**RIO APPLICANT SURVEY REPORT**

**In the framework of**

**Call for Concept Notes and Proposal “Advancing the Rights and Integration of Roma”**

# Executive Summary-Key Findings

Roma Initiates Office launched a web survey inviting all applicants—those whose ideas were declined as well as those whose projects were approved—to share their opinions about a range of aspects pertaining to the call “Advancing the Rights and Integration of Roma” launched in February 2013. The results presented here were obtained during 16-day period in October 2013 and indicate the following findings:

RIO received responses from almost all countries that participated in the call. For the ease of identification, the two pools of responses-- i.e. those received from applicants who submitted only a concept note and those that submitted both a concept note and a proposal--will be referred to in the report as “concept note” applicants/respondents and the “proposal” applicants/respondents.

**USAGE OF GRANTEE PORTAL**

Twenty percent of “concept note” applicants and 45% of “proposal” applicants encountered technical problems during the application process. Foundation Connect is itself undergoing continuous adaptation and improvement and there are still glitches that need to be fixed which thus might improve the application process in the future. Faced with technical problems during the application process, 54% of “concept note” applicants and 50% of “proposal” applicants contacted RIO staff. Sixty six percent of “concept note” applicants and 75% of “proposal” applicants think that RIO staff responded immediately to their technical question and offered a solution that solved their problem.

**COMMUNICATION WITH RIO STAFF**

The most utilized communication channels through which applicants communicated with RIO staff was email (84% of concept note applicants and 100% of “proposal” applicants), Skype (58% of “proposal” applicants), and phone (29% of “proposal” applicants). Overall, during the evaluation process RIO staff was responsive towards applicants. Regarding the consistency of information conveyed by RIO staff, 22% of “concept note applicants think that the information received from RIO staff was “extremely consistent and 42% think that the information was “very consistent”. Regarding “proposal” applicants, 35% think that information was “extremely consistent” and also 35% think that the information was “very consistent”. Twenty percent of “concept note” applicants and 23% of “proposal” applicants think that the information was partly consistent with the information stated in the application call and guidelines. Most of the applicants, over 60%, found out about RIO’s advocacy call through OSF website.

**CONCEPT NOTE APPLICATION PROCESS**

The majority of the applicants did read RIO guidelines: 100% of concept notes applicants and 94% of proposal applicants. Eighty four percent of “concept note applicants and 74% of “proposal” applicants think that RIO’s application guidelines provided a clear explanation of the goals and objectives of the advocacy call. Fifteen percent of “concept note” applicants and 25% of “proposal” applicants think that the guidelines provided some or no explanation. The translated guidelines in local languages are important for 70% of applicants. Over 25% of applicants did not refer to the guidelines because they were proficient in English.

None of the respondents thinks that the concept note template did not contain questions relevant for their project. Seventy six of “concept note” applicants and 77% of “proposal” applicants applied in the framework of the call because they read the guidelines and found them relevant for the work of their organization. The time offered to the applicants to develop their concept notes was assessed as “more than enough” (37% and 23% respectively) or “just about right” (56% and 70% respectively) by both “concept note” and “proposal” applicants.

**PROPOSAL APPLICATION PROCESS**

The feedback provided by RIO staff on proposals was assessed as extremely   
(33%) and very useful (33%) by “proposal” applicants. As is usually expected, applicants whose proposal was approved have a higher appreciation for RIO’s feedback compared to applicants whose proposal was rejected. Thirteen percent of applicants whose proposal was not approved assessed RIO’s feedback as slightly helpful. Forty six percent of proposal applicants think that RIO staff demonstrated an excellent understating of the issues the proposals were seeking to address. None of the respondents assessed RIO staff as having no understanding at all. Regarding RIO staff’s understanding of the issues addressed in the proposals, rejected applicants (20%) tend to have a lower estimation of staff’s expertise.

Thirteen percent of applicants felt that they were extremely pressured to modify their proposals in order to satisfy RIO’s requirements and 6% felt “very pressured”. Thirteen percent felt “moderately” and “slightly pressured” (33%). Ninety three percent of applicants responded that the proposal template contained questions relevant for their project; 87% of applicants think that the application template did not contain questions difficult to understand; and 13% of the “proposal” respondents think that the questions in the application template have to be reformulated. Sixty percent of RIO staff is viewed as being “extremely supportive” towards the applicants. According to the respondents, RIO application process is less or equally burdensome compared to the main funders in the field such as other OSF programs, EC, Norway Funds and state funds. Respondents also expressed a high likelihood of reapplication (93%).

**ASPECTS OF INVITED AND DECLINED APPLICANT EXPERIENCE**

Thirty two percent of “concept note” applicants and 65% of “proposal applicants” think that each applicants has equal access to RIO’s funding while 32% and 24% respectively think that “some applicants are favoured”. Additionally, 28% of concept note applicants who were not invited to submit a proposal think that some applicants are favoured while 4% of “concept note” applicants who were invited to submit a proposal think so. Similarly, 27% of proposal applicants whose proposals were rejected think that some applicants are favoured. None of proposal applicants with an approved proposal think so. Seventeen percent of “concept note” applicants and 60% of “proposal” applicants think that RIO staff treated them extremely fairly while 33% of “concept note” applicants and 14% of “proposal applicants” think that they were treated “moderately fairly” or “not at all fairly”.

