How To Develop A Project Idea (150)

A key role of the route is to constantly explore new ideas and projects that will attract visitors to your route, improve the experience that these visitors have, and raise the levels of income that your members can earn from this visitor flow.

This Guide will help you take a project idea and develop a **Project Plan** that you can present to the Route Forum for possible implementation, and propose to potential funders. It will also guide you to transform the project idea into the implementation stage, where you can implement and manage the proposed project.

One of the benefits of belonging to the Open Africa networks is that you are able to learn from the experience of other routes. Some of these routes have been operating for more than 10 years and have much experience in marketing their routes and others who have come up with innovative ways to develop new projects.

To keep up with the times and exploit new opportunities, your route needs to develop new project ideas all the time. Not all of these will be implemented — some of them might not be practical, and there will always be a limit on the resources and money you have to put ideas into action. But the Route Forum's energy must be channelled into a systematic way of taking an idea and assessing its possible impact and viability.

This way, the Route Forum can become a funnel of good ideas — taking suggestions and concepts and then putting them through a process of testing which are the most practical, valuable and beneficial to the route.

Developing a project idea is the first stage in getting a new

project started. After the idea is developed and accepted by the relevant stakeholders, there are Guides on how to develop and manage a project plan (see the list of other Guides below).

Why is developing project ideas important?

Times are always changing, and new opportunities arise with new trends and events in your area and beyond. Your route can use these to the benefit of members if everyone is thinking creatively about how to make the best of these opportunities.

An idea on its own, of course, is not enough. It must be developed to see if it could be practical, useful and affordable. And if it is, then it can be turned into a project or activity that the route can implement. A really good idea can turn into a regular project that runs continuously or is repeated at a certain time each year.

What is a project idea and how do you develop it?

The project idea will be a concept for an activity that can help the route to achieve its goals. It might be a once-off project that takes advantage of an unusual opportunity or it could be an activity that is repeated each month or each year. The FIFA Soccer World Cup was an example of a once-off event that the tourism industry was able to exploit in a number of ways, many of those businesses that benefited the most, however, were those who were able to extend the benefit by attracting World Cup visitors back again — or using the publicity of the event to gain future, sustainable business.

The trick is to be able to test an idea cheaply and quickly, and turning the good ones into practical projects that serve

the aims of the route. Implementing too many ideas that fail is an expensive and unsustainable exercise.

Assess the project idea

The route needs a way of assessing a project idea before it commits the time and money that is required. Put aside some time during regular monthly meetings or arrange a separate time to focus only on one or more ideas. Bring in experts on particular things if the ideas need some specialist advice.

Examine the current reality or situation

To conduct a situational analysis is a process that routes must go through when starting up and prioritising their focus and a unique selling proposition. Such an analysis can also be used to zoom in on smaller aspects of the route area, to examine opportunities for specific projects within specific areas along the route.

This is important to ensure that every project idea has a context. It must address a certain need or opportunity that is well understood so that the intervention you plan has the impact you expect.

What will the project's impact be?

Be clear and realistic about what the possible benefits will be to the route and its members. During the assessment, you need to estimate these impacts and measure them during implementation. This will give you more confidence about tackling the project.

So set some goals for the project. You can do this in the same way that you set the original goals for the route. Use the SMART principles: S = specific, M = measurable, A = attainable, R = realistic, and T = timely.

Is it practical and affordable?

Put some thought into how this project might be implemented. Are there any unsolvable challenges that will risk its success? In other words, how practical is it?

Also, put some figures to the different steps involved. Estimate what it will cost for the planning, the materials (or components) and the implementation. Put these into a simple budget and see if the route has the money to cover the costs; if you don't have enough, see if there are other stakeholders who might be interested in contributing money to it.

Then identify potential (or estimated) revenue gains from the project. Explore how the idea will give something back to your members and, if applicable, the other stakeholders — who will usually be looking for something in return for their contribution.

