in the *'Instructions to Suppliers'*.

The verification process involves:

- a) Checking for completeness of the submission, which includes verifying the use of the correct formats and ensuring that the submitted pack contains all the required documents;
- b) Verifying for adherence to the guidelines as specified in the Instructions to Suppliers; and
- c) Checking for organizational history of integrity and possible involvement in illegal activities through interrogation of international databases.

The document provides you with key questions that applicants should use to ensure they are submitting a complete and well developed proposal.

*The verification process involves:*

- Checking for completeness of the submission*
- Verifying for adherence to the guidelines*
- Checking for organizational history of integrity.*

*COMPLIANCE check ensures that only those applications that have provided all the information required are retained for the technical and commercial evaluation.*

## Shortcomings in Compliance stage:

- Missing the deadline
- Not meeting the eligibility criteria
- Adopting an incorrect format

The Executive Summary and Technical bid must not have any details of the budget.

*EARF encourages organisations teamed as consortia led by or including institutions from low or middle income countries, in particular those in East Africa*

Compliance check ensures that only those applications that have provided all the information required are retained for the technical and commercial evaluation. Organisations whose applications are not retained due to compliance reasons are informed at the close of the compliance stage (normally within a week after close of the call) and are provided with reasons why their applications were found not to be compliant.

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*Note 1: A checklist is provided to assist applicant's cross-check that all of the required documents are provided at the time of submission of the application pack. Applicants are required to complete all sections of the checklist.*

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### 1.2 Shortcomings often found during check for compliance

Some of the common shortcomings identified during the compliance check include:

a) **Not keeping to the deadline for submission of applications.** The call documents are very explicit on the deadline date and timing for making submission. EARF will not accept any application made after the close of the call, as they will be considered non-compliant.

b) **Not meeting the eligibility criteria for an applicant research supplier institution.** The Terms of Reference (ToRs) provide clear eligibility criteria for institutions to qualify as applicant research suppliers. The ToRs of most EARF calls require a team of academic and subject experts working under a Lead Supplier Organisation.<sup>1</sup> The Lead Supplier Organisation should be a recognised higher education institution, research organisation or an organisation with a credible research capacity and experience of conducting similar research projects.

The Lead Supplier Organisation should demonstrate adequate capacity to undertake the research project. Preference is given to groups incorporating both international and regional (East Africa) expertise to encourage diverse perspectives, integrated and innovative thinking. Tenders from suitably qualified organisations or consortia are equally welcome. EARF encourages organisations teamed as consortia led by or including institutions from low or middle income countries, in particular those in East Africa.

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<sup>1</sup>This may include a consortium of organisations, with a designated Lead Supplier.

Applicants who do not conform to the eligibility criteria are regarded as not compliant.

c) **Missing application components or incorrect format** (not observing font size, page limits etc.) as described in [section 3](#) of the *Instructions to Suppliers*. Applicants are required to provide a complete application pack comprises of three components as follows:

- **Component 1: Technical Proposal**

- ✓ Executive Summary
- ✓ Technical bid
- ✓ Research methodology (completed in a prescribed template)

- **Component 2: Commercial Proposal**

- ✓ Commercial bid

- **Component 3: Additional Documentation**

- ✓ Suppliers Checklist
- ✓ Supportive documentation (upon request)

Note 2: The Executive Summary and Technical bid must not have any details of the budget.

d) **The technical bid missing any one of the 8 narrative components** as provided for in [section 3](#) of the *Instructions to Suppliers*, namely:

- ✓ Qualifications to the ToRs
- ✓ Rationale, problem analysis and theoretical basis for undertaking the research work
- ✓ Research Methodology
- ✓ Research and management capability of the research team
- ✓ Track record in undertaking similar work with CV summaries of the research experts
- ✓ Quality assurance and performance management
- ✓ Programme management arrangements including monitoring and evaluation plans
- ✓ Approach to enhance policy uptake

Note 3: No additional documents should be submitted unless specifically asked for

e) **The commercial bids do not utilise the excel commercial template which has provision for completion of the following worksheets:**

- ✓ Financial Methodology
- ✓ Detailed Financial Plan
- ✓ Milestone Breakdown

f) The total **budget quoted (inclusive of taxes) for implementing the research project (inclusive of taxes) exceeds** the figure provided in the *Instructions to Suppliers*.

g) As support to the bid, applicant has not **provided references for past research projects** undertaken.