**RIO’S APPLICATION PROCESS AND SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE IT**

Eighty three percent “concept note” applicants and 59% “proposal” applicants think that RIO’s application process is easy to follow and reasonable. The suggestions to improve the application process range from RIO’s inability to change to congratulatory comments. The most frequently mentioned suggestions for RIO deal with the application process itself. Specifically, the applicants request a more simplified application form, translated guidelines to be published well in advance of the deadline, the deadline for future calls to be extended up to one month, publication of approved projects on RIO OSF webpage, provide personalized feedback, and conduct more consultations with the applicants.

**SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE THE SURVEY**

Applicants expressed a preference for more open and reflective questions and suggested running similar surveys more frequently. The survey provides interesting insights into the performance of the program. RIO might want to specify and have a common understanding of “What good looks like”. For instance, establish some thresholds of excellence (e.g. 80% or 90%) for the responses received to be interpreted as excellent or good performance and use these thresholds to analyse future survey results and compare performance towards achieving these thresholds over time.

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# Methodology

Roma Initiates Office launched a web survey inviting all applicants—those whose ideas were declined as well as those whose projects were approved—to share their opinions about a range of aspects pertaining to the call “Advancing the Rights and Integration of Roma” that was launched in February 2013. The survey asked applicants about their experience using the OSF grantee portal; quality of the technical support received; promotion channels of the advocacy call; communication and responsiveness of the RIO staff; quality of feedback; concept note application process; proposal application process; the way applicants were treated; the helpfulness of staff during the application process; as well as other questions which will be presented in more detail in a series of tables and figures in the following pages.

The survey contained both closed and open-end questions, which represents a useful mix of responses. The survey was sent to 175 applicants who submitted only concepts notes and to 29 applicants who submitted concept notes and full proposals, with a response rate of 33% in the case of the former and 69% in case of the latter (see Table 1), achieving overall quite a high response rate, 33% in case of “concept notes” applicants and 69% of “proposal” applicants. Seven percent out of “concept note” respondents and 17% out of “proposal” respondents were submitted only partial responses. The results presented here are based both on complete and partial responses.

Table 1: *Methodology*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Survey 2013 for the Advocacy call | Survey period | Number of total applicants invited | Number of respondents | Complete responses | Partial Responses | Bounced | Opted out |
| “Concept Note” respondents | 8-23 October, 2013 | 175 | 57 (33%) | 45 (26%) | 12 (7%) | 2 | 3 |
| “Proposal” respondents | 29 | 20 (69%) | 15 (52%) | 5 (17%) | 0 | 0 |

Figure 1: *Country of respondents*

Most of “concept notes” and “proposals” respondents that responded to the survey were from Romania (15.8% and 30% respectively, see Figure 1). In case of “concept notes” applicants no responses were received from Slovakia though six concept notes were received from this country, whereas in case of the “proposal applicants” no responses were received from Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina.

# Usage of Grantee Portal

**Figure 2: *Did you encounter any technical problems when submitting your application through the Grantee User Portal?***

Twenty percent of “concept note” and 45% of “proposal” applicants encountered technical problems during the application process (see Figure 2 below). “Proposal” applicants encountered more technical difficulties because the process of submitting an application through Foundation Connect is comparatively more complicated than submitting a concept note. Foundation Connect is itself undergoing continuous adaptation and improvement and there are still glitches that need to be fixed therefore this is another reason that might explain the high number of those who encountered technical problems. In the future, we might expect less applicants to face technical problems as the system will become more robust and returning applicants may become more versed in using the system.

Figure 3: *How did you request help with your technical problem?*

Faced with technical problems during the application process, 54% of “concept note” applicants and 50% of “proposal” applicants contacted RIO staff (see Figure 3 above). Although technical queries should have been normally directed to the web technical support team, only 9% of “concept note” applicants and 13% of “proposal” applicants did so. Those who did contact the technical support team were satisfied with the quality of support received. One “concept note” respondent and one “proposal” respondent replied that “The technical support team responded and offered a solution to my problem.” Over 25% of both “concept note” and “proposal” applicants were able to solve the problem on their own.

Figure 4*: Which statement from the list below best reflects your opinion?*

Sixty-seven percent of “concept note” applicants and 75% of “proposal” applicants responded that the staff responded immediately and offered a solution that solved their problem (see Figure 4). Twenty five percent of “proposal” applicants think that the staff responded, though not immediately, and offered a solution to their problem. Both responses are positive, and if added, there is 100% satisfaction with how the staff handled their query. In case of the “concept note” applicants 17% responded that the staff responded with some delay but have been able to solve their problem. Nevertheless, in case of concept note applicants 84% (two first responses added) were satisfied with how the staff handed their request.

