

INFO BRIEF

APRIL 2026

CLARE brief on Reflections for Local Organisations from a Global Adaptation Funding Call Process Review



OVERVIEW

Last year, **Transitions Research** had the opportunity to undertake a CLARE-commissioned critical review of the programme's 2022 Call for Proposals process, with the aim of generating learning to strengthen future funding processes and better support locally led, action-oriented adaptation research.

Being on the other side of a large global call for proposals like this, where we are more often applicants ourselves, offered a rare vantage point. Reviewing the call at scale, with applications and granular reviewer feedback, surfaced insights that fundamentally changed how we now approach proposal writing.

In a space where adaptation funding is dwindling while demand continues to grow, making competition fiercer than ever, if we, as a community-centred climate adaptation organisation in the Global South, were applying for a similar call today, knowing what we know now, here's what we would do differently.

REFLECTIONS FOR LOCAL ORGANISATIONS FROM A GLOBAL ADAPTATION FUNDING CALL PROCESS REVIEW

What 1,600 applications taught us about writing stronger proposals

THE FIT QUESTION

Everyone knows you should check alignment. Theoretically, we all understand that we're supposed to match our work to the call criteria before applying. We often apply to slightly connected opportunities and try to make ourselves fit into that mould, maybe because the pressure to secure funding feels more urgent than the risk of rejection, or because we convince ourselves that if we just frame it right, we can make it work.

Here's what we learned from reviewing 1,600 applications: For high-outreach global calls where thousands apply, your time is better spent finding the right opportunity than forcing an imperfect fit.

The first filter in the review process eliminates proposals that don't align with the call's objectives, no matter how well articulated the idea is. We saw good proposals with clear methodologies get filtered out at the initial stage simply because they didn't genuinely address what the call was asking for.

One reviewer told us they encountered applications that focused on areas the funder had already supported extensively, priorities had shifted, but applicants were still proposing what was supported five years ago. Better to preserve your energy for opportunities where your ideas genuinely match what funders are seeking now.



CLARE
CLIMATE
ADAPTATION
& RESILIENCE



UK International
Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity



IDRC · CRDI
Canada

SOUTH
SOUTH
NORTH



Transitions
Research

What we would do now:

Before spending weeks or even months drafting the proposal, we will spend a genuine day (not an hour skimming) examining whether our work truly addresses the call's objectives, not whether we can make it sound like it does. For us, this now means treating fit not as a technical eligibility check, but as an honest reflection on whether the opportunity genuinely enables the direction we want to pursue as a team.

BUILDING OUR THEORY OF CHANGE FIRST

When writing proposals, we used to focus immediately on what we had to do: the methods, the activities, the outputs. But we often skipped the deeper question of why those activities would lead to the change we claimed they would.

That's what a theory of change forces you to articulate, the causal pathway from action to impact, and how those changes outlive the project itself. It's a relatively new framework in adaptation work, and many organisations, especially smaller local ones, aren't yet fluent or have had the space and resources to learn how to draft comprehensive theories of change.

After reviewing hundreds of proposals, we realised that reviewers can immediately tell when this linkage is missing.

What we saw in the reviews: Weaker proposals often "relied on untested assumptions", had "weak links between methods, objectives, and anticipated impact", or presented ambitious goals without operational feasibility. The pattern was consistent: big objectives with unclear pathways to get there.

What actually worked: Proposals with "logical linkages between objectives, methods, and outcomes" where you could draw a clear line from activities to outputs to outcomes to impact.

What we would do differently now:

We wouldn't jump straight into writing. Instead, we will:

Learn what a good theory of change looks like. We would look up resources from the call organisers themselves,

GETTING REAL ABOUT GEI INTEGRATION

We had a perception that to make a proposal successful in the impact space, we need to promise transformative equality outcomes and demonstrate exceptional Gender Equality and Inclusion (GEI) integration at any cost. That felt like the only way to score high in the GEI segment.

But that's not really the case. What reviewers valued wasn't just ambition, it was specificity, operational detail, and genuine integration. Being clear about what's feasible and how you will achieve it makes a proposal stand out better than grand promises without substance.

