

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

**THOUGHT PIECE: LEGITIMACY AND  
POWER IN INGO TRANSITIONS**

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## INTRODUCTION

This thought piece was developed as part of Stopping As Success (SAS), a collaborative learning project implemented by a consortium consisting of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The project aims to study the dynamics at play when ending a development program, and provide guidelines on how to ensure locally led development. In doing this, SAS looks beyond the technical aspects of an exit strategy to identify examples that demonstrate a transition toward locally led development. The 20 case studies produced by the project highlight the past and present realities faced by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations (CSOs), and local NGOs, focusing in particular on how partnerships evolve during transitions or devolvement to local entities.<sup>1</sup>

### DEFINITION OF LOCAL

Definition of local: The term 'local' has different connotations in different contexts and is a contested term. In the context of SAS's research, 'local organization' is used to refer to CSOs or NGOs in the global South that are undergoing a process of transition in their partnership with an INGO. This encompasses organizations that work at the local and national level. The broader term 'local actors' recognizes the diversity of this group, which can include individuals, communities, newly created NGOs or CSOs, NGOs that have devolved from an international federation, or local and national governments.

### WHY WRITE ABOUT POWER AND LEGITIMACY IN RELATION TO TRANSITION?

The short answer is that any research about the aid sector should grapple with the concepts of power and legitimacy because they are central to the way in which the development system functions. More specifically, the power imbalances that exist between international and local or national organizations more often than not determine how, when and why transitions occur, and whether they are legitimate.

But what do we mean by power and legitimacy in the specific context of INGO transitions? Far be it from SAS to offer absolute definitions of such complex concepts. But for the purposes of this thought piece, we conceptualize **power** as the ability to drive the decision of when to transition, to shape the process and outcomes, and to determine what success looks like. In this context, **legitimacy** means having a genuine mandate for transition from those the organization or program is meant to serve, and being held accountable to those whom the process will directly affect.

Both power and legitimacy are core themes running throughout SAS, and not only in the context of transitions. In October 2017, prior to conducting case study research, the SAS consortium held an online consultation with 95 participants working in over 40 countries.<sup>2</sup> This thought piece returns to and reflects on some of the views shared during the consultation. The report highlights four key insights, all of which touch on legitimacy and power to some degree:

1. Local actors must be given most of the control, which requires shifting our understanding of accountability to one of answering primarily and publicly to aid recipients before, during, and after development assistance.
2. The power dynamics between local and international actors remain unequal.
3. There is a need for greater emphasis on listening and responding to locally defined priorities by donors and other external actors.
4. Successful exits can be dependent on a successful entrance, as the ways in which relationships begin influences how these relationships come to an end.

The opening session of the consultation asked specifically about power dynamics and decolonizing aid, recognizing that development does not operate in a power-free vacuum. As Elijah Manyok from South Sudan noted: “The power imbalance has also forced most local NGOs to restructure to fit into the internationally designed humanitarian and development architectures to be competitive and access funding, abandoning their local structures and strategies, hence making them less relevant to the communities they represent.”<sup>3</sup> This restructuring can have a significant effect on the post-transition landscape, where local and national organizations are suddenly left to mobilize domestic resources when their structures have been set up to access international funds.

## **SHINING THE LIGHT ON STOPPING AS SUCCESS**

It is important for SAS to acknowledge upfront that this project is being implemented by three ‘Western’ or ‘Northern’ organizations, all headquartered in either the United Kingdom or the United States. This is partly because INGOs are the main unit of analysis in SAS, and therefore our consortium is well placed to

write about their experiences. In addition, transitions of country offices and support to local and national actors in resource mobilization are ongoing strategic priorities for some of our consortium partners. But the composition of the consortium does have implications for the production of knowledge on transition, as we are writing through a particular lens and from a specific case study evidence base.