# Communication with RIO staff

Figure 5: *What communication channel did you use to contact RIO staff?*

The most utilized communication channels through which applicants communicated with RIO staff was email (84% of “concept note” applicants and 100% of “proposal” applicants), Skype (58% of “proposal” applicants), and phone (29% of “proposal” applicants). “Concept note” respondents communicated with staff mostly through email (84%), RIO/OSF webpage (16%) and phone (10%, see Figure 5). “Proposal” respondents communicated through a more diversified range of channels evidently because of the nature of staff engagement during the second and third evaluation phase, which was through email (100%), Skype (58%), phone (29%), in person (24%) and via RIO/OSF webpage (24%). Three “concept note” respondents mentioned that they had no communication with RIO staff.

**Figure 6: *Overall, how responsive was RIO staff?***

Twenty two percent of “concept note” applicants responded that RIO staff was “extremely responsive”, responding immediately with interest and enthusiasm and 48% think that RIO staff was responsive “RIO staff responded fast to my inquiry” (see Figure 6 above). Overall, the two responses added, 70% of the “concept note” applicants think that RIO staff was responsive. Ten percent of “concept” note applicants think that RIO staff was “slightly responsive” and 8% think RIO staff was “not at all responsive” because they did not receive an answer to their inquiry. Although, more “proposal” applicants consider RIO staff to be “extremely responsive” (35%) and 35% think that RIO staff was “very responsive”, the two responses added, similarly to “concept note” applicants, 70% think of RIO staff as responsive. Six percent of “proposal” applicants think that RIO was “not at all responsive”.

Figure 7: *How consistent was the information you received from RIO staff?*

Twenty two percent of “concept note” applicants responded that the information was extremely consistent and 42% think this was very consistent (see Figure 7). In case of “proposal applicants”, slightly a higher percentage thinks that the information was “extremely consistent” (35%), and 35% think that the information was “very consistent”. Overall 64% of “concept note” applicants and 70% of “proposal” applicants are positive about the consistency of the information they received from RIO staff. Six percent of “concept note” applicants think that the information was not consistent and 6% of “proposal” applicants consider the information was slightly consistent.

Figure 8: *How did you hear about RIO’s advocacy call?*

Most of the applicants found out about RIO’s advocacy call through OSF website in almost the same percentage, 67% of “concept note” applicants and 65% of “proposal” applicants. Other channels mentioned by “concept note” applicants are “other organizations” (29%) such as OSIFE Italy and mailing lists, 27% through Roma Virtual network and 14% from RIO staff. In case of “proposal” applicants, 41% found out through Roma Virtual Network, 35% from RIO staff, and 24% from other organizations. Twelve percent of “concept note” applicants and 6% of “proposal” applicants found out about RIO call through our Facebook page.

# Concept Note Application Process

Figure 9: *Did you read the program’s application guidelines?*

The majority of the applicants did read our guidelines: 100% of “concept notes” applicants and 94% of proposal applicants though 6% of proposal applicants did not read the guidelines.

Figure 10: *Application Guidelines*

Seventeen percent of “concept note” applicants and 44% of “proposal” applicants agreed with the main scope of the RIO’s guidelines that of “stimulating new ideas and providing a clear explanation of the goals and objectives of the advocacy call” (see Figure 10). The first three response options reflect a favourable opinion about the guidelines and if the percentages of the first three responses are added, we get 85% of “concept note” applicants and 75% of “proposal” applicants who expressed a positive opinion about the guidelines. The proportion of those who think that RIO guidelines provided only some explanation or no explanation at all is 15% in case of “concept note” applicants and 25% in case of proposal applicants (the last two response options added).

Figure 11: *Were the guidelines translated into your language helpful in preparing your application?*

The translated guidelines in local languages are important for 70% of applicants. Among the “concept note” applicants, 15% think that the translated guidelines were extremely helpful and 26% think that these were moderately helpful (see Figure 11). For 19% of “proposal” applicants the translated guidelines were extremely helpful and moderately helpful for 38%. Twenty eight percent of “concept note” applicants and 25% “proposal” applicants did not refer to the guidelines because they were proficient in English. Two percent of “concept note” applicants and 6% of “proposal” applicants think that the guidelines were not useful because the translation was poor and confusing.

Figure 12: *Did the concept note template include questions relevant for your project?*

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Regarding the questions contained in the concept note template, more proposal applicants (71%) than concept note applicants (43%) think that the questions were relevant for their project (see Figure 12). None of the respondents thinks that the template did not contain questions relevant for their project.

Figure 13: *Why did you apply for funding in the framework of this call?*

Most of the applicants, 76% in case of “concept note” applicants and 77% of “proposal” applicants, applied in the framework of the call because they read the guidelines and found them relevant for the work of their organization (see Figure 13). The second most cited reason by both “concept note” and “proposal” applicants was encouragement by OSF or RIO staff (17 % and 29% respectively). The third reason in case of “concept note” applicants was encouragement received from other organizations or individuals (15%) and prior collaboration with RIO (15%). In case of “proposal” applicants, the third reason was that because RIO is a major funder in the field (24%).

