
SUMMARY

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Common weaknesses of Lithuanian LIFE programme applicants

In this document Henrik Toremark, Sweco's expert of the LIFE programme, has summarised the most common weaknesses observed in the concept notes from Lithuanian applicants that he reviewed in 2020. Each description of a weakness is accompanied with recommendations on how to clarify and strengthen the issues. The evaluator described below refers to the independent evaluators who review concept note on behalf of the contracting authority within the LIFE programme as a part of the evaluation process.

The general common weaknesses were the following:

1. Last minute deadline rush

The preparations of the concept note were often carried out at the last minute. The LIFE programme is a comparably attractive funding programme that provides large money grants for implementation projects with relatively small obligations. **Recommendation:** The applicants are recommended to take the preparation procedure seriously and allocate time for preparation proportional to the potential outcome. Sufficient time, usually months, is needed to get acquainted with the LIFE programme preferences, adapt the own concept to the programme and finetune a successful concept note.

2. Lack of structure in the text

Most applicants did not provide a clear structure to neither the overall concept note nor the individual sections. Important arguments and justifications were not understandable as they lacked a logical, chronological and/or explicit presentation. The unclear structure might force the evaluator to search for information, which creates frustration and a risk for independent interpretations. Moreover, many applicants use abbreviations that are not properly spelled out. **Recommendation:** To provide a clear structure, the applicant is recommended to outline for him/herself an own understanding of which problem, solution or actions that are crucial. Knowing which information to highlight, the applicant can emphasise certain issues and arguments by provide concise, clear and short sentences; repeat the same key words throughout the concept note; and use highlighting in bold, underlined, cursive, sized letters for key words or sentences. If the applicant needs to present multiple issues or arguments, it is wise to present them using a decreasing order of importance and/or bullet points. Character-consuming abbreviations should be spelled out at least once when they first appear in the concept note.

3. Information irrelevant to the evaluation

Many applicants appear to not have read the LIFE programme instructions regarding eligible activities and requested content in each section. The information provided is often formulated too broadly, for example describing the organisation's general activities rather than the experience in the selected specific project topic. As a result, the evaluator will suffer from information overload. The inclusion of irrelevant and/or excessive information risks to confuse the evaluator and thus provide a negative impression. Sometimes, it appears that much information has been copied from applications in other programmes. **Recommendation:** To avoid this, the applicant is recommended to carefully select and include information that is relevant to the LIFE programme. Sometimes it hurts to remove information that may have taken much time to collect. But only information that is requested in the specific Concept Note section is considered relevant. This information is clearly specified in the LIFE programme application guide.

4. Vague and subjective argumentation

Many applicants use adjectives like "significant", "serious" and "strong" to describe various information in the concept note. The wording may be considered vague, uninformed or even subjective and is unlikely to convince the evaluator. **Recommendation:** To avoid any doubt for the evaluator, the applicant is recommended to provide information and argumentation in numbers. Replacing "impressive market potential" with "450 potential clients in EU" provides clarity and convincing strength to the concept note.

Some specific common weaknesses are presented section by section:

5. Brief description of the Coordinating Beneficiary's activities and experience in the area of the proposal

Many applicants presented general information about the organisations that is not directly linked to the proposal. **Recommendation:** Applicants are recommended to strictly stick to describing the entity, its legal status, its activities and its competence *in relation to the proposed actions*. Therefore, it is sufficient to provide information that ensure that the applicant, in combination with the other beneficiaries, has sufficient technical means, competencies and expertise for implementation of the proposed activities.

6. Environmental problem targeted

Many applicants risk to be unclear in the presentation of the environmental problem by providing excessive, unstructured information. Often, concrete data about the absolute, quantified size and context of the environmental problems as well as its underlying reasons are missing or unclear. In some case, the environmental problem may have multiple components, e.g. an environmental,

technical, legal and policy-related issue or reason, and an argumentation around such factors was rarely elaborated. The provided information was often limited to the situation in Lithuania.

Recommendation: The applicants are recommended to clearly highlight the main environmental problem and motivate the existence and form of the environmental problem by providing quantified and detailed information about both problem and causes, preferably on the EU level. If the problem takes various forms in different countries, this could be explained along with a discussion on legal or other organisational differences, possibly with examples for multiple EU member states. Motivating that there is a need to solve the EU-wide environmental problem is indirectly a way to justify the EU added value of the project.

7. Project objectives

Many applicants described one or several objectives that did not contribute to solve the described environmental problem. As a result, the objectives description failed to outline the function and potential impact of the proposed project. **Recommendation:** The applicants are recommended to ensure that there is a logical link between the environmental problem and objective as well as other section. “Over-detailed” descriptions may be useful to ensure that the evaluator interprets information in the way that the applicant desires.