We'll ask ourselves:

- Does this opportunity genuinely align with our organisation's vision and way of working, or are we stretching ourselves to make it fit?
- Have they already funded similar work in this geography or theme, signalling they might be looking for something different?
- Would a reviewer immediately recognise this as aligned, or would they need convincing?

If the answer isn't a clear "yes", we will save our energy for the next better aligned opportunity.

established funders in this space, or other organisations' theory of change frameworks. We would study them until we understood not just the concept, but how to structure one aligned with what we want to propose.

Start with clear objectives. Not just the call's broad goals (like "build resilience"), but our specific, contextual objectives: Who are we doing this for? What will they get out of it? What will remain after the funding ends? How is this connected to the call's goals, and the big-picture impact we seek. These questions define our boundaries and help assess feasibility.

Map our methodology to those objectives. For each activity or method, we will ask: Why is this step necessary? How does it connect to the objective? Can we justify our sampling strategy for our specific context? Are we linking knowledge to action, not just producing outputs?

Reality-check the timeline. What can we actually change in 3-years? What's genuinely feasible versus aspirational? Reviewers could spot over-ambition immediately in proposals that "resembled consulting scopes rather than research" or were "too ambitious, lacking details".

Build in sustainability from the start. How do the changes we initiate continue beyond the project timeline? How do the changes we initiate become embedded? Who carries them forward? Funders want to see this pathway, not just immediate outputs.

The key question: Can we draw a clear line from what we'll do to what will change? If we can't explain this pathway confidently, I'm not ready to write yet.

What reviewers could easily see through:

Lower-scoring proposals tended to:

- Limit GEI to team composition ('50% women on our team')
- Rely on disaggregated survey data as the only GEI evidence
- Use vague language like "we will engage women and other marginalised groups" without explaining how
- Fill the GEI section with justification instead of actual methods.

After looking at highly scored GEI sections, we learned they did specific things:

They embedded GEI in the research logic from the start, not as a separate add-on section at the end. Reviewers praised proposals where “GEI considerations are integrated in the problem statement, research questions and design and referenced throughout the proposal”, and linked their work to policy processes, governance reforms, or institutional change.

They used evidence-based intersectionality, not just “women,” actually naming which groups face inequality in their specific context. Reviewers highlighted: “Strong intersectional character ... considers caste, disability, ethnicity, class, age ...”

They operationalised GEI in their methods. Reviewers loved seeing specific tools that added strength to the proposal such as:

- Life histories to capture gendered trajectories
- Social network mapping to understand power relations
- Co-interpretation workshops with women / disabled groups

Most importantly, successful proposals allocated actual GEI expertise, which helped articulate the thoughts into ideation better. Successful proposals had named gender focal points, budget for capacity-building, and GEI woven into M&E frameworks.

One awarded grantee told us they hired a GEI expert fairly early in the proposal process. Having their contextual advice from the start made the integration realistic, not just aspirational.

Successful proposals were honest about their level. Some proposals were transformative (changing power relations and institutions). Others were responsive or sensitive,

while the main impact was outside of GEI considerations. What mattered was being clear and realistic about what level was feasible in their context and timeline.

What we would do differently now:

Looking at layers of ways to formulate GEI in our proposal, also knowing that this is a relatively new framework and not how most of us naturally think about when designing programs and projects, we would now:

Build our knowledge base on GEI integration in our field. Understand what integration really means before writing.

Know our context best. What aspects of GEI are relevant here? What’s genuinely feasible given our timeline and resources?

Consider bringing in expertise. The expert doesn’t need to already know our specific context. What’s important is that they work closely with those who do: our team – locally, technically strong and grounded in our reality. The risk isn’t hiring an external expert; it’s having a GEI section that’s beautifully written but disconnected from the reality of our work.

Connect it to our theory of change. How does our GEI integration actually lead to achieving our long-term goal? What’s the pathway?

The key shift. Now we know that contextual, honest, operationalised GEI integration scores better than blanket promises. Reviewers are looking for what makes sense in our specific context, not a cookie-cutter approach or broad declarations.

