# Lessons Learned from the Request for Proposals & Contracting Phase

*Therapeutic Virtual Reality (VR) for GBV Survivors in Iraq*

Following the Market Dialogue, NCA took the following steps to draft and publish the Request for Proposal (RFP):

- **Specifications Workshop:** The project's internal Technical Working Group (TWG) held a workshop to brainstorm needs and corresponding specifications for the RFP on 6 December 2022. A mini-training on performance-based specifications (PBS) was conducted beforehand so TWG members understood the different types of specifications and the project's focus on PBS.
- **Drafting the RFP:** The ideas generated from the workshop were then consolidated, cleaned up, and transferred to NCA's RFP template. A smaller group—comprised of the GBV Innovation Advisor, VR consultant, Procurement Senior Advisor, Innovation Officer, and GBV Manager—met several times to review and refine the specifications. Meanwhile, the Procurement Advisor, VR consultant and GBV Innovation Advisor drafted the text of the RFP, including Terms of Reference.
- **RFP & Bids:** The RFP was published on 6 January 2023, with initial closing date of 27 January. The closing date was extended to 1 February 2023 to allow NCA to receive more bids. The RFP was advertised on Twitter, LinkedIn, NCA's website, DevelopmentAid.org and via email to all contacts from the ecosystem mapping.
- **Procurement Committee Review:** The Procurement Committee—comprised of two head office staff, two country office staff and the VR consultant—independently reviewed and scored bids. They then met to go through the total scoring and discuss the best proposals. The suppliers with the three best proposals were invited for meetings so the committee could ask follow-up questions. Suppliers were also requested to provide a demo of their product or similar products so their quality of work could be assessed. After the meetings, the committee selected the best proposal to move forward for contract negotiation.

1. **The market dialogue was effective to promote supplier interest and higher quality bids.** Over half of the bids came from suppliers who participated in the market dialogue. These bids tended to be higher quality; that is, they more closely matched the specifications and considered each problem statement.

2. **Classify specifications as "nice to have" and "must have".** As an initial step, NCA brainstormed all possible specifications for the innovative solution without indication of "must have" or "nice to have." From the brainstormed list of specifications, the group identified which specifications must be fulfilled and which could or should be fulfilled. The "nice to have" and "need to have" categorization process was important for identifying specifications that vendors must fulfill, while still allowing space for innovation from the vendors.

3. **Link specification requirements to outcomes.** It is easier to see which requirements are necessary to achieve the desired result and which are not. Linking specifications

requirements to outcomes creates accountability for delivering on specific goals, making it easier to measure success. When requirements are linked to outcomes, it becomes easier to communicate the importance and purpose of each requirement to stakeholders, reducing confusion and improving collaboration.

4. **Include scaling potential in selection criteria and ask suppliers for more specifics.** NCA indicated that it was open to many different ways of scaling the solution after this initial pilot project, including increasing new users within target group, integrating VR in other programmatic contexts (e.g., support groups), expanding into new geographic contexts (e.g., another country or another project site within Iraq), building out the solution further (e.g., adding more features or apps), increasing the duration and frequency of use, and more. Ask suppliers to be specific about the ways their products can be scaled. Ask suppliers the ease of scaling, especially for new languages. Additionally, ask suppliers if and how getting the current contract would reduce cost for scaling in the future, especially when scaling to a new country, context or language. This was particularly challenging to assess for suppliers with proposals that here highly contextualized to Iraq. Also ask companies whether they would be able to match future scaling grants with private capital.

5. **Involve a diverse range of technical expertise in the specifications development and bid review.** The team involved in developing the specifications and reviewing the bids possessed strong knowledge of GBV, the Iraq context, and the technology requirements for the innovation. This team shaped the specifications and reviewed the bids. Time and logistics-permitting, having a member or representative from the target user population involved in either the specifications development or bid review would be ideal.

6. **Provide a checklist of all required materials for applying vendors.** NCA requested many materials for review from the vendors, including a narrative description, information about past performance, a budget, timeline, and team compositions. Still, some of the vendors did not provide all information, thus making it difficult to evaluate all bids to the fullest extent. Determining a protocol for when vendors fail to provide all required information may also be helpful in ensuring that bids are evaluated against all criteria.

7. **Request companies to provide idea of their timelines for design, development and delivery in their proposal. Make it detailed in the contract.** To request detailed timeline is difficult for suppliers, and unrealistic in the RFP phase. This is conducted when contract negotiation starts and must be a part of the contract. There are too many uncertainties and suppliers need to take many precautions because of external circumstances beyond their control. The suppliers do not have the overview over different risks, there can be scope creeps—meaning that changes in the scope after proposal is submitted—that can impact the timeline. A holistic timeline in the RFP might provide insight into whether suppliers' plan are feasible given the projects scope and complexity. It might also help identifying some potential risks and success. NCA did not request a detailed timeline, so it was difficult to compare the different timelines and processes across proposals. Most proposals only commented on date of delivery or rough timetable for delivery of the software; more details could include when NCA can expect to receive each component of the ToR (e.g., user guide, training of staff), as well as indicate at which points in the process NCA will need to test and provide feedback. This would have better helped NCA with resource planning

(e.g., when to send in roster member/consultant to conduct or support trainings, when to mobilize user testing groups, etc.).

8. **Ensure language needs are clearly specified for each deliverable.** The terms of reference included several deliverables that each needed to be in English, Arabic and Kurdish, including a user guide, training of NCA staff, orientation for users, data collection tools, and the software itself.

9. **Bring in technical expertise that the team/organization does not have.** While NCA has expertise in GBV and MHPSS, we were new to VR, so we hired a VR consultant to support the needs assessment, market dialogue and RFP phases of the project. This was very beneficial as she "spoke the language" of the VR companies, could address their questions while representing NCA's interests, assessed supplier's quality of work, educated NCA's team on VR, and guided NCA on the software requirements and hardware that best suited our needs.

10. **Consider the project's holistic needs in contract negotiations. Work as a team.** Involving a GBV technical specialist in the contract negotiation process with the Procurement Senior Advisor helped ensure that the contract terms were favorable not just in terms of costs, but also aligned with the project's technical requirements, risks, and long-term success. The holistic approach was to consider both project-specific and procurement-related factors (i.e., alignment with project objectives, technical challenges, budgetary control, risks, procurement, communication and coordination, accountability, and post-contract management).

11. **Consider transferability of licenses/subscription.** As humanitarian contexts are unpredictable, consider negotiating rights to transfer licenses/subscriptions to another party. Based on an internal process and NCA criteria for presence, NCA made a strategic decision to close the Iraq country office. Governmental and non-governmental partners expressed interest in continuing the VR project. Transferability of license could allow this.

12. **Decide on intellectual property rights (IPR).** Based on NCA's internal capacity, our desire for wide access to its solutions by other NGOs and the supplier's commercial interests and pre-existing IPR, NCA decided not to hold the full IPR. However, to ensure safe and ethical use of the solution, NCA needs to consent to sell the solution to a third party. Consult Innovation Norway's "[How to manage intellectual property rights in humanitarian innovation partnerships](#)" for further considerations.