

Nexus Funding Facility (NFF) Lessons Learned for Future Applicants



1. Introduction: purpose of this paper

This paper is intended for organisations preparing proposals for the next Nexus Funding Facility (NFF) funding round in Nigeria. It offers practical guidance to be read alongside the official Call for Proposals package, and other key strategic documents including UNSDCF Strategic Priority 4, keeping in mind the peace context in Nigeria.

The purpose is not to explain why specific proposals were or were not selected, but to help applicants strengthen future submissions.

The guidance draws on anonymised feedback from the first NFF Call for Proposals in Cameroon and Chad, where a total of 72 consortium proposals were assessed by an Independent Technical Review Committee (ITRC) against common criteria, including alignment, HDP nexus quality, project design, partnership, cross-cutting priorities, budget, and sustainability. For a more detailed overview of the evaluation process, please see [here](#).

Across the review, clear patterns emerged: stronger proposals shared similar strengths, while weaker proposals often faced similar gaps. This paper consolidates those lessons in a practical and constructive way.

How to use this paper

Read Sections 2–4 to understand what reviewers consistently looked for and where proposals most often lost ground. Read Section 5 closely, the peace pillar was the single weakest area across the first round, and the Nigeria round places it at the centre. Use the checklist in Section 6 as a final self-assessment before you submit.

2. What the previous round showed

Across the first round, reviewers were not looking for perfect proposals. They were looking for credible, well-evidenced, internally consistent ones — designs where the analysis, the activities, the results framework, the partners, and the budget all told a coherent story. The strongest proposals shared a recognisable profile, and so did the weakest.

Where proposals were generally strong

- **Geographic and thematic alignment.** Most applicants anchored their work clearly in the target areas and referenced the relevant strategic frameworks. Alignment was rarely the problem. For the next call ensure that your activities and area of intervention are reflected

in the Nigeria Priorities that were developed in an integrated and consultative manner and are included as annex in the current call for proposals on the [NFF Website](#).

- **Gender and protection.** In many proposals this was a genuine strength, with sound gender analysis, attention to GBV and safeguarding, inclusion of persons with disabilities, and functioning complaints and feedback mechanisms.
- **Context and needs analysis.** Better proposals grounded their design in real assessments and community consultation rather than in institutional priorities alone.
- **Consortium collaboration.** The most convincing consortia showed evidence of prior joint work and described complementary, non-overlapping roles. We do not want parallel programming, instead we look for a coherent intervention logic across the three pillars.

Where proposals most often lost ground

Five areas came up again and again in reviewer comments. In rough order of how frequently and how seriously they were flagged:

1. **The peace pillar.** Consistently the weakest part of the HDP nexus: often present in name but thin in substance. This is covered in detail in Section 5.
2. **Budgets and value for money.** Calculation errors, unclear overheads, staffing costs above the allowed share, missing beneficiary breakdowns. All of which made cost-effectiveness impossible to assess. Value for money will be one element that we intend to review more deeply and projects with low value will be screened out at the outset.
3. **Results frameworks and theory of change (ToC).** ToC logic that was generic or descriptive, output-level indicators where outcomes were needed, missing baselines and targets, and inconsistencies between the logframe, workplan, and budget. Here, we are looking for a coherent story across analysis, activities, results framework and budget.
4. **Partner capacity and presence.** Operational presence and track record asserted rather than evidenced, and consortium governance left vague.
5. **Sustainability and exit.** Replication and handover mentioned as ambitions but not backed by concrete pathways or links to local systems. Often more as an afterthought than integrated into the design.

The single most useful takeaway

Reviewers rewarded internal consistency and concrete evidence, and penalised vague intentions. A modest, realistic, fully-evidenced proposal generally scored better than an ambitious one whose pieces did not add up. If you do only one thing differently next time, make every claim in your proposal traceable to analysis, activities, a measurable indicator, and a budget line: tell a coherent story.

3. Key lessons for future applicants

Seven lessons capture most of what separated stronger proposals from weaker ones. Sections 4 and 5 then turn them into specific fixes.

Lesson 1. Design the nexus as one project, not three. Humanitarian, development and peace activities should reinforce each other within a single logic, not run side by side as parallel workstreams that happen to share a cover page.

Lesson 2. Treat peace as a substantive component. The peace pillar needs its own analysis, expertise, budget and outcomes. Treated as an add-on, it weakened otherwise strong proposals (see Section 5).

Lesson 3. Measure change, not activity. Outcomes such as trust, cohesion, access or resilience must be measured by indicators that capture change in people's situations, not by counting meetings, trainings or platforms established: outcomes over output.

