Learning from doing: reflections on UKNIAF's Task Order process

Introduction

UKNIAF works with a number of Nigerian federal and state level entities, (MDAs). We aim to walk with these partner organisations to assist them to improve the way they plan, fund, and implement infrastructure related processes. Each of our interventions with these institutions is planned and funded through a discrete instrument that details what we want to achieve, by when, and the associated cost. This instrument is a Task Order (TO). After each TO the delivery team sit with the internal monitoring team and reflect on TO delivery to identify ways in which we might improve our own delivery. These reflections are documented and fed back into the programme for iterative implementation.

This document is a collection of our lessons and observations across all our technical components over the last few years.

In the reflection we have separated the TO process into two interlinked sections – designing a TO and implementing a TO. These sections simply provide structure and do not preclude a lesson from one section being applicable in the other.

Designing and drafting a task order

Early familiarisation and co-creating engagement. Sensitising stakeholders to the TO process, design, and format within the partner MDAs has proven to be a successful strategy to achieve two objectives: making early changes to the TO of deliverables and timeframes, and early institutional buy in from key decision makers.

While we as UKNIAF may clearly understand the TO design, approval, and milestone delivery system; this is not necessarily familiar territory to the colleagues within the partner institution. In meeting the first objective – early changes to the TO – the TO is planned in a manner that is both technically sound because of our input, but also meets the internal requirements of the partner, aligning with their own internal timeframes, approval processes, and decision-making structures. Without this, a technically sound TO might be undone simply by being misaligned with a partner's internal processes or timelines, leading to unnecessary delays and increased costs.

Early engagement also provides the opportunity for exploring the prospect of leveraging existing systems, tools, or data, building on current internal capacity and processes, and increasing institutional ownership.

Working with colleagues and co-creating TO deliverables and timelines, meets the second objective – early institutional buy in. By facilitating this process, we achieve our programmatic objective of being demand led and further embed our legacy. Early institutional buy in appears to frequently result in greater and more effective internal support and communication, enabling TO implementation. Early engagement also assists in identifying key decision makers, and central influencers, easing the later approval and implementation process.

Broad engagement of stakeholders. Rather than limiting the TO design to a narrow group of individuals, we have learned that involving a wider group of stakeholders achieves several objectives. It communicates the initiative to a range of people and departments which might otherwise have been excluded (see *Communication: wide and frequent*, below). In the early stages of TO design it ensures that all relevant stakeholders (including FCDO) are informed early of the anticipated proposal and progress, allowing opportunity to comment and adjust the TO.

Review of TO before approval. MDA personnel may be involved in the development of the TO deliverables and timelines in line with the lesson above, but we have learned that it is sound practice to allow time and opportunity for the MDA decision makers to review the final draft before submission for FCDO approval.

The review provides an opportunity to identify any misunderstandings and confusion regarding wording, deliverables, process, and delivery dates but importantly reinforces the role of the MDA as an active partner in the process, rather than as a passive recipient of services.

Communication: wide and frequent. There can be a tendency, often framed by expediency, to limit the number of stakeholders involved in a design or decision-making process. Too many people can result in indecision, or a hijacking of a process towards another, unrelated objective. However, involvement of too few people, or of previously involved people can result in a perception of a closed circle or clique of experts, excluding others.

We have learned that early communication to wider audiences within the MDA, and frequent updates of progress allays this tendency. Wider communication strategies target individuals who are not directly involved in the TO objective, providing them with information about the TO and our role and how these relate to the MDA's broader plan of action. This communication can go some way to enabling peripheral support within the MDA, for example, enabling logistical or IT support for a hosted meeting. If broader institutional personnel have been made aware of the purpose, the process, and the objectives of the TO, and are familiar with the UKNIAF personnel involved, they may provide more efficient peripheral support.

We have also learned that different communication processes and streams can be used and are effective in communicating the same message in different ways to a variety of audiences. This is particularly valid in introducing something new to the audiences such as climate change related transition. Using multiple communication methods provides the audiences with multiple opportunities to gain a greater or clearer understanding of the concept, all of which adds to institutional commitment and buy-in.

Implementing a task order

While a well designed TO that has involved institutional partners as co-creators lays a solid foundation, the implementation of the same TO is met with challenges, especially when working in a fluid, politically delicate and complex environment. We have learned several lessons from this process.

Ensure that all stakeholders understand the TO and their role. In early TO not all personnel involved in the TO delivery had a clear understanding of their tasks, deliverables, dates of delivery, etc. An early lesson that was quickly adopted ensured all internal personnel clearly understood their mandate and their responsibilities, and we implemented regular check-ins to assess and mitigate any challenges.

Similarly, we learned that although some partner personnel may have been involved in design of the TO, different personnel may be assigned to assist in the delivery. This change in personnel can lead to a misunderstanding and a misalignment of perspectives regarding the purpose of the TO. Ongoing communication, to both institutional decision makers as well as operational personnel, about the purpose and the scope of the TO, as well as the roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders help guard against this misunderstanding.

Act on and communicate changes as early as possible. We have been through several forced pivots, due to circumstances beyond our control. This has resulted in shifting relationship dynamics between us and our implementing partners. We have found it advantageous to communicate the implications of the changed circumstances as early as possible with our partners. Partners can then make timeous changes to their own internal processes, and this step further reinforced a relationship of professional trust. This trust relationship underpinned all our activities and was pivotal in re-establishing institutional relationships when circumstances improved.

These early communication lessons served us well when our teams were not able to deliver milestones within the expected time frames. Whether this was for internal or external reasons, early communication allowed the partner institution to adjust and communicate their own expectations.

We found ourselves in a unique situation of being the intermediate between FCDO and the implementing agencies. As changing circumstances impacted on either of these partners, we needed to communicate the changes, and the resultant impact to the other. Early, honest, and frequent communication earned us a position of “honest broker” within this partnership.

Flexibility allows for ongoing implementation. We work in a dynamic and sometimes fluid environment. While TO are planned and have specific milestones and timelines, meeting these in the prescribed or expected manner, is not always possible. We have learned that we need to allow a certain level of flexibility in how we meet our targets. As long we widely communicate the sound reason for the changes to all interested stakeholders, delivery traction is not lost, and milestones are delivered even if timelines are adjusted.

This flexibility allowed us to be able to pivot and to change direction when circumstances demanded. The ongoing delivery process allowed deployed teams to continue to work with their partners, and this to some extent also moderated any possible loss of reputational risk.

Do not compromise the implementation. We want to promote solutions in line with our mandate, but on occasions circumstances change, and might affect the capacity or willingness of our institutional partners to work with us to implement these solutions. While we have learned that we can implement solutions in a flexible manner, we have also learned that at times the required degree of flexibility is too far removed from our original direction. On these occasions we have had to pause implementation with our partner and communicate the reason for this decision. While this course of action might not be popular with the implementing partner, it serves our broader objectives, and reinforces a reputation of integrity. On occasions this decision, together with a flexible implementation process, has allowed us to partner with an implementation agency better suited to the TO purpose.

Keep the circle wide and open. We have learned that too much reliance on one agency can lead to implementation delays if the internal process of the agency is compromised in some way. This wider communication ensures we do not rely too heavily on one agency for TO delivery. We might have a key implementation partner for a TO, but the results of the TO might benefit several different agencies. This latter group may have no active role in the defined TO but may have a role in implementing the benefits. Ensuring these agencies are kept up to date with progress results in faster buy-in and application of any TO results.