

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

# CASE STUDY: BECOMING 'LOCAL' TO SUPPORT THE GLOBAL: ACTIONAID INTERNATIONAL'S JOURNEY IN INDIA

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## STOPPING AS SUCCESS

This case study was developed as part of Stopping As Success (SAS), 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). SAS is a collaborative learning project that 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 case studies produced by the project highlight the past and present realities faced by international non-government organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations (CSOs), and local NGOs, focusing in particular on how partnerships evolve during transitions or devolvement to local entities.

### I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

This case study outlines the transition of ActionAid International (AAI) to ActionAid Association (AAA), an Indian organization. The report focuses on how AAA applied its organizational mission and values to the transition, particularly through internal and external messaging. In doing so, it builds on Sherine Jayawickrama's 2012 report<sup>1</sup> documenting ActionAid's systems and processes for transitioning its governance framework, starting in 2003.

This case describes the organization's "internationalization" agenda prior to the establishment of AAA. This agenda noted the demand for INGOs to be more accountable at the national level so, rather than "exit," the focus was on setting up transparent national governance processes.

The report was written based on an analysis of relevant publicly available research, interview notes, lessons drawn from a 2017 online consultation led by SAS, and a thorough literature review published by SAS in 2018. The SAS consortia also fed into initial findings following fieldwork in India, and has remained engaged in analyzing lessons from each of the case studies in this collaborative learning project.



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#### ACRONYMS

AAA	ActionAid Association
AAI	ActionAid International
CBO	community-based organization
CSO	civil society organization
INGO	international non-governmental organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
SAS	Stopping As Success

#### TYPE OF TRANSITION

This case study is an example of a transition from an INGO to a national entity – in this case, the transition from INGO ActionAid International to the fully Indian entity, ActionAid Association.





Securing rights for women in the world of work. Fisherwomen at a fish landing centre in Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh, India. Photo credit: Poulomi Basu/ActionAid

This case was produced using qualitative methods, through a series of semi-structured key informant interviews. AAA staff and several external experts familiar with the organization's transition contributed to discussions. External experts with knowledge of the country's civil society context were also interviewed.

In total, seven semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted in Delhi, Mumbai, and remotely with individuals at the local, national, and international level. The interviewees were, first, people who had managed the organization during transition or immediately afterwards; and, second, people who had worked at the organization during the transition phase. Given the small scope of

the case study, government partners, donors, and program participants were not contacted for case research. The team also interviewed external experts with knowledge of the country's civil society context.

## 2. CONTEXT

India's constitution mandates that the government work toward a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, upholding the fundamental rights of its citizens. Following independence, the state could not initially reach many of its most marginalized citizens living in remote rural areas, resulting in civil society taking on a crucial role in enabling and implementing

last-mile delivery of development programs and services. Over the years, while the state has increased its outreach to remote areas, it is still not extensive. Hence, the state and civil society continue to work in synergy, complementing each other's needs. At the same time, however, civil society has often challenged and critiqued the government's policies and programs.

NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) that work with government, the political leadership, and other stakeholders find it easier to function in India's current development financing landscape. Environmental and rights-based advocacy work can be challenging, with organizations focused on these areas often facing difficulties working and raising funds either locally or from international agencies. Recent developments concerning Greenpeace India<sup>2</sup> and Amnesty India<sup>3</sup> are illustrative in this regard.

Collectively, civil society has succeeded in bringing about important legislative change in India, especially during the last two decades. One example is the strong grassroots movement that led to the formulation of the Right to Information Act in 2005. This landmark act has meant greater accountability and transparency from the Indian government, especially regarding public information and finances. As noted in an interview with an ActionAid staff member: "Progress will not happen only because civil society exists. Progress will happen only if civil society is successfully able to bring about legislative changes and set the national agenda."

Global foreign assistance to India has declined significantly<sup>4</sup> since the latest amendment to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act in 2010, which limited and placed greater restrictions on such assistance. Given this, Indian organizations have increasingly sought support from private companies via their corporate social responsibility policies<sup>5</sup> and high net-worth individuals. This shift in funding sources became apparent during data collection for this case study, with those working in the development and peacebuilding sectors seemingly having shifted how they think about funding sources. One high-net worth individual interviewee commented: "I don't even think of foreign funding anymore." As a result, a new model has begun to take hold in the public sector. In effect, Indian companies are acting as "channelers" to local organizations: "They channel money because they have relationships with the government.