From the comments provided, other applicants applied simply because it was an opportunity for funding: *We need to follow any given opportunity to develop our NGO and implement our projects* (see Table 2). According to the comments, the call was also an opportunity to reach out, connect to similar organizations in the field, and develop partnerships for the call as one applicant put it: *We were encouraged by a national ROMA organization, which wanted our collaboration and partnership to help them.*

Table 2: *Why did you apply for funding in the framework of this call? Other (please specify)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Other (please specify) | |
| “Concept Note” respondents | **“Proposal” respondents** |
| *Possibility to make change in the Roma community* | *We need to follow any given opportunity to develop our NGO and implement our projects.* |
| *I saw the call as an opportunity to address issues in an innovative and non-traditional ways and I thought that it would be understood and appreciated.* | *The advocacy domain it is a strategical activities of our organization.* |
| *We were encouraged by a national ROMA organization which wanted our collaboration and partnership to help them.* |  |

Figure 14: *Was the time between the announcement of the call and the deadline enough to develop and submit your concept note?*

The time offered to the applicants to develop their concept notes was assessed as “more than enough” by 37% of concept note applicants and 23% of proposal applicants and “just about right” by 57% of concept note applicants and 71% of “proposal” applicants (see Figure 14). Seven percent of “concept note” applicants and 6% in case of proposal applicants mentioned that the time was not enough.

Figure 15: *Were you invited to submit a full proposal?*

The responses to the survey were received from 85% of applicants whose concept note was rejected and from 15% who were invited to submit a full proposal.

# Proposal Application Process

**Figure 16: *How did you receive feedback from RIO staff on your concept note?***

Proposal applicants received feedback mostly by email (93%), Skype (60%), and in person 27% (see Figure 16).

**Figure 17: *After receiving RIO’s feedback on your concept note, did you have enough time to prepare your proposal?***

As in the case of concept notes, the time seems to have been enough for the applicants to develop their proposals. For only 13% of the applicants the time was not enough compared to 7% in case of concept note applications (see Figure 17).

Figure 18: *Will the feedback you received about your proposal be helpful in strengthening future advocacy proposals?*

Thirty three percent assessed the feedback provided by RIO staff as “extremely helpful” and 33% as “very helpful” which if the two columns are added, 66% of “proposal” applicants regard the feedback as very helpful (see Figure 18). Twenty two percent regarded it as moderately helpful and none assessed it as not being helpful at all.

Figure 19: Responses based on the status of the applicant’s proposal: “*Will the feedback you received about your proposal be helpful in strengthening future advocacy proposals?”*

Applicants whose proposal was approved have a higher appreciation for RIO’s feedback compared to applicants whose proposal was rejected. For instance, 27% of those whose proposal was approved think that RIO staff’s feedback was extremely helpful while 6% of those whose proposal was not approved think so (see Figure 19). In addition, 13% of the applicants whose proposal was not approved think that the feedback was slightly helpful. Applicants whose proposal was approved did not choose this response option.

Figure 20: *RIO’s understanding of the issues presented in the proposals*

The respondents assessed positively RIO’s understanding of the issues addressed in applicants’ proposals. For instance, 47% of “proposal” respondents think RIO staff demonstrated an excellent understanding of the issues and 20% think that RIO staff had a good understanding. The percentages of the two responses add up to a total of 67% (see Figure 20). Twenty percent think that RIO staff has only some understanding of the issue presented in the applications. None of the respondents assessed RIO staff as having no understanding at all.

Figure 21: *Based on “Proposal Approved” and “Proposal not approved” responses*

Regarding RIO staff’s understanding of the issues addressed in the proposals, rejected applicants tend to have a lower estimation of staff’s expertise. For instance, 33% of approved applicants think that RIO staff has an excellent understanding, while 13% of rejected applicants think so (see Figure 21). Thirteen percent of approved applicants think that RIO staff has a good understanding while 7% of rejected applicants think so. Moreover, 20% of rejected applicants think that RIO staff has only some understanding. None of the approved applicants selected this response option.

Figure 22: *As you developed your grant proposal, how pressured did you feel to modify your proposal and your organization’s priorities in order to create a grant request that was likely to receive funding?*

Thirteen percent of “proposal” applicants felt “extremely pressured’ and 7% felt “very pressured” (see Figure 22). The majority, 33% felt “moderately pressured” and similarly 33% felt “slightly pressured” but in a positive way. In addition, 13% did not feel any pressure to modify their proposal.

Figure 23: *Did the proposal template contain questions that were irrelevant to your project?*

A majority of applicants (93%) responded that the proposal template contained questions relevant for their project. Seven percent responded that the template did not contain relevant questions. Only one respondent mentioned that the proposal template contained irrelevant and repetitive questions (see Table 3). The questions mentioned by the respondent as irrelevant are quite significant for RIO during the evaluation process.