Lesson 4. Make the budget accurate, compliant and justifiable. Check every formula, respect cost ceilings and category rules, show overheads transparently, and link costs to beneficiaries so value for money is visible. While we want to see details and an internal logic, the first triage will be based on the summary and if the formulas in the Excel file are broken, we won't fix them for you and your project will be eliminated.

Lesson 5. Prove capacity and presence; don't assert it. Back claims of field presence and track record with evidence and set out clear consortium governance and decision-making.

Lesson 6. Plan sustainability from day one. Tie handover and replication to specific local institutions, systems and capacities, not to a closing paragraph of good intentions. Early engagement with authorities is key here.

Lesson 7. Anchor everything in analysis. Needs analysis and, for the peace pillar, conflict-sensitive analysis are the foundation. Without them, the theory of change and the activities lack credibility.

4. Common weaknesses and how to address them

This section pairs the most common patterns with practical fixes.

4.1 A theory of change that describes rather than explains

Many ToC listed what would be done but not why it would lead to change. Reviewers repeatedly noted designs that were “generic and descriptive”, lacked stated assumptions, and did not analyse root causes. A strong theory of change makes its logic and its assumptions explicit and is anchored in the actual activities.

Instead of...	Consider...
A narrative that lists activities and asserts they will produce impact.	An explicit results chain (inputs → activities → outputs → outcomes) with the assumptions and risks at each step stated.
A ToC written separately from the rest of the proposal.	A theory of change visibly anchored in your specific activities, locations and target groups.
Claims of contribution to cohesion or resilience with no underlying analysis.	Claims that trace back to a needs analysis and, for peace, a conflict analysis.

4.2 Indicators that count activity instead of measuring change

This was one of the most frequent comments, especially on social cohesion and governance outcomes: results were measured by activity proxies, i.e. platforms established, plans developed, people trained etc., rather than by any change in trust, perception, behaviour or conditions. Baselines and targets were often missing, and outcome indicators were often absent or weak.

Instead of...	Consider...
"Number of social cohesion platforms established."	"Change in the proportion of community members reporting trust in XXX, from an agreed baseline."
"Number of people trained."	"Change in [specific capacity or behaviour] demonstrated by trained participants after [period]."
Outputs presented as if they were outcomes.	A clear separation of outputs (what you deliver) and outcomes (what changes), each with a baseline and a realistic target.
Targets that quietly assume a longer timeframe than the project.	Targets that are achievable within the actual project duration, consistent across the logframe, workplan and budget.

4.3 Budgets that cannot be verified or do not comply

Budget issues were among the most damaging because they undermine confidence in the whole proposal. Reviewers flagged calculation and formula errors, totals that did not reconcile, unclear or missing overheads, staffing costs exceeding the permitted share, ceilings exceeded, and missing beneficiary breakdowns that made cost-per-beneficiary, and therefore value for money, impossible to judge.

Instead of...	Consider...
A spreadsheet with broken formulas and totals that don't add up.	A budget where every total is checked, internally consistent, and reconciles with the workplan.
Staffing or overhead costs that exceed the allowed thresholds.	Costs kept within the stated ceilings, with any structural cost clearly justified.
No breakdown of beneficiaries or unit costs.	Clear beneficiary numbers and unit costs so reviewers can see value for money at a glance.
A national or local partner given large responsibilities but a token budget share.	A budget share that genuinely matches each partner's role — a real expression of localisation, not a formality.

4.4 Partner capacity and presence asserted, not evidenced

Reviewers were careful about claims of field presence and experience. Where a proposal stated that a partner was "present" in an area or "experienced" in a sector but offered no supporting

evidence, it was marked down. Consortium governance: who decides what, and how, was often left unclear even when roles were listed in the budget.

Instead of...	Consider...
"Partner X has a strong presence in the target area."	Specific evidence: offices, staff, past projects, dates, and references in the target locations.
Roles listed in the budget but no governance described.	A clear consortium structure: lead responsibilities, decision-making, coordination, and conflict-resolution mechanisms.
Complementarity assumed because partners are different.	Complementarity demonstrated — showing how each partner's specific capability fills a specific need in the design.

4.5 Sustainability and principles stated as an intention

Sustainability, replication and handover appeared in most proposals as ambitions, but frequently without concrete pathways. Reviewers wanted to see how gains would be sustained through which local institutions, systems and capacities. Reviewers also noted when humanitarian principles were left implicit rather than explicitly articulated.