Look carefully at the timeframe. How long do you have to plan this project and implement it? Be realistic about the sort of delays that usually occur when implementing a project — especially for the first time. Avoid pursing a project if you can see that the time is too short. Trying to rush something new is usually a recipe for disaster.

Who can put it into action?

See if the route has people employed who have the skills and experience to implement such a project. Or perhaps the Route Forum has people with the expertise that you need. You can also look to the membership of the route to find the skills and abilities required. If it's a specialist task, you might need to get an outside expert — and the cost may be higher than you had hoped. Ensure that you factor any additional expenses into the budget.

What other resources do you need?

There may be a range of tools, supplies, partnerships, funding, meeting space, etc. that the project will need. Make a detailed checklist and see how many of these your route has access to. If you don't have them and need to procure them from outside, add them to the project budget.

Building capacity

If a project idea looks really good but needs skills you don't have, consider training people for the task. There is often donor funding for training — especially if it can build capacity within your route so that this project can be carried out internally and on an ongoing basis. This can help to bring more people into the route's activities while laying the ground for them to do this work into the future and ensuring the project's sustainability.

Evaluating outcomes

Every project need sto have some way of judging whether it was worthwhile. One way of doing this may be to measure if it brought in more income than it cost to implement— in other words, did it make a profit and is it therefore a sustainable project to continue with?

But not all projects need to show a financial return (or profit). Many activities — especially marketing — will only show their value over a long time. Plan some way of measuring these benefits, the best way in the short-term may be to ask people's opinions — speak to those who were meant to benefit, or other stakeholders who were involved. There may even be other benefits that you did not intend, but which are important nonetheless. It is a good idea to develop several indicators that can one can measure against during the implementation phase and post-implementation.

Who is involved with project ideas?

The Route Forum needs to champion the importance of new project ideas, as it cannot be expected to come up with all the ideas by itself. Members must also be encouraged to come up with ideas — and not just the idea, but also a more in-depth proposal exploring the issues discussed above. It is unfair just to throw ideas at the Route Forum and expect it to do all the hard work of researching whether they are practical or not.

But the Route Forum can create a channel for these ideas, and can even offer workshops on how to investigate ideas and turn them into proposals. The Route Forum may even create a subcommittee, onto which they can co-opt anyone with expertise and interest, that will evaluate ideas and develop the best ones into proposals for the forum to consider.

Practical tips

- Make the brainstorming a fun exercise so that members don't feel intimidated by your request for ideas and proposals. Working as a group has two aspects: completing tasks and building relationships. The relationship dimension is an essential part of the success of your route, so take time to get to know one another better and enjoy each other's company.
- Keep each other inspired. Create a visual of your project design, goals and vision. Look for inspirational stories of similar projects that were successful and share them among members in the route.
- Keep up the momentum when developing an idea. Establish realistic timeframes and monitor the progress of tasks.
- Break up large goals into manageable parts and assign tasks to people based on their confidence and ability in completing them.
- Check in with group members to see where they may need

support, and share their progress at every meeting.

- Determine your budget and identify all the main costs in the early planning stages.
- Based on consensus of the group, is it a reasonable investment for what you hope to achieve? Do the benefits outweigh the costs?
- Avoid developing ideas that don't relate to your goals and objectives.

Use of this Guide

This Guide can be used by the Route Forum, but it can also be circulated to members with the request that new ideas are not only welcome but are required for the route's success. This Guide can be a gentle way of reminding members that the route's success depends on them, not just on the office bearers.

The need for new ideas from members can be raised at every AGM, so that members understand the need and also the process of getting an idea into the system so that the route can explore and consider it.

Other Guides

There are other Guides to help you with new project ideas for your route. These include:

- Guide: [How To Develop A Project Plan For A Short-term Project](#)
- Guide: [How To Manage A Short-Term Project](#)
- Guide: [How To Develop A Project Budget](#)