Table 3: *Feedback from respondents: Yes (please mention the questions)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Respondent 1 | *The application had a lot of question that* [were] *repeated. For example, the methodology and advocacy, questions form monitoring and evaluation, and also the participation of Roma had questions that* [were] *repeated. We had to write a proposal of 30 pages which is a lot and in some parts irrelevant. An example: ''Why is it important to address the issue now? What is a specific opportunity that you see in the future that will provide an opening to advance the interests of Roma on this issue and change the relevant law, policy or practice?'' ,''Is there any available baseline data to support the description provided in the section 4.a.? If so, what is it? Why do you believe that this data is reliable?''"* |

**Figure 24: *Did the proposal template contain questions that were difficult to understand?***

A majority of applicants (87%) think that the application template did not contain questions difficult to understand (see Figure 24)). Thirteen percent of “proposal” applicants think that the application template contained difficult questions. The respondents below noted that the section in the application template titled “Issue, context and opportunities” contain too many details and information that seems to be repetitive and the questions on beneficiaries, progress and indicators were difficult to understand. However, from our point of view, these sections are very important.

Table 4: *Feedback from respondents: Yes (please mention the questions)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Respondent 1 | *The whole section 4. a. "Issue, context and opportunities” is quite difficult to understand and some questions ask for too many details and seem to be repetitive.”* |
| Respondent 2 | Describe *and quantify the targets and constituency of the project'' ''How and when will progress/indicators be measured? Include data sources and methods of data collection to be used to show progress toward each objective/outcome?''* |

Figure 25: *Would you like to suggest questions to be included, deleted or reformulated in future proposal templates?*

Thirteen percent of the “proposal” respondents think that the questions in the application template have to be reformulated and two respondents proposed some suggestions (see Figure 25). The applicants suggest a shorter version that would contain simpler questions (see Table 5). One applicant gives an example the application template of the OSF Human Rights Program, which is shorter and more concrete in terms of the information it requires from the applicants. We might consider having a look at HRP’s application to see how it compares with our application template.

Table 5: *Feedback from respondents: Yes (please mention the questions)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Respondent 1 | *The whole section 4. a. "Issue, context and opportunities" is too detailed and complicated, so it would be better if it could be simplified.* |
| Respondent 2 | *I would like to recommend a shorter version of application. A more easy and understandable template that does not requires information that even the staff will not read. For example the template from Human Rights Program has max 15 pages and we understood exactly what the donor wanted and expected.* |

Figure 26: *How supportive was RIO staff in the development of your grant proposal?*

Sixty percent of the respondents consider that the staff was extremely supportive during the development of the proposal and expressed genuine interest in applicant’s proposals, 20% think that the staff was very supportive and 13% think that the staff was moderately supportive by providing feedback on request (see Figure 26). The first three positive responses add up 93%. Seven percent of respondents think that RIO staff was slightly supportive by providing recommendations that were not supportive. None of the respondents considers the staff as being not at all supportive.

Figure 27: *How burdensome is RIO’s application process compared to that of other funders?*

According to the respondents, RIO application process is less or equally burdensome compared to the main funders in the field such as other OSF programs, EC, Norway Funds and state funds. Respondents evaluated it as equally burdensome compared to other OSF programs, less burdensome compared to European Commission, equally and more burdensome compared to the Norway grants, less burdensome compared to state funds, and more burdensome compared to other funders in general.

Figure 28: *Was your proposal approved?*

The responses have been received in almost the same proportion from approved and rejected applicants. Fifty three percent of the respondents had their proposal approved while 47% respondents had their proposal rejected.

Figure 29: *Will you apply for funding in the future?*

Respondents expressed a high likelihood of reapplication as 93% of applicants are planning to reapply to RIO in the future with 7% (one applicant) saying that he/she is not planning to apply because he/she feels demotivated.

# Aspects of Invited and Declined Applicant Experience

**Figure 30: *Do you agree that every applicant has equal access to RIO’s funding?***

Thirty two percent of “concept note” applicants and 65% of “proposal” applicants think that each applicant has equal access to our funding. The “concept” note applicants are equally split in their responses on whether each applicant has equal access to RIO funding. For instance, 32% think that each applicant has equal access while similarly 32% think that some applicants are favoured over others (see Figure 30). In case of “proposal” applicants, 65% consider that each applicant has equal access to RIO’s funding while 24% think that some are favoured more than others are.

Figure 31: Based on “Proposal Approved” and “Proposal not approved”: *Do you agree that every applicant has equal access to RIO’s funding?*

A look at the responses of the applicants based on the approval status of their concept note/proposal reveals interesting though not surprising results (See Figure 31). Twenty-eight percent of applicants whose concept note was rejected consider that some applicants are favoured compared to 4% of respondents who were invited to submit a full proposal. In the case of “proposal applicants”, only those applicants whose proposal was not approved (27%) think that RIO favours some applicants over others. Approved applicants did not choose this response option.

The reading of the comments provided by the applicants offers interesting insights into how the grantees view our work. Most of the comments received reflect the fact that applicants are quite dissatisfied with RIO’s grant making (see Table 6). One applicant considers that RIO funds “completely uncertain and irrelevant initiatives”. In addition, applicants think that RIO supports only those applicants with whom it has a prior relationship, or favouring applicants that are well-known, or favouring only Roma organizations. The respondents also criticized RIO for not making public on the website the list of approved applicants. In addition, especially those applicants who have not received a clear explanation on their rejected proposal tend to perceive the program as being less transparent.