Instead of...	Consider...
"The project's results will be sustainable and replicable."	Named local institutions and systems that will carry the work forward, and the specific capacities you will build in them.
A closing paragraph on exit strategy.	An exit and handover plan woven through the design, with milestones for transferring responsibility.
Humanitarian principles assumed.	Humanitarian principles (and Do No Harm) explicitly stated and reflected in how activities are delivered.

4.6 Cross-cutting commitments that outrun the activities

Gender and protection were often a strength, but reviewers also flagged proposals where gender ambition was "overstated relative to the activities proposed", where intersectional considerations were absent from the results framework, or where conflict sensitivity was treated superficially. The lesson is consistency: every commitment in the narrative should be visible in the activities, the indicators and the budget.

5. Strengthening the peacebuilding pillar

This is the most important section of the paper. Across the first round, the peace pillar was the weakest and least developed part of the HDP nexus and the Nigeria round will put greater emphasis on well-developed peace pillar activities. If your organisation works mainly in humanitarian or development programming, this is the area where you are most likely to need to strengthen your proposal, and your partnerships.

What reviewers said about peace

- Peace was often present “in name” but received only a small share of activities and budget, in some cases a token amount of the overall intervention.
- There was frequently no conflict analysis, which undermined every claim about contributing to social cohesion and weakened the theory of change.
- Consortia often had no partner with demonstrated, specialised peacebuilding expertise; peace was bolted onto humanitarian or development capacity as an appendix.
- Peace and social cohesion outcomes were measured by activity counts, not by changes in trust, perceptions or conflict dynamics.
- Peace ran in a silo rather than being integrated with the humanitarian and development pillars.
- “Social cohesion” was used as a vague, catch-all term, often without genuine conflict sensitivity.

5.1 Why this matters in the Nigeria context

Peacebuilding is not a generic add-on in Nigeria, it should respond to specific, well-documented conflict dynamics. The drivers of conflict identified in Nigeria are political, economic and social: competition over land and natural resources, criminality, inter- and intra-identity group disputes, ethno-religious tensions, and perceptions of marginalisation and exclusion from decision-making.

These play out differently across the country, and your proposal should engage with the dynamics specific to your target location rather than referring to “social cohesion” in the abstract. And, in instances of several overlapping conflict dynamics in a target location, the proposal should explain the link, if any, between the chosen conflict dynamics to address and the others, as well as the potential impact.

It also helps to be clear about what kind of peace you are building. Beyond stopping violence (“negative peace”), the goal is to build the institutions, attitudes and structures that sustain peaceful societies (“positive peace”), which is exactly where humanitarian and development work intersects with peacebuilding.

Anchor your peace work in UNSDCF Strategic Priority 4

The 2023–2027 UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework places peace at the centre through Strategic Priority 4, aligned to SDG 16. It has three outcome areas you can map your peace objectives to: (4.1) violence reduction through strengthened institutions; (4.2) justice and human rights systems; and (4.3) greater inclusion of marginalised people. A strong proposal states plainly which of these it contributes to and how. This also reflects the single most important point from the UN’s own peace framing for Nigeria: organisations too often fail to say what “peace” they are actually building — so define it explicitly, in your own context, rather than leaving it implicit in the word “cohesion”.

This is also consistent with the NFF Nigeria priorities for the BAY states, which emphasise protection, social cohesion, community-level justice and security. Applicants should show how

their peace work responds to concrete local risks, such as violence, unresolved community disputes, weak trust between groups, GBV, child protection concerns, explosive ordnance threats, trauma, and reintegration challenges. The key is to demonstrate how proposed activities will reduce tensions, strengthen trust, improve access to justice, and support safer community relations. Strong proposals also demonstrate how initiatives can be nationally owned with a view to greater sustainability.

The NFF national priorities for Nigeria can be reviewed in the annex of the Call for Proposals and over the [NFF website](#).

5.2 What “substantive” peace programming looks like

Treating peace as a substantive component, not an add-on, means six things in practice:

1. **Start with a real conflict analysis.** Identify the specific drivers of conflict and the dynamics of trust in your area, and let that analysis shape the whole design. This is the foundation reviewers looked for and rarely found.
2. **Bring genuine peacebuilding expertise into the consortium.** Include a partner with a demonstrated track record in peacebuilding, mediation or social cohesion, with evidence, not a humanitarian or development partner asked to cover peace as a side project.
3. **Give peace a meaningful share of activities and budget.** If peace is a core pillar, it cannot be a few percent of the budget. The resourcing should match the ambition stated in your narrative.
4. **Measure peace outcomes properly.** Use indicators that capture change in trust, perceptions of safety, intergroup relations or conflict incidence, with baselines, rather than counts of dialogues held or committees formed.
5. **Apply conflict sensitivity and Do No Harm across everything.** Conflict sensitivity is not only the peace pillar's job. Show how your humanitarian and development activities avoid worsening tensions, for example over the targeting of assistance or the siting of services.
6. **Integrate, don't isolate.** Show how peace activities reinforce, and are reinforced by, the humanitarian and development components, for example livelihoods that reduce resource competition, or services delivered in ways that rebuild trust in institutions.
7. **Ensure that peace initiatives are inclusive.** Demonstrate through disaggregated data how peace initiatives will equally impact men and women, girls and young boys, host communities and returnees or IDPs.