8. Actions and means involved

Many applicants claim that the project will do a certain kind of activity without including it in this section, which is likely to not impress the evaluator. Moreover, many applicants did not provide comprehensive and clear descriptions in terms of why, how, when, where and by whom their planned activities will be carried out. Descriptions of important procedural and quantitative information about the activities was missing. **Recommendation:** The applicants are recommended to make a detailed account of the implementation process. One way of ensuring that all information is provided is to describe the process to a colleague who knows little about the proposed project and let the colleague ask control questions. Trying to explain it someone else tends to force the applicant to include also the “excessive” or “obvious” details. Some recommendations to each issue:

- *Why:* Explain the aim of the activity in max. ten words;
- *Where:* Indicate a known or guessed exact location;
- *When:* Provide an estimated time range with start and end dates for the activity, e.g. “Test operations: Q2 2022-Q4 2023” and not only the duration, e.g. tests over two years from commissioning;
- *How:* Describe the key project solution in terms of size, capacity, components and explain the process or production stages/phases;
- *By whom:* Outline which beneficiaries or (un-named) sub-contractors that are to be responsible and involved based on the described experience, knowledge and capacity;

9. Quantified expected results and impacts

Most applicants did not provide a clear baseline situation, e.g. the performance of the best practice solution of today, in the results description. If the baseline is not clear and well described, all relative result indicators are likely to be considered invalid. Moreover, some of the result indicators were difficult to relate to, for instance avoidance of pollution of a chemical to the environment in an amount that could be perceived as very small. Therefore, it was difficult to make a rough assessment of the proposed project feasibility (i.e. expected results vs. budget).

Recommendation: The applicants are recommended to provide a clear baseline situation description outlining today's conventional and/or state-of-art solution's capacity, performance or similar in absolute, quantitative terms and comparable to the proposed best practice/pilot/demonstration solution. A similar quantitative indicator should be provided for the proposed solution. Moreover, applicants may justify the need of the proposed project by translating abstract measures into concrete examples. For instance, the annual production of x kg of fertiliser could be translated into amount of phosphorous recovered, potential size of agricultural lands fertilised over a year and/or the potential amount of food grown per year using the amount of the fertiliser.

10. Sustainability of the Project Results

Most applicants lack concrete and convincing arguments and activities to support that the solution would be replicated and used after the end of the LIFE project. A justification that is not based on quantified commercial potential, expected or existing legal issues or applied dissemination activities is not likely to impress the evaluator.

Recommendation: The applicants are recommended to consider including concrete activities in the project that go beyond transfer of knowledge and networking in conferences, workshops and similar; and involves putting the solutions developed and/or applied in the project into practice beyond the project period, elsewhere or for a different purpose. This could include a widely applicable replication model, a mobile prototype or meetings with policymakers that encourages the potential replicating or uptaking organisations to get actively involved. Moreover, the evaluators are often more easily convinced by rough business plans or legal justifications. Business plans may include information on expected full-scale production cost, pricing, customers and competitors that motivates commercialisation within the selected context. Legal justifications may include information on current and expected tightened legislations within the field of the concept note.

11. Project topic(s)

Several applicants had not finally selected a project topic and their concept notes were therefore not necessarily suitable within the LIFE programme. As a result, the concept note is likely not to be invited to full application stage or, if it is, experience issues at the full application stage.

Recommendation: The applicants are recommended to invest time into selecting the most appropriate project topic as a *first step* to ensure that the concept note has a logical link to the priorities of the LIFE programme.

12. Project's pilot/demonstration character

Most applicants had not clearly referred to whether the concept note intended to meet the criteria for a best practice, pilot or demonstration character project, which is obligatory within the LIFE programme. As a result, it was difficult to assess the level of maturity of the solutions. Moreover, most applicants did not clearly and structured explained the state-of-art solution nor referring to preparatory activities suggesting that their beyond state-of-art solution actually performs as promised in the results section. Some applicants did not provide a clear description of the best practice/pilot/demonstration solution. **Recommendation:** The applicants are recommended to provide separated descriptions with performance and maturity indications of the state-of-art solution, best practice/lab/pilot tests carried out prior to as well as the beyond-state-of-art solution to be implemented during the proposed project. Normally, best practice/lab/pilot test descriptions should include information about capacity, timing, location, result and conclusions to be convincing. Performance indications could be for instance amount of input, output or processing per year. Maturity indicators could refer to EU's definition of the technology readiness levels (TRL).

In the other sections, Sweco has not identified any major or common weaknesses among the applicants.