Table 6: *Why do you think some applicants are favoured more than others?*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| No. | Concept Paper Applicants | Proposal Applicants |
|  | *Due to historical data. Many good projects have not been supported thou they are real and very compliant with the objectives.* ***However, completely uncertain and often irrelevant attempts are financed****. In general, the situation is that the NGO sector is not on the receiving end, but* ***the administration of the various open Society funds is for years acting like governmental employees.*** *Meaning, they care to be paid themselves and like those NGOs which are either naive or are then receiving funding. A very disappointing situation with the Open Society network of organizations, and we have such experiences for more than a decade, with different initiatives funded by the Open Society Foundation.* | *There are local organizations which do not have same capacity as the organizations from Bucharest. However, these organizations which are far away from communities were financed.* |
|  | *We think that institutions, with a long experience on Roma issues, should be equally considered as Roma NGOs.* | *We have the impression that those applicants are favoured with whom there is an already established contact or gained experience, also regarding the types of projects that they are involved in.* |
|  | *There is no information about beneficiaries and their projects on OSF website. It is no transparent system.* | *Because they are well known, have notoriety and therefore creates the belief that they have capacity. This influences the staff of RIO to give them further encouragement in disfavour of small NGOs.* |
|  | *I think Roma organizations applicants are more favoured than non Roma and then I think that Roma organizations with Roma leaders are the most favoured.* | *Because we fail to understand even today, negative reasons for our project evaluation.* |
|  | *Because the structure of their organization might be more in line with RIO requests than others.* |  |
|  | *You have to be very specific.* |  |
|  | *nu stiu (From Romanian: “I don’t know”)* |  |
|  | *Well, after I send the application I heard that actually whole call of proposal was designed for some Roma NGOs who was already working with RIO office.* |  |
|  | *It seems that the process doesn't include a fair information collection with regards to the concepts from non-Roma applicants.* |  |
|  | *Existing and previous relationships colour the decision-making process.* |  |
|  | *Hungarian and also new, unknown NGOs are not taken as equal as others.* |  |
|  | *because should give more priority to Roma NGO-s* |  |
|  | *There are bodies and organizations that seem to be more financed than other.* |  |
|  | *Language: the translation into French came a few days before deadline so people who are not proficient with English are disfavoured.* |  |

Figure 32: *In providing feedback, how fairly did RIO treat you?*

Seventeen percent of “concept note” applicants think that they were treated extremely fairly compared to 60% of “proposal” applicants who chose this answer; 50% of “concept note” applicants think they were treated very fairly while 27% of “proposal applicants consider so. Similarly, to other questions in the survey, “concept note” applicants apparently felt treated less fairly compared to “proposal” applicants. For instance, 20% of “concept note’ applicants consider that they were treated moderately fairly and 13% responded that they were treated not all fairly. In case of “proposal” applicants 7% and 7% respectively consider so.

In case of concept note applicants, only those applicants who were not invited to submit a full proposal consider that they have been treated moderately fairly (20%) and not at all fairly (13%). The same tendency can be observed in case of rejected “proposal” applicants though in lower percentages: 7% consider that RIO staff was to some extend fair and reasonable and 7% think that they were not treated at all fairly by RIO staff.

Figure 33: Based on “Proposal Approved” and Proposal not Approved”: *In providing feedback, how fairly did RIO treat you?*

In response to the question “why RIO staff was to some extend fair and reasonable” the respondents provided comments that are critical mostly of RIO’s evaluation process (see Table 7). For instance, some applicants think they were pressured to change their application to fit RIO’s objectives:

* “We felt more encouraged to stick to the RIO agenda”
* “They replied that our project idea lacked innovation”
* “The response from RIO was not fully convincing”
* “Should give more suggestions and assistance in building an idea that was previously liked by them”

Table 7: *Why do you think that RIO staff was to some extent fair and reasonable?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “Concept Note” respondents | “Proposal” respondents |
| *“As explained before, it is the same system as with national governments, creating pipelines of projects, internal reports and other activities that serve the purpose of having RIO staff funded.”* | *“Should give more suggestions and assistance in building an idea that was previously liked by them, since it addressed one of the most serious problemtiakt that are presently Roma Community in Albania and SEE.”* |
| *“The response from RIO was not fully convincing.”* |  |
| *Considering likely volume of applications* |  |
| *“We were requested to add information in order to suit specific goals, rather than expose innovative aspects. We felt more encouraged to stick to the RIO agenda than to express genuine concerns and propose innovative solutions.”* |  |
| *“no”* |  |
| *“It was a good project.”* |  |
| *“I think my concept paper was to be in consideration.”* |  |
| *“They replied that our project idea lacked innovation.”* |  |
| *“N/A”* |  |

In response to the question “Why didn’t you feel valued and respected by RIO staff”, most the applicant’s comments referred to the quality of feedback they received from RIO staff on their rejected concept or proposal (see Table 8). For instance, one “concept note” applicant thought that he/she was not provided a personalized feedback but rather a standard, “cookie cutter” response that was sent to all rejected applicants. Concept note applicants doubt that their concept note was read at all. Proposal applicants complained that the staff did not follow on promises to send detailed comments and had the feeling that the decision on their proposal had been taken long ago while he/she was still asked to send improved versions:

“I asked RIO staff to provide me comments on writing after a Skype conference but although they promised that will send me written comments I did not receive anything […] I feel during the write process that the decision was already taken from the beginning but still they ask me to provide them improved versions.”

