

Caribbean Handbook on Risk Information Management



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[Home](#) > 10.1 Introduction

10.1 Introduction to Writing technical requirements for Terms of Reference for projects

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Introduction

A Terms of Reference or TOR is the name given to the individual document that provides details of an assignment required to be undertaken by a group or individual consultant or contractor. Terms of Reference, or TORs, stated in the plural, are important to ensure that the aim of a project is met or that the person or entity hiring the consultant or contractor obtains exactly what was anticipated from requesting the assignment. They must therefore be written in language that is specific, actionable, and capable of being evaluated. This therefore requires that the writer of the TOR has specific technical knowledge of the output that must be delivered. Technical knowledge alone, however, is not sufficient for writing a good TOR. Drafting a good TOR that not only clarifies what is expected, but that also avoids pitfalls, requires experience and so the capacity of the writer of the TOR will increase over time. If a TOR is not constructed with knowledge and experience there can be many negative outcomes including non-achievement of the anticipated outcomes as well as wastage of human and economic resources as well as time. A vague TOR can also frustrate the job of the consultant or contractor and be grounds for termination of the project with often unclear financial consequences.

Purpose

For the target countries that have limited human and economic resources and that are confronted numerous projects that require hiring external expertise, e.g. related to environmental and hazard problems, an inadequate TOR can result in inefficient usage of money and may even increase vulnerabilities. Such 'failed' projects can have significant social, economic, and environmental impact. A well-constructed TOR guides both the consultant and the project manager along the process to final delivery of successful output and will reduce the possibility of conflict over deliverables and payments.

Another important aspect of TORs are that they are required for determining the success of the project after its completion. TORs should be written in clear, concise language to ensure effective communication of the requirements (Mahony and Dearden. 2012; Roberts, Khattri, and Wessal 2011). Specifications should, where possible, and depending on the nature of the assignment, be given in specific numbers, precisions, and areas, to avoid ambiguity and should be used as a benchmark to evaluate the project's success.

In development work, TORs are needed for the following types of projects:

- Pre-feasibility studies
- Feasibility studies
- Appraisal and design projects
- Implementation projects that have already been designed
- Review, evaluation and audit of completed projects
- Technical advice reports

Examples of some of these types of projects in the area of incorporating landslide and flood hazard data into planning and infrastructure development can be:

- Feasibility studies – Studies for the feasibility of construction of schools, bridges, highways in hazard prone areas
- Appraisal and design missions – Appraisal of risks to existing infrastructure, or design of a local plan
- Implementation projects that have already been designed – implementation of the construction of a school campus
- Review, evaluation and audit of completed projects – Review, evaluation and audit of the preparation of a national plan or the construction of a highway
- Technical advice reports – Technical advice on the capacity required in the institutions to make the approval of applications to construct more efficient.

A project can therefore be split into several different sub-projects for feasibility, design, implementation and evaluation, each of which would require its own TOR (Mahony and Dearden. 2012; Roberts, Khattri, and Wessal 2011). It is therefore important that TORs are well prepared as any negative impacts of poorly developed TORs at the initial stages can affect the overall development programme further down the pipeline. It is therefore equally important that the responses to the call for proposals demonstrate a deep understanding of the TOR so that the best entity is selected based on the precise fit of the proposal to the TOR.

TORs can be input based or output based. In input based TORs, all specifications are rigidly supplied and the contractor is required to conform to the requirements. In output based TORs, the outcomes required are more rigidly specified but the contractor is tasked to design innovative methods that will be most effective as well as efficient at meeting the outcome requirements.

State institutions in developing countries, such as those of the target countries, often have valid reasons for hiring consultants and contractors to perform certain tasks. Often they lack sufficient resources to do everything “in-house” so there is a clear need to “outsource”. This is particularly the case in complex studies related to landslide and flood hazard and risk and the use of this information for e.g. planning and infrastructure development.

A disadvantage of outsourcing complex issues, is that the institution does not have the opportunity to learn and to develop its own capacity and experience that would be gained from performing the activity in-house. A possible solution is that the institution should ensure that capacity building is part of the TORs and that staff is made available to learn “on-the-job”. This way abilities are developed and experience is gained. It also will result in a more thorough understanding of the project’s outcomes so that it can be built upon and maintained. Institutional learning and proper maintenance of projects’ results (including archiving of data, reports and other deliverables) is very important. If done properly follow-up projects can build on work done previously; if not, all projects will have to start from scratch again.

References

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