PARTNERSHIPS THAT ACTUALLY WORK AND FEEL RIGHT

Partnerships are valuable because they bring complementary strengths such as technical expertise, local knowledge and established networks that no single organisation holds entirely. For Global South organisations, partnerships can provide access to resources and legitimacy.

Funders are actively looking for genuine Southern leadership, not just participation. They look at budget distribution, decision-making power, and governance structures to assess whether partnerships are equitable.

What “symbolic partnerships” looked like in feedback: “Unclear roles”, most “resources concentrated in the North”, “vague coordination mechanisms”, and “power imbalances” where Global South partners were included but not genuinely empowered.

What we would do differently now:

Finding partners (way before the proposal cycle starts). For many local organisations, the challenge starts at the first step, it’s knowing who’s out there.

Now we will,

- Identify our organisation’s strengths and gaps first: What skills, expertise, or geographic reach do we lack that can be complemented by a partner, and what do we bring to the table?
- Actively engage in platforms and alliances where potential partners gather (like the ones funders are creating through these very initiatives). Build a network proactively, not scramble when a call drops.

Forming genuine partnerships. When reaching out to potential partners, we would start with honest conversations about power and resources, not just shared interests. This takes time, which is exactly why we would work on building these relationships proactively and then tap into them when a call emerges.

One successful grantee told us they flew to Tanzania before even submitting the proposal, ensuring their local NGO partner had an equal voice from day one. Finding partners like this from Global North will establish us for equitable success.

Also pay attention to:

Role clarity: Each partner's contribution must be specific and necessary, not just tokenised. Why is this partner essential? What unique value do they bring?

Southern leadership in practice: Not just on paper, but in budget control, agenda-setting, and visibility. We now know this makes proposals stronger, so we will make a confident case for it in partnership negotiations.

FIVE QUESTIONS BEFORE SUBMITTING

After our first read of the call, and an initial brainstorming or a first rough draft, and after every draft development, we now ask ourselves these five questions:

- **Is this call genuinely aligned with what we do?** Does this call genuinely align with our organisation's vision and way of working? Not "can we make it work," but "are we offering what they're actually asking for?"
- **Can we confidently explain our theory of change** from activities to outputs to outcomes to impact? If we can't draw that clear causal pathway, we are not ready.
- **Have we been honest about what's feasible in our GEI integration?** Are we promising what we can actually deliver in our context, and what's relevant?
- **Do we feel this partnership is genuine and equitable?** Do we feel empowered to shape decisions, challenge approaches, and lead key aspects, or are we just checking a box?
- **Can we realistically achieve this in the timeframe?** Are we confident we can deliver, or are we being over-ambitious?

If any answer is "no", we go back and revise. These aren't external reviewer checks; they're internal gut checks about whether we genuinely believe in what we're proposing.

These insights are not new, but there is a gap between knowing and doing. The truth is simple - funders want proposals that are realistic, contextual, and honest. They want to see that you have thought through feasibility, that you understand your context, and that you are building something sustainable.

If we were applying again to a similar global call that is looking to support grounded adaptation work, we will spend less time polishing sentences and more time making sure these basics are solid. Because that's what gets you through, and more importantly, that's what helps you actually deliver meaningful work.

A fuller synthesis of findings from the CLARE call review that informed these reflections is available in the [CLARE Key Insights Report](#).

Acknowledgements

Authors:

Perna Singh, Transitions Research;
Diksha Gupta, Transitions Research

Contributors:

The authors acknowledge the contributions of CLARE-supported project team members in the process of developing this brief.

CLARE is a flagship research programme on climate adaptation and resilience, funded mostly (about 90%) by UK Aid through the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and co-funded by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. CLARE is bridging critical gaps between science and action by championing Southern leadership to enable socially inclusive and sustainable action to build resilience to climate change and natural hazards. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent those of the UK government, IDRC or its Board of Governors.



Learn more about CLARE:
www.clareprogramme.org



Photos:

Front: CLARExchange site visit in Lusaka, Zambia.
Credit: Kalichi Pictures

Back: Tour of urban settlement in Lusaka, Zambia.
Credit: Kalichi Pictures