

ICT for Civic Data — Crash Course 2026

# Reading an RFP



Self-Paced Review — Section A

**Why This Matters**

## > Understand the funder's real need

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An RFP is the interface between a funder and a respondent. The funder has money and a problem. The respondent has expertise and a plan.

Your job is not to answer what the RFP says. It is to understand **what the funder actually needs**, which may be different from what they wrote.

The RFP is a starting point for interpretation, not a specification to follow blindly. A strong response reads between the lines.

**Before You Start**

## > Strategic RFPs reward interpretation, not compliance

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### Technical RFP

Precise scope, specific deliverables, defined datasets. Little room for variance.

Example: "Build a dashboard showing flood frequency per district using GDACS data, updated monthly."

The funder knows what they want. You execute.

Most data-focused RFPs in the civic space are strategic. The CLI RFP is strategic.

### Strategic RFP

Floaty language, underspecified scope, signals about values rather than requirements.

Example: "Propose how data-driven approaches can strengthen disaster preparedness."

The funder knows data and AI matter but **cannot articulate how.**

## > Funders often don't know what they want

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The RFP says:

*CLI believes that data-driven approaches, supported by AI, can help confirm and enrich the knowledge of field teams, improve the allocation of preparedness resources, and enable more consistent planning across regions.*

This is a belief statement, not a requirement. The funder thinks data and AI are important but does not know what that looks like in practice. Your proposal needs to make it concrete: **you are the expert they are hiring.**

When the RFP is vague about data and AI, you have both freedom and responsibility: the funder is trusting you to fill in the blanks.

## > RFPs are work of interpretation

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There is little formalisation beyond a deadline and a context. Every other element is open to interpretation:

- > **Scope of Work** uses phrases like "propose an approach" and "describe how", not "build" or "deliver"
- > **Proposal Requirements** ask for methodology and roadmap but give no template or page limit
- > **Evaluation Criteria** list five areas but do not assign weights

Even the deadline has ambiguity. **Deadline timezone rule:** when the timezone is not specified, assume the latest country to cross midnight: Alaska time (UTC-9). This is standard practice for international RFPs.

**Walkthrough**

## > How to read an RFP (1/2)

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Six questions to understand the funder:

- 1. What is the funder's core problem?** Restate in your own words, not the RFP's words.
- 2. What does the funder already know?** They are not starting from zero. CLI has "deep expertise in the regions where they operate."
- 3. What capacity is the funder missing?** The gap your proposal fills. CLI "lacks the technical capacity to systematically complement that expertise with data analysis."
- 4. What does the funder explicitly ask for?** List concrete items from Scope of Work and Proposal Requirements.
- 5. What does the funder signal but not prescribe?** Phrases like "data-driven," "AI," "scalability": values, not requirements.
- 6. What is NOT in the RFP?** Missing constraints, unstated assumptions. These are opportunities or risks.

## > How to read an RFP (2/2)

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Six questions to design your response:

- 7. How are proposals evaluated?** Rank the criteria by importance. CLI lists five: relevance, data approach, technology, feasibility, scalability.
- 8. What is a weak response?** Generic, describes tools without connecting them to the problem.
- 9. What is a strong response?** Grounded in a specific context, demonstrates methodology with actual data.
- 10. How can data strengthen this?** Describe your approach, or **demonstrate** it. Demonstration is always stronger.
- 11. What is your angle?** Pick a region, a hazard, a population, an infrastructure gap.
- 12. What are the risks?** A proposal that acknowledges risks is stronger than one that ignores them.

## > The 12 analysis questions

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### Understand the funder

1. Core problem?
2. Funder's existing knowledge?
3. Missing capacity?
4. What do they ask for?
5. What do they signal?
6. What is absent?

### Design your response

1. Evaluation criteria?
2. Weak response?
3. Strong response?
4. How can data help?
5. Your angle?
6. Risks?

# Behind the Approach

## > Challenge the assumptions

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The funder's framing may not be correct. **Strategy before tools.**

The Civicus example: they asked for a chatbot. But the real problem was content accessibility: their reports were long, jargon-heavy, and nobody read them. A chatbot over bad content is still bad content. What they needed was a content accessibility strategy.

Applied to the CLI RFP: the funder asks for "data-driven approaches supported by AI." But what if the real need is simpler: a systematic way for field staff to document and share what they already know? Your response should address the deeper need, not just the stated one.

## > The "show don't tell" advantage

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### Describe (tell)

"We will use geospatial data to identify communities near flood-prone areas and map their proximity to health facilities."

The funder reads a plan. Hopes it works. Trusts credentials.

The strongest response backs arguments with actual data. This is what the crash course builds toward: a working artifact that demonstrates your methodology.

### Demonstrate (show)

"Here is a map of health facilities within 1km of historical flood zones in Indonesia. 23% of facilities are in high-risk areas."

The funder sees evidence. Trusts the team.

## > An RFP response is a story

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A winning proposal projects **knowledge and clarity of thought**, not promises.

Three trust signals a funder looks for:

1. **Past work and credentials** — have you done this before? This is trust by reputation.
2. **Data analysis** — can you demonstrate competence? This is trust by evidence.
3. **Clear narrative** — can you connect data to the funder's problem? This is trust by communication.

The story connects the data to the funder's problem. Without the narrative, a dashboard is just a dashboard. With the narrative, a dashboard is evidence that your team understands the problem and can solve it.

**FAQ**

## > What's the difference between an RFP and a grant?

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A grant is one contractual outcome. The RFP is just the solicitation mechanism: the way the funder asks for proposals.

Behind the RFP, the contractual relationship varies:

- > **Grant** — funding with reporting obligations, no profit margin
- > **Commercial contract** — fee-for-service with deliverables and milestones
- > **Cooperative agreement** — funder is actively involved in implementation

The CLI RFP does not specify the contractual form. In the civic sector, most RFPs lead to grants, but not all. The response strategy is the same regardless: understand the need, propose a credible plan, demonstrate competence.

## > How do funders pick?

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Selection quality is **uneven and often opaque**. Few funders publish scoring rubrics or feedback.

Only the largest structures (UN agencies, major foundations) afford multi-year stakeholder consultations before implementation. Most projects operate under the pressure of "**we have money, it expires at the end of the year.**"

This means:

- > Proposals are often reviewed quickly, by people who are not domain experts
- > Clear, concrete language wins over jargon
- > A working demonstration stands out because most proposals are text-only
- > Relationships and reputation matter more than they should

## > How has decolonisation changed international development?

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A structural shift in international development:

**Before:** Northern organisations designed and led projects in the Global South, with local staff as implementers.

**Now:** Funding flows to local organisations with local staff. Technical partners provide specific expertise (data, tools, methodology, capacity building), not project leadership.

This changes how you write a proposal:

- > Position yourself as a **technical partner**, not a project leader
- > Emphasise **capacity building** and knowledge transfer
- > Respect the local organisation's field knowledge: data confirms and enriches, it does not replace

## > How does funding flow in international development?

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Funding flows through layers:

**Government** funds an intermediary NGO, who funds regional funders, who fund local implementers. Each layer operates on grant timelines.

This creates cascading constraints:

- > Each layer adds reporting requirements
- > Timelines compress at each level (a 3-year government grant becomes 18 months at the implementation level after administrative overhead)
- > The implementer inherits all the constraints above them but has the least flexibility

For your proposal: understand where you sit in the chain. The CLI RFP positions you as a technical partner to an implementing organisation. Your timeline and budget must fit within theirs.