RIO shall decide whether the lack of feedback on rejected concept note is an important criticism at RIO’s address and whether providing such feedback shall be considered in the future.

Table 8: *Why didn’t you feel valued and respected by RIO staff?*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “Concept Note” respondents | “Proposal” respondents |
| *“By comparing the feedback from RIO staff with two other applicants we saw that it was a cookie-cutter response; the same for all three applicants with very different project concepts.”* | *“I asked RIO staff to provide me comments on writing after a Skype conference but although they promised that will send me written comments I did not receive anything. In addition I asked a series of questions and I had some opinion about the call but I did not have any answer or comments. I feel during the write process that the decision was already taken from the beginning but still they ask me to provide them improved versions. I will appreciate in the future a straight answer from the beginning and not to ask me to work hard although the decision was made.”* |
| *“We were only told that the proposal was 'very poor' with no detailed appraisal of inadequacies or positive elements.”* |  |
| *“I do not know if my project ever read. Rejection was the general formulation.”* |  |
| *“We made a strong effort to produce three proposals which were rejected and we did not receive any specific feedback on reasons for rejecting them. We only knew informally that some problems with too high allocation of budget occurred. But we were not asked for any explanation.”* |  |
| *“Because our proposal was very helpful for the Roma Society in Bulgaria but nobody just even tried to check it. Also we wrote to the stuff, but there was no answer 3 month long.”* |  |
| *“We had the feeling our work was considered as useless.”* |  |

# 

# RIO’s Application Process and Suggestions to Improve It

Throughout the survey, the “proposal” applicants provided comparatively more positive responses than the concept note applicants did. For instance, 41% of “proposal” applicants think that RIO’s application process is clear and easy to follow compared to 35% of “concept note” applicants (see Figure 34). Four percent of “concept note” applicants and 6% of “proposal” applicants think that the application process is complicated and difficult to follow. Overall, 83% of concept note applicants and 59% proposal applicants think that RIO’s application process easy to follow and reasonable.

Figure 34: *Concept and Proposal Application Process*

The applicants were asked to provide suggestions for how RIO could improve its application process. Applicants made 37 suggestions and a sample, representative by theme, such as clarity of communication, application process, applicant understanding, quality of interactions and other, is shown below (see Table 9). The responses range from pessimistic views about RIO’s ability to change to congratulatory comments:

* “We do not expect this to change.”
* “[…] In fact we did not receive requests for concrete modifications, more only questions.”
* “I extremely appreciated this application process: besides the points that are dealt with in the survey, I would like to stress the flexibility of the process and the support received from RIO staff in providing very helpful materials and discussing some ideas based on their expertise in the specific field we want to work in. We learnt a lot!”
* “I do not think it is necessary I received from RIO team very quick advices and solutions. Program officers are highly qualified and their behaviour is very open, always ready to help Roma organizations to develop.”

The most frequently mentioned suggestions for RIO deal with the application process itself. Specifically, the applicants request a more simplified application form; translated guidelines to be published well in advance of the deadline; the deadline for future calls to be to be extended up to a month; publication of approved projects on RIO OSF webpage; and provide personalized feedback and conduct more consolations with the applicants, among the most cited recommendations. Regarding communication, the applicants suggest RIO staff to provide feedback that is more accurate, be more transparent with the applicants and provide constructive feedback that helps applicants improve their application. Regarding the quality of the interactions between the RIO staff and applicants, the latter suggest RIO to be more open and inclusive, treat applicants with respect, and provide opportunities for applicants to learn about RIO values, principles, strategies, and preferences in programming.

Regarding other comments received, the applicants suggest RIO to include new priorities relevant for the Roma ordinary people and focus more on Roma youth and have a RIO representative in the countries where RIO operates. Another suggestion was to value plurality and multicultural approaches and move away from RIO’s "Roma pride" approach.

