

Ref. Open letter from the Count Me In! Consortium, 25 November 2019

Dear Colleagues,

As we all grapple with how best to respond to changing contexts and priorities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, we would like to assure you that, across all Spotlight country programmes, the EU and UN colleagues are shifting or prioritizing a number of activities to respond to the increased risk of violence against and women and girls. Specific to civil society, we are analyzing options within the Spotlight Initiative for supporting civil society organizations to safely engage in critically necessary work, while ensuring their long-term sustainability.

In relation to your open letter, as you are well aware, the early and continuous conversations we have had and still have with civil society helped to shape the Spotlight Initiative, its programmes and its engagement with civil society, the Spotlight Secretariat has indeed adopted many of the 18 recommendations shared in 2018.¹

We are certain that this open letter will help the Spotlight Initiative to further push the needle in terms of accessibility of UN funds and we acknowledge the room for improvement. The Secretariat has therefore developed a [Grassroots Action Plan](#) that includes concrete guidance and recommendations to Spotlight teams at country and regional levels on how to better reach and engage local and grassroots organisations as implementing partners in Spotlight Initiative. All five recommendations in the open letter are addressed fully or partially in the Grassroots Action Plan. The Grassroots Action Plan has been developed with civil society and the UN in a consultative process over the last five months. The document is now going through the last consultations within the UN and the EU before finalization.

1. Onerous application processes

- *Recommendation: Simplify application and reporting procedures, at the very least for small grants, so that Spotlight funding is accessible to small- and medium-sized, local and grassroots, women's rights and feminist groups and organizations.*

The UN and the EU share the concern regarding onerous and resource heavy application processes, including the complex online application systems. The Grassroots Action Plan advises on the simplification and harmonization of UN processes to better engage small- and medium-sized partners, including capacity building of these organisations in proposal drafting and reporting. The Spotlight Secretariat is also continuously working with the UN and EU country teams to find innovative ways to make the partner engagement processes more inclusive, within the existing policy frameworks.

For example, several Spotlight countries have launched joint calls for proposals and/or joint expressions of interest. This is a new coordinated and harmonized partner engagement process that reduces the

¹ Spotlight Initiative has implemented thresholds for funding civil society in country and regional programmes; channels 10% of the regional envelopes through existing mechanisms (UN Trust Funds); established civil society reference groups and included civil society in the governance structure at national, regional and global levels; and developed an integrated protection approach for women human rights defenders.



number of proposals that applicants must submit. In most countries, the Spotlight teams are applying a 2-step process that allows more local and grassroots organisations to apply for funding opportunities, by first submitting a simple concept note to determine eligibility, and later submitting full-fledged proposals following UN-led proposal-drafting workshops. In Honduras, the team is planning to organize a session with civil society organisations on alliance building that aims to create more consortiums that can apply jointly for Spotlight funding. Spotlight teams are also using offline methods to reach civil society partners, e.g. by distributing and accepting hard copy submissions.

2. Short deadlines to apply for funding

- *Recommendation: Ensure that deadlines to apply for funding provide sufficient time to allow those with limited resources to engage - at a minimum 8 weeks.*
- *Recommendation: Similarly, ensure that timelines for other processes, such as participation in consultations, joining reference groups, and giving input on programme documents, are also reasonable and provide sufficient time for women's rights organisations to engage.*

The Spotlight Secretariat is providing continuous feedback to countries regarding the length of submission deadlines and we recognize that there is room for improvement. The Spotlight Grassroots Action Plan recommends that all job, consultancy and partner engagement posts are advertised for at least 4-8 weeks². This is an increase from the usual minimum posting time of 5-14 days. The Spotlight country teams need flexibility to balance the inclusive posting deadlines with the tight timeline to deliver and implement programme activities. We are also conscious of the timelines for other processes.³

To ensure meaningful engagement of civil society reference groups, the Spotlight Secretariat will circulate a survey to reference group members at national, regional and global levels. The survey will identify areas of improvement and guide how the engagement can be strengthened and more inclusive.

3-4. Unregistered organisations cannot apply for funding; Regranting of Spotlight funds is not allowed

- *Recommendation: Meaningfully engage the entire ecosystem of women's rights movements, including unregistered organisations and women's funds, and enable their access to Spotlight funding.*

While the Spotlight Initiative understands the reasons for organizations' inability to register and recognizes the invaluable work these groups do, UN policies do not allow direct funding to go to

² Spotlight Initiative in partnership with the UNTF to End Violence Against Women are re-launching a call for proposal for regional projects in Africa, for which an 8 weeks submission deadline will be applied.

³ The Spotlight country teams have reported that the guidance in the Grassroots Action Plan has been useful. For example, posts are now advertised for longer periods and creative channels are used to disseminate the posts both online and offline. The Secretariat is sharing posts on the Global Repository, the monthly newsletter and with civil society partners to widen the circle for dissemination.



unregistered organisations. The UN cannot hold unregistered organisations accountable for management and reporting of funds, harassments, etc. However, unregistered organisations can apply together with a registered lead entity who will be the primary accountability holder. We are working to ensure that sufficient deadlines and resources are allocated to build alliances and consortiums that allows more groups to access Spotlight funding, including unregistered entities.

The Spotlight Initiative identifies the imperative role of women’s funds to reach grassroots organizations. The Grassroots Action Plan recommends Spotlight teams to engage women’s funds as implementing partners to effectively reach local and grassroots entities, especially where grassroots entities are limited to engage due to the size of grants, capacity gaps and limited absorption capacity. A similar modality is already used in many Spotlight countries, where UN organisations partner with national organizations that channel funds to community-based organisations.

Regarding regranteeing of funds, please note that each fund, programme and agency has its individual policies. The policy of the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women specifically does not allow regranteeing of funds. The Spotlight Secretariat is currently exploring new mechanisms that will allow regranteeing in the new Spotlight regions (Central Asia, the Caribbean and the Pacific).

Spotlight Initiative has committed to deliver 30-50% of its programme outcome costs by civil society organizations. Spotlight’s country programmes across Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Pacific and Central Asia have budgeted approximately **40% of programme funds** to be delivered by civil society organisations.⁴ Our aim is to deliver as much as possible by national, local and grassroots organizations, in particular women's rights organizations.

5. Language accessibility

- *Recommendation: Make calls for proposals available in all the widely used languages of the countries they target.*

Language is recognized as a key barrier for women’s rights’ and grassroots organisations to access international funding. The Grassroots Action Plan advises Spotlight country teams to launch calls for proposals in the main local languages, including in braille and as voiceover text for those with vision impairments. Spotlight teams are also recommended to accept proposals in the main local languages, including handwritten proposals, to be more accessible for those who lack digital literacy or access to the internet, computers or printers.

The Spotlight Initiative is constantly seeking to improve the way it reaches and engages with civil society, in particular with women’s rights’ organisations, grassroots organisations and underfunded groups, to set a precedent for other funds and programmes. We therefore welcome a continuous dialogue with civil society on how we can reach further together.

⁴ Not including Ecuador, Afghanistan and regional programmes.



**Spotlight
Initiative**
*To eliminate violence
against women and girls*

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read 'Nahla Valji', written in a cursive style.

(e-signed)

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