So why is this consortium writing a piece about power and legitimacy at all? Our aim is a decidedly modest one: to share high-level reflections on these topics based on our own learning over the past few years. We do not feel best placed to develop a tool or practical guidelines on how to address the structural power imbalances that dominate the international aid sector and that drive the way in which many INGO transitions unfold; we’d rather that space was created for local and national actors to share what needs to change from their own perspectives. But we hope this short piece serves to raise critical questions that inform future research on the power dynamics associated with transitions, and with the aid sector more broadly.

We have attempted to shine a light on the practices of international actors operating in the aid sector, therefore, while documenting the lived experiences of local and national organizations undergoing transition processes. In order to bring in voices other than our own, SAS team members partnered with researchers from and based in each of the 13 countries in which we conducted case studies. The consortium has also held regional review meetings in Bangkok and Nairobi with local and national organizations that are the subject of SAS case studies, as well as other NGO and civil society representatives from each of the three regions, in order to both share findings, seek input and feedback, and foster networks of practitioners who can continue to engage outside of SAS.

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## DISCUSSION OF KEY THEMES

When considering the body of evidence from across the 20 SAS case studies, alongside issue papers on different themes, four insights arise in relation to power and legitimacy.

### 1. UNILATERAL DECISION-MAKING ON EXIT AND TRANSITION

An inescapable fact that has emerged from the SAS research is the fact that in several of our 20 case studies the decision to transition was driven or imposed by international actors (donors and INGOs). Additionally, in many cases this decision was triggered by financial considerations, for instance a donor ending funding for a program or an INGO scaling back activities in specific countries or regions due to a decrease in funding for that location or a shift in strategic priorities.

The unilateral nature of decision-making about transition presents a significant challenge to the legitimacy of international actors - who invited them to enter a particular country or region in the first place, and why do they get to determine when it is time to leave? It also raises questions about whether transitions are genuinely about transferring power and ownership in service of locally led development when international actors are in the driving seat and can control when to trigger the process.<sup>4</sup> The 2017 SAS consultation found that “aid operates on a timeline set by donors, rarely with flexibility.”<sup>5</sup> The same can be said for transition processes, which are not only triggered externally, but are sometimes driven by pressured timelines.

On a more positive note, in virtually all cases of organizational transitions that we studied as part of SAS, local and national organizations and actors were instrumental in driving the transition process (even if they were not able to determine the trigger). The Raks Thai Foundation would never have been established following the transition of CARE Thailand had Thai staff members not taken the reins. Without a strong national leader, the Centre of Studies for Peace and Development (CEPAD), a Timorese NGO, would not have continued to exist beyond the phasing out of financial support from its international partner Interpeace. In this sense, therefore, SAS has documented the ‘art of the possible’ when it comes to redressing the

unilateral nature of transition processes. Nevertheless, if the decision to transition continues to be externally driven, the prospects for locally led development are diminished. This is especially the case if transitions are not resourced and implemented in a way that supports the institutional development of local and national entities before the process is complete.

### 2. POWER IMBALANCES IN ACCESSING FINANCIAL RESOURCES POST-EXIT OR TRANSITION

As noted above, the decision to transition is in many cases driven by financial difficulties, often when INGOs run out of money or undergo a re-prioritization exercise resulting in funding shifts to different regions or countries.<sup>6</sup> In many cases, national staff take the initiative to develop a new, independent entity as the INGO transitions. Abruptly losing a key source of international funding can be immensely challenging for local and national actors seeking to raise funds from domestic sources in contexts where this type of financing is extremely limited. This is especially true when the INGO is still competing for the same funds or acting as a gatekeeper to donor contexts.

Transition, therefore, should not be entirely focused on international actors immediately ‘getting out of the way’ so that local and national actors can determine their own development processes and outcomes, including by raising their own funds. Having decided to enter and exit in a unilateral way, it can be argued that INGOs have a unique responsibility to directly support local and national organizations in becoming financially sustainable before the transition process is complete. This is in recognition of the fact that unequal distributions of global wealth are a result of complex and long-standing historical process, often rooted in colonial and neo-colonial oppression. As part of the consultation, Nora Lester Murad asked participants to consider whether aid is itself a tool of colonization: “liberation can never come from contracting with the interests of the oppressor.” She asked: “what if instead of aid, we should be seeking reparations?” While this may not apply in every context, to ignore the origins of economic inequality when exiting or transitioning minimizes the existence of deeply entrenched power dynamics.