Table 9: *Please suggest how RIO could improve its application process.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Comments |
| Clarity of communication | *-It seemed for us until almost the end of the process that we can work together and we imagined that we can collaborate and improve our application together. In fact we did not receive requests for concrete modifications, more only questions. After this collaborative environment we received a brief evaluation without the possibility to clarify some misunderstandings and elaborate a better project together, that we expected based on the experiences gained throughout the application process. We have seen this project as a chance to give a voice and power to our advocacy work that we are implementing to make an impact and pressure on the authorities. Now we are continuing our work on this issue, but alone we do not feel that we enough power to make a strong impact. We would suggest making possible in case not funding a certain project to implement another action that at least supports these advocacy activities with professional support and communicational tools.*  *-Reply to applicants more accurately.*  *-By helping applicants to improve their future applications: In the answer we received we understood why it was not relevant not how to do better.*  *-More transparency, clearer explanations and clearer elaborations when not meeting guidelines instead of a generic reply.* |
| Application process | *-Translated guideline version could be published in the very beginning of the application period.*  *-Just to make sure that the technical issues are solved.*  *-To simplify the application form and to make it more relevant by focusing on objectives and activities and not on background and justification / theory.*  *-Taking off the 4 pages limit to the concept paper. It is not enough.*  *-Please revise the application form. There are a lot of details and information that do not need special chapter. With more than 3 questions and establish a maximum of pages. It is not fare to write 30 pages and be rejected.*  *-Minimum a month period between call publication and application deadline.  -Grantees should be published at RIO website, together with brief description of projects.*  *-To support more technical assistance to build the final project, when it passes the first phase; -To build an application form with short and simple;*  *-To be more simplified*  *-To have more deadlines*  *-Take the time to give individual feedback on submitted concepts.*  *-Give more time to develop proposals; Give better feedback to rejected applicants*  *-Should be translated to local languages, and more consultation should be organize with applicants.*  *-We had some technical problems with the pre-designed PDF format of the full application. It shows differently on different machines, so it was hard for us to double-check the final form.* |
| Applicant understanding | *-Roma inside the penitentiary system where we operate need advocacy even more than others, despite their lack of autonomy or capacity to initiate a project at this point.* |
| Quality of interactions | *-By being more open and inclusive.*  *-More respect and keeping the terms. They ask us to keep the deadlines but they do not keep any.*  *-Provide opportunity to learn about RIO values, principles, strategies, and preferences in programming, so that proposals can fall more in line with RIO directions.* |
| Other | *-At this point, we do not see reasons to look for improvement.*  *-Allow for more innovation within a broader framework.*  *-To come up with new priorities relevant for the Roma ordinary people and include Roma Youth as one of the priorities.*  *-More funding*  *-I need a representative RIO in my country, with whom I could communicate my speech and possibly with him personally meet and consult my projects.*  *-Give more priority to Roma organizations*  *-RIO does not publish the results and approval for funding*  *-To be supported more products realized in project;*  *-It must have more funding priority for Albanian NGO.*  *-Value plurality and multicultural approaches and move away from the "Roma pride" approach.* |

# Suggestions to Improve the Survey

The applicants were asked to provide any suggestions for how RIO could improve future surveys (see Table 10). Applicants expressed a preference for more open and reflective questions as well as include an open question on general feedback such as “Is there anything else you'd like to say”. The applicants also suggested running similar surveys more frequently. Though current survey had a different focus, the applicants suggested RIO to ask more questions about applicant organizations, areas of activity, and their work in general. Questions related to the budget were suggested, which indeed have been missing from the current survey.

Table 10: *Please suggest how RIO could improve this survey or suggest questions that you might want RIO to consider in future surveys.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| “Concept Note” respondents | “Proposal” respondents |
| *The survey is just fine.* | *We would like to see more open questions, also reflecting on the certain phases of the application project not only in general.* |
| *Most likely the survey itself is irrelevant because it will most likely only present what the RIO staff wants to be presented.* | *Different topics/subject that are of interest for NGO such as: areas of activity. I think RIO needs to extend it area of activities and domains that they fund. Women must have an equal attention within each application. not just to thick some principles.* |
| *No.* | *I congratulate you for questionnaire.* |
| *Our Charity has Roma volunteers and staff when funds permit. Our team is committed to empowerment and giving victims a voice - especially where discrimination makes this worse. RIO seems to diminish leadership of views not initiated directly from a Roma community.* | *I don't know what questions, but to be in contact more with the applicant.* |
| *Please include some questions related on the budget (i.e. is the grant awarded sufficient to carry out project activities?* |  |
| *Please comment selection of grantees and projects?* |  |
| *Do it more frequently.* |  |
| *Why we need RIO funds.* |  |
| *Suggested question: "How well do you understand the criteria applied to your proposal to determine RIO's response?* |  |
| *No any* |  |
| *It is OK.* |  |
| *There’s no space for 'is there anything else you'd like to say' - and in fact, there is something else I'd like to say! Coincidentally I was thinking only yesterday in the context of another (nightmare) grant application process we're going through, how brilliant RIO's process was (even though it was disappointing for us as we weren't even invited to submit a full proposal) - we really appreciated the fact that we were given a deadline by when we would have heard either way, which enabled us to plan and apply elsewhere. We also really appreciated the feedback email telling us the areas where applications most frequently fell down, and we could see that in relation to one of your criteria our application hadn't been strong enough. So even though we got no money from you, we think you are a great funding body! And we will try again, feeling wiser next time! Thanks, and keep up the good work.* |  |
| *No suggestions* |  |
| *To be more responsible!* |  |
| *I have no suggestions, it is well.* |  |
| *I don't know.* |  |
| *N/A/* |  |