5.3 Practical “instead of / consider” examples for peace

Instead of...	Consider...
Adding a “social cohesion” output near the end of an otherwise humanitarian/development design.	Building the design around the conflict analysis from the start, so peace, humanitarian and development objectives are interwoven.

Instead of...	Consider...
A standalone peace workstream with its own small budget and a few dialogue sessions.	Peace integrated across pillars, with a meaningful budget share and a partner who specialises in it.
Measuring peace by “number of dialogue sessions held” or “committees established”.	Measuring peace by change in trust or perceived safety between specific groups, against a baseline.
Referring to “social cohesion” without explaining the conflict it addresses.	Naming the specific conflict dynamic (e.g. farmer–herder tension, returnee–host friction) and showing how the activity reduces it.
Assuming peace expertise because a partner works “in the community”.	Demonstrating peacebuilding expertise with concrete past results and qualified staff.

6. Practical checklist for applicants

Use this as a final self-assessment before you submit. If you cannot answer “yes” with evidence to a question, that is where your proposal is most likely to lose ground.

Design and logic

- ☐ Is the proposal built around one integrated nexus logic, rather than three parallel projects?
- ☐ Does the theory of change state its assumptions and link clearly to the actual activities?
- ☐ Is every major claim traceable to analysis, an activity, an indicator and a budget line?

Peace pillar

- ☐ Is there a real conflict analysis that shapes the design?
- ☐ Does the consortium include demonstrated peacebuilding expertise?
- ☐ Does peace have a meaningful share of activities and budget — not a token amount?
- ☐ Are peace outcomes measured by change in trust or conflict dynamics, with a baseline?
- ☐ Is conflict sensitivity (Do No Harm) applied across all pillars, not just the peace one?
- ☐ Does the proposal state clearly which UNSDCF Strategic Priority 4 outcome area(s) it contributes to (4.1 violence reduction, 4.2 justice/rights or 4.3 inclusion)?
- ☐ Are Peace Initiatives inclusive?

Results and measurement

- ☐ Do outcome indicators measure change, not activity?
- ☐ Are baselines and realistic, time-bound targets included for every outcome?
- ☐ Are the logframe, workplan and budget fully consistent with one another?

Budget

- ☐ Have all formulas and totals been checked and do they reconcile?
- ☐ Are cost ceilings and category rules (e.g. staffing share, overheads) respected?
- ☐ Are beneficiary numbers and unit costs clear enough to show value for money?
- ☐ Does each partner's budget share match its actual role?

Partnership and sustainability

- ☐ Is each partner's field presence and track record evidenced, not just asserted?
- ☐ Is consortium governance and decision-making clearly described?
- ☐ Is sustainability tied to named local institutions, systems and capacities?
- ☐ Are humanitarian principles explicitly stated and reflected in delivery?

Cross-cutting

- ☐ Are gender, protection and inclusion commitments matched by real activities, indicators and budget?
- ☐ Is the proposal internally consistent from first page to last?
- ☐ Does the package adhere to all other formatting or submission requirements?

One line to remember

Make every claim traceable, give peace the substance it deserves, and make sure the whole proposal tells one consistent story.

7. Concluding message

Most of the gaps identified in the first round are fixable and relate more to clarity, discipline and evidence than to a lack of ambition. **Reviewers welcomed innovative project ideas, but the main obstacle was often that the proposal did not explain them clearly or demonstrate how the analysis, design, partnerships, expected results and budget fit together.**

Innovation was most convincing when it was supported by a coherent and credible project logic.

The **peace pillar is the clearest opportunity for improvement.** In the next round it is central, not optional. Organisations that invest early in a real conflict analysis, bring genuine peacebuilding expertise into their consortium, and measure peace by the change it creates will stand out, precisely because so few proposals did this last time.

We share these lessons in a spirit of partnership. The goal is to help more organisations, submit proposals that are stronger, more deliverable, and more likely to make a real difference in the communities you serve. **We believe that this is an added value well beyond this funding round.**