Our case studies uncovered various ways of shifting power through different types of financial partnership. As part of its transition in Georgia, Oxfam officially allowed its Georgian staff to use 10% of their paid time on establishing BRIDGE, a new NGO, in parallel with managing Oxfam's projects. Burundian NGO GLID (Great Lakes Ikingi Development) has recommended that donors and INGOs increase the amount of core funding provided to local and national partner organizations. This is important because institutional development, such as the improvement of organizational systems and advocacy and influencing efforts, are rarely if at all covered through earmarked or project funding. At present, INGOs tend to monopolise unrestricted resources, especially as they are extremely limited and competitive.<sup>7</sup> Otherwise, it becomes a vicious circle: without core funding, local and national NGOs are unable to raise independent resources, the very kind that will be crucial to their survival post transition. As noted by GLID, even if the percentage of unrestricted funding is minimal, a greater transfer of core resources would be highly symbolic of a more equal relationship.

PeaceBuilders Community Inc (PBCI), a Filipino organization, has carefully considered different ways of redressing the financial power imbalance between local and international organizations. As part of its effort to secure financial sustainability from its international partner, the Mennonite Church Canada, PBCI established Coffee for Peace, a social enterprise that enables Filipino farmers to receive financial investment in exchange for their coffee. As we noted in the case study, "an investor, as opposed to a donor model, is helpful in overcoming unequal power dynamics in the aid sector."<sup>8</sup> This model also enabled a shift away from seeing farmers as "beneficiaries" as opposed to partners.

### **3. THE LEGITIMIZATION OF CAPACITY 'BUILDING'**

The notion of capacity 'building' in preparation for a transition came up in virtually all SAS case studies. This term is increasingly fraught, as for many local and national actors it is a largely top-down, imposed process, pre-determined by external actors rather than being a two-way exchange. The discourse on capacity in the aid sector generally focuses on how to 'make' local organizations 'better' in some way, or on how to make them look and act more like INGOs - some would argue this is about the aid sector creating problems that they can

then fix.<sup>9</sup> In the context of INGO transitions, capacity building is often about preparing local and national actors to continue their work, or fill existing gaps, once the INGO is no longer present. Although this approach is welcomed in some cases, it does not account for the fact that international actors have much to learn themselves about transition processes, and development processes more broadly, especially if they are purportedly about fostering locally led development.<sup>10</sup> This learning cannot take place in the absence of genuine, two-way learning from the local and national actors who will face the consequences of the transition.

During the 2017 consultation, co-creation was highlighted as key to achieving greater balance. As noted by Cecilia Milesi during the 2017 consultation, the very idea of exit "entails that we are still working with a linear framework... this is not a transformative and dialogical approach. In [such] a framework, the horizontal exchange means that there is no 'end' or 'exit' as we 'are together' in a cooperative relationship." We saw multiple examples of ongoing partnerships in SAS's research. In the case of the transition from an internationally-funded economic development program to national microcredit foundation Partner, Mercy Corps has maintained a seat on the board of the Bosnian organization. This enables a continued relationship between the two organizations, and fundamentally also allows Mercy Corps to learn lessons from Partner on what a successful transition looks like and how to recreate it in the future.

### **4. KNOWING WHEN TO LET GO (OF CONTROL)**

The 'localization' agenda in the aid sector has been equated by some with international actors letting go of control. But in practice, localization has in many cases become about shifting the locus of activities (for instance by moving an INGO's headquarters) rather than creating systemic change. Existing power dynamics and structural changes are often left untouched. The same can be said for many transition processes: while they are ostensibly about transferring power and ownership, there is an art to letting go in such a way that both acknowledges and addresses the power dynamics at play.