## 2. Technical Evaluation

### 2.1 Purpose of the Technical Evaluation

The purpose of the technical evaluation is to assess the applicant research supplier's technical and professional experience and capability, based on the technical bid submitted. The assessment is carried out by a specialist expert panel with international experience and exposure in the disciplinary area of the advertised research. The panel evaluates the research services proposed by the applicant as well as the approach to be followed in providing it. The panel evaluates the responsiveness to the requirements described in the ToRs, and assesses how well the supplier has demonstrated an understanding of the ToR requirements, as well as the supplier's past performance in undertaking similar projects.

The total score attributed to the technical bid is 80% generally distributed in three categories of criteria:

- ✓ Quality of personnel (30%)
- ✓ Capacity to undertake work (20%)
- ✓ Methodology (30%)

The criteria categories may change from the procurement of one research project to another depending on the specific needs and technical requirements of the research study. It is important that applicants **read and understand the Scoring Methodology and Evaluation Criteria** provided in the ITT application pack since it clearly outlines what the evaluation panel will look for in the bids to base their assessment and thereby score the various attributes of the technical bid. The panel's score indicate the degree of confidence they have on the Supplier's capability to deliver the projects outputs effectively based on the contents of the bid.

### 2.2 Shortcomings often encountered during the technical evaluation

The major shortcoming found with most technical bids and which result in low scores is that applicants do **not optimise marketing of their research capability, experience and organisational management capacity** based on the ToRs and the scoring guideline. Often, considerable effort is made in the description of the introductory parts of the proposal without due regard to what the evaluating panel will be looking for as described in the scoring guideline. As a result, many proposals lack the essential aspects that would make them obtain high scores. This is highlighted below as follows;

- a) **Quality of personnel not well articulated and demonstrated.** Applicants score if the well if they are able to convincingly demonstrate their capacity by addressing the following questions:

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- ✓ Methodology (30%)

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Applicants do **not optimise marketing of their research capability, experience and organisational management capacity** based on the ToRs and the scoring guideline

- ✓ Does the Team Leader have the relevant academic and professional experience as well as leadership capability that would be useful in the implementation of this project? How appropriate and rationalized are the proposed number of days allocated for the research work?
- ✓ Is the composition and strength of project team, including skill mix diversity and quality of expertise (academic and professional) appropriate and well rationalized? How appropriate and rationalized are the proposed number of days allocated for the research work? Would the lead researchers be available during the appropriate periods of the project?
- ✓ Does the proposed team have the knowledge and in-depth experience of the research question? Is there evidence of the experience and track record in undertaking similar research work in the eastern Africa region?

Note 4: ensure that CV summaries of lead researchers are included within the body of the technical proposal. The summaries must not be more than three quarters of a page for each expert proposed, indicating their specific role in the research study and providing recent published peer reviewed evidence (not more than five years old) of having undertaken similar work. Do not include full CVs.

b) **Capacity to undertake the research work is not well described and demonstrated.** Applicant suppliers will be able to attract good scores if the convincingly address the following:

✓ Does the supplier organisation and project team have the relevant experience and track record in management large, multi-component, multi-locational programmes? Is there evidence of relevant institutional management capacity?

