

A Note on Concept Notes

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Introduction

Concept notes describe proposals that have not yet been written. They may be conceived of as pre-proposals defining a proposal's framework in a way that illuminates the project concept for internal discussion, a potential funding agency or collaborator. Its primary objective is to provide enough information about the idea being considered to elicit useful input and engender effective shaping of the *concept* when it is finally transformed into a proposal. Concept notes are a useful tool to *prime the pump* – secure interest and generate mindful commitment from managers, funding agencies, partners and collaborators about a project idea.

Concept notes are, thus, a more complete description of the ideas supporting the conceptualized project. They encompass the definition of the problem and a clarification of the question that facilitated the idea, the project's objectives and the approaches or strategies that would be used to achieve the identified objectives. They also include cover ideas about expected results from the project if it is executed.

While people often believe that their ideas are great, they do not often believe that about other people's ideas. Therefore, it is prudent in a concept note to identify the points of differentiation that the note's ideas have in relation to existing solutions or the contribution they make to them. When contributions are framed to cover projects of interest to a potential project partner, identifying the concept note's value addition is always prudent.

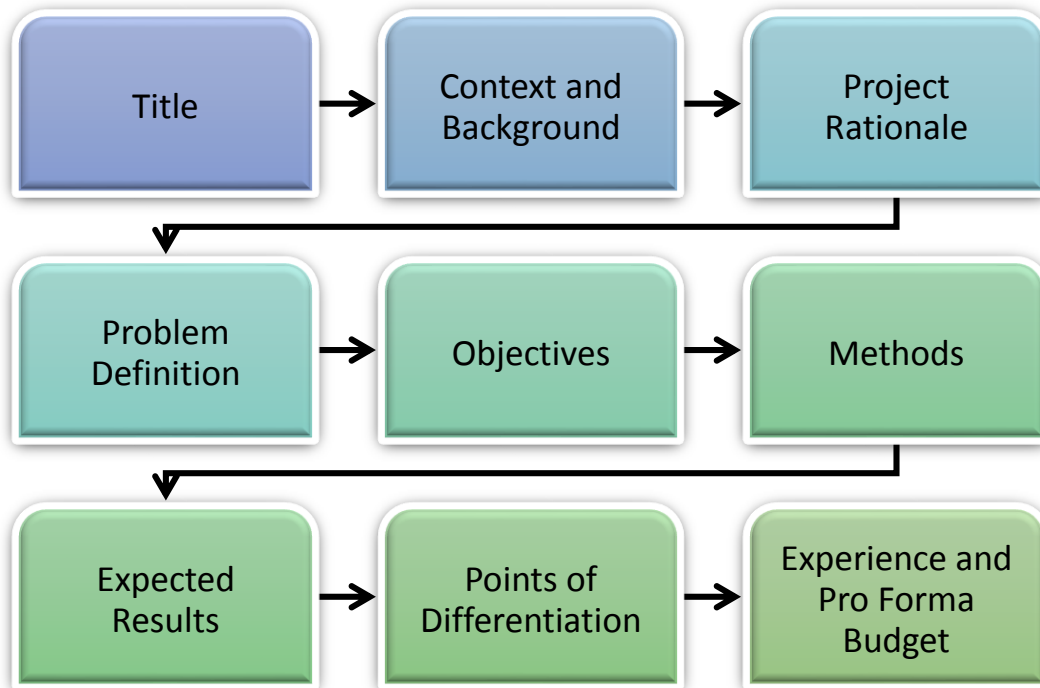
The Framework

The prime objective of concept note is to provide enough information to stimulate contributions from the target audience and, in the process, engender interest and provoke an invitation to submit a full proposal. Consequently, the concept note should not become a proposal. The concept notes should be fewer than five pages and be a brief synopsis of the proposal that *has not been written yet*. Indeed, the shorter it is, the more effective it is. Economy and completeness are the elegant characteristics of an effective concept note.

Figure 1 shows the components of a framework for writing an effective concept note. The title is the first thing that anyone sees. It must, thus, be simultaneously informative and complete. It must be interesting enough to captivate and invite a reader. However, to ensure

differentiation, it is important that the title not be *ordinary*. It must be attractive and attention grabbing in its phraseology and rhythm.

Figure 1: Framework for Concept Notes



The context or background describes the antecedents to the problem stimulating the concept note. It must be written in a way that convinces the reader of the note's accuracy of the facts, its importance and usefulness. An effective context and background will reveal a powerful project rationale which will provide a foundation upon which to describe the problem the project seeks to address. The problem definition is often a sentence or two capturing the base problem for the project. It essentially sets the project's rationale into a clear and concisely-framed problem. It should cause the reader to agree that addressing the problem would make a significant contribution to a broader mission.

The objectives must be directly related to the problem. The most effective approach to defining *relevant* objectives is to decompose the project problem into logical steps and set the objectives up to sequentially accomplish each of those steps. This way, completing all the steps (achieving all the objectives) would imply solving the problem. Another advantage of setting up the objectives as logical components to the project problem is that each component or step suggests a unique approach or method for addressing it. This allows us to think about methods in a systematic manner.

The description of the expected results is a way of helping the reader understand the linkage between the project and its rationale. Therefore, this section circles back to the rationale and background, connects the reader to the beginning and reaffirms the importance of the problem. Including points of differentiation in the concept note offer another opportunity for securing commitment and action. The innovative solutions to the problem as described in the

concept note must compel the reader to see the conceptual project's value. After all, having already committed to the project rationale, showing the value addition is ensuring the value contribution is not lost on the reader.

Some funders require a budget in concept notes. However, it is very difficult to produce a budget of any accuracy before completing the full proposal. Therefore, in cases where this is requested, provide a pro forma budget, and make it clear that it is a pro forma. Explaining what has not been included in the pro forma budget because of uncertainty about the final shape of the project is a good idea. Preceding the budget statement with a description of the bench strength of the proponents of the project is always prudent. This statement must describe why you and your team must be the organization to execute this project. A brief description of the experience with the problem and relevant activities in the area would suffice.

Conclusion

The concept note is used as a hook for exciting potential project partners. It seeks to get them excited about a project idea or concept. For it to be successful, a concept note must be compelling enough to leave no room for a "So what?" question. Instead, it must engender a high level of curiosity that allows the potential partner to begin investing time, energy and creativity to add to it, make suggestions, become engaged and make it better. Once people's interests are high enough to cause them to contribute, the likelihood of their willingness to invest increases. The ultimate of the concept note is to get enough interest to receive an invitation to present a full proposal.