We have seen many successful cases of international actors being able to 'let go' without simply abandoning

an existing partnership. Instead they managed transitions in ways that intentionally supported the institutional resilience of local and national actors. Indeed, in virtually all of the SAS case studies, relationships between international and local or national actors have continued in some shape or form. As we saw in the case of the transition from ActionAid India to ActionAid Association (AAA, now a national NGO), “a successful transition is not simply a technical or programmatic exercise, with a start and end date; rather, to AAA the commitment to a transition of power is something that should be continuously strived towards within the organization.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, in the transition from Nuru International to Nuru Kenya, the international team was guided by the principle of ‘servant leadership,’ which underpinned the philosophy of the transition process. Servant

leadership is designed to invert traditional ‘power leadership’ models by ensuring that collaboration, trust, empathy and the ethical use of power constitute a much broader definition of what it means to lead in a development context.

We also found that post-transition partnerships do not have to be visible in order to be meaningful. For example in the case of CEPAD, Interpeace actively embraced the role of a ‘silent partner.’ They were unconcerned about publicizing their own brand in Timor Leste, and opted instead to work behind the scenes to support the development of CEPAD, including by supporting them to find other donors. Interpeace continues to support CEPAD’s work, even though they no longer provide direct financial support to the NGO.

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## INFORMED QUESTIONS FOR DONORS, INGOS AND NGOS/CSOS

SAS does not purport to have covered all or indeed most of the issues related to the power and legitimacy in this thought piece. We have not, for instance, discussed the way in which language is used to perpetuate power imbalances. This is often done by using the term ‘local’ in a sweeping, un-nuanced way that does not take into account the full variation of local and national actors. We also have not discussed the presumed legitimacy of INGOs as prime development actors (and by extension as key decision-makers on development priorities and approaches). This ignores the multitude of capable local/national actors and leaders that consistently demand a full seat at the table.

Because this topic is so vast and important, we feel it is apt to end this piece by raising questions rather than providing answers.

1. How can international actors take active steps to decolonize the transition planning process, and avoid imposing externally driven decisions on local or national organizations?
2. What does it mean to truly plan for transition from the ‘very beginning’ when many INGOs have operated in specific countries for several decades? How can that process be meaningfully undertaken at different starting points?
3. How can donors and INGOs actively relinquish power, resources and control during a transition process? What structural changes need to happen within INGOs in order to allow for this?
4. What changes need to take place in the current financial structures of the aid sector in order to shift power from a monetary perspective? Specifically, what needs to change in donor policies and funding approaches to support the institutional development of local and national actors and foster responsible transitions?
5. What can local or national CSOs/NGOs do differently when partnering with international actors who are likely to transition in the short-to-medium term?

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## ENDNOTES

1. Read more about Stopping As Success on the program website: <http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/>
2. Aid Exits and Locally-led Development: Key insights from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Search for Common Ground, [http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PD-USAID-Report-v8\\_23.10.pdf](http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/PD-USAID-Report-v8_23.10.pdf)
3. Aid Exits and Locally-led Development: Key insights from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Search for Common Ground, p.10
4. For more detail, see Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of Aid, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, November 2012. In Chapter 11, the report calls for “mutually agreed exit strategies” as part of a paradigm shift to a more collaborative aid model.
5. SAS, Aid Exits and Locally-led Development: Key insights from a global consultation convened by Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects and Search for Common Ground, p.10
6. These pressures are explored in the SAS Issue Paper on Financial Sustainability in Responsible Transitions, October 2019.
7. For further information on this topic, see the SAS How to: Access Unrestricted Funding, October 2019.
8. Philippines: Mennonite Church Canada and Coffee for Peace, Stopping As Success, January 2020, p.6.
9. In Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of Aid, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects discusses how NGOs and CBOs become defined only as agents of aid, not as civil society actors and change agents. As noted by a Kosovar researcher and policy advisor: “A project society has been developed, not a civil society.”
10. See the SAS Guidance Note on Joint Learning and Mutual Capacity, January 2020.
11. India: ActionAid International to ActionAid Association case study, Stopping As Success, January 2020, p.9.

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