- ✓ Does the project team have familiarity with the research landscape and policy context in eastern Africa region?

c) **The approach and methodology to be used in implementing the research work is not appropriate or is not well described.** This is a critical area of the research proposal that needs to be well described and referenced. Check that you have answered the following questions:

- ✓ In respect to the ToRs, does the proposed methodology able to achieve results, whilst ensuring optimal Value for Money (VfM) over the lifetime of the project? Are the outcomes clear and well-articulated?
- ✓ How robustness is the proposed method of data analysis? What approach will be used to assess the strength of the evidence and quality assure the outputs of the project?
- ✓ How will the analysis of the geo-political landscape be undertaken in relation to gender, human and economic development outcomes? What approach will be followed to ensure maximum policy uptake?
- ✓ Do you have good examples that demonstrate where the proposed methodology has been applied successfully in research situations similar to this project?

d) **Lack of well described supportive annexes** of the following :

- ✓ Detailed **Work Plan** which provides breaks down activities and outputs, which are clearly cross referenced (where appropriate) to payment mechanisms and governance/quality assurance mechanisms to ensure effective delivery on time and within budget.
- ✓ Contacts of organizational references who can demonstrate your relevant research experience;
- ✓ Contractual agreements in case of joint ventures, subcontracting arrangements etc.;
- ✓ Declaration of Non-Canvassing and Non-Collusive Tendering;
- ✓ Acceptance of duty of care; and
- ✓ Provision of the completed template of the research methodology summary.

### 3. Commercial Evaluation

#### 3.1 Purpose of the Commercial Evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation of the commercial component is to determine the responsiveness of the proposal based the *Terms of Reference* which are elaborated in the *Instructions to Suppliers*. The assessment seeks to determine how well the application has demonstrated that the bid offers the best mix of quality and cost-effectiveness (least use of resource over the proposed period of providing the services required). The assessment covers the whole of project life costs including (but not limited to) capital, maintenance, management, operating and disposal costs. The assessment also seeks to establish how the proposed approach would continue to add value beyond the implementation life of the project as will be determined by the contract.

Guidelines provided require the applicant to structure the Commercial component in the following 3 sections:

- a) Financial Methodology (elaborating on the rational of your organization’s Commercial bid and how it offers the best value possible);
- b) Detailed Financial Plan (or detailed budgets); and
- c) Milestone Breakdown (providing breakdown of professional fees charged based on milestone delivered).

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**Note 5:** A deep understanding of the key issues in the “*Compliance and Technical Evaluation stages*” needs to be clearly demonstrated. Merely providing general statements of information and a can-do attitude will not attract high scores.

In order to ease the development of the commercial bid, financial templates designed as excel worksheets are provided. The commercial bid contributes 20% of the total aggregate score. Easy to follow guidelines are provided within the worksheets so as to assist the applicant correctly populate the templates.

It is important that applicants **read and understand the Scoring Methodology and Evaluation Criteria** provided in the ITT application pack since criteria clearly outlines what the evaluation panel will look for in the bids to base their assessment and thereby score the various attributes of the commercial bid.

### 3.2 Shortcomings often encountered during the commercial evaluation

The most common shortcoming encountered revolves round failure to provide the information required in the format described. These shortcomings can be elaborated as follows:

- a) **Failure to populate the templates as required.** There is no option of not using the templates. All applicants must complete the templates provided.



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- b) **Failure to provide sufficient detail on benchmarking** and how the professional fees have been arrived at
- c) **Failure to provide financial risk analysis** that comprehensively looks at both programmatic and management components
- d) **Failure to provide a Value for Money (VfM) analysis**
- e) **Failure to provide a well rationalised budget** supported with narrative explanations of the budget lines
- f) **Failure to provide the breakdown of milestones** and how these relate to payments over the life of the project.
- g) **Inaccurate or wrong calculations**

*Note 6: Do not hesitate to reach out to the EARF team when in doubt or need clarification on aspects that you do not understand. It is also important to read and acquaint yourself with the questions that various applicants ask and whose response is published in the EARF website during the entire period when the call is open*