It's now making more sense to be in a resource provider role given this model that's happening. They find the CSOs doing really good work."

Kshiti Gala, SAS research partner, describes the situation as follows: "INGOs know and are good at sharing information networks, providing financial and other resources. What INGOs do not know is the lived realities of people for whom they design development programs. It is best for INGOs to leave developmental planning to local actors. For example, channeling funds to credible local CSOs in India that have built long-term relationships with the Indian government and local communities. These can deliver programmatic impact in a way that USAID and others cannot achieve. Leave development planning and implementation to local actors and facilitate progress by providing resources."

### 3. MAPPING THE TRANSITION

AAI tackles poverty and injustice globally. The organization's commitment to addressing inequality was an early influence on the organization's decision to transition and devolve power. The shift from AAI to AAA, a local Indian entity, embodies the organization's values of equality and transparency: "... the people whose lives our work affects should decide how we're run."<sup>6</sup>

ActionAid has been working with India's poor since 1972, and by the time of the organization's transition to an international federation in 2003, staff, according to an interviewee, "... felt we couldn't do what we wanted to by staying who we were." This sentiment was indicative of wider changes taking place organizationally. Thus, ActionAid embarked on a process that became known as its "internationalization" journey. A 2012 report on ActionAid's transition from international to national noted that "... the ethic of internationalization has become a point of pride at ActionAid."<sup>7</sup> The description of ActionAid's structure on its website reads: "Rather than emphasize the divide between rich countries which raise funds and poorer ones which spend them, we choose to recognize the more complex modern reality, and strive to work together in a spirit of equality, democracy and accountability." The organization is also proud to

note it was the first large INGO to physically and symbolically relocate its headquarters from Europe to South Africa, signaling a shift in governance and decision-making power toward the Global South.

On 5 October 2006, the legal aspect of the transition was completed, with ActionAid Association, an Indian organization, being registered under the Societies Act of 1860 (an act governing the registration of Indian charitable societies). Similar to most INGOs, AAA is governed by an independent general assembly and an independent national governing board.

Though AAA is still a member of the AAI federation, and in many ways did not experience a significant amount of operational transition in 2003, its staff and leadership feel the national NGO is distinctly independent from the larger organization. As one interviewee commented: “The transition was thought-through and well managed. There was no conflict of interest and a memorandum of understanding was signed between AAI and AAA.” Another added: “ActionAid International always had a hands-off approach so even through the transition, some things have changed but many have remained the same.”

## 4. KEY LESSONS

**It is worthwhile for INGOs to consider a transition in their overall partnership approach role when assessing their mission and relevance.** This is in addition to any project or country office transition. AAI found this to be an important distinction during the “internationalization” process. Given civil society (including global civil society, not just “local” civil society) is crucial for states to succeed and – as noted by an AAA senior staff member – “will always be needed,” staff felt a shift in the overall partnership between AAI and AAA was both necessary and strategic. This enabled ongoing support to the newly registered Indian entity.

**Strengthening civil society and people’s movements can be enabled by further decentralization, even within a local entity.** After AAA was registered, significant strategic visioning was still required to determine how best to support locally led development at the community level. For this reason, AAA has continued to decentralize its staff and projects within India. As noted by an AAA senior staff member: “A balance of power is crucial within any organization.” AAA’s work is spread across 25 states and one union territory, and is carried out through 14 regional and field offices rather than being centralized at the headquarters in Delhi. AAA’s interventions take place in 317 districts,<sup>9</sup> with over 252 grassroots partners referred to as alliance organizations. This decentralized structure places decision-making at the state, district, and local level, in the hands of staff who are also originally from these areas. AAA feels that a decentralized approach is true to the spirit of democracy and is the best way of supporting citizens’ movements, community initiatives, and state-level NGOs. This, in its view, most accurately represents an inclusive model of locally led development work in India. AAA designs projects at a community level, allowing its work to be driven by the values of social, ecological, and gender justice espoused by these communities.

**A strong and inclusive board can be critical during a transition.** This was certainly the case with AAA’s transition, which involved a board with 100 percent Indian representation. A senior AAA staff member noted that “... it’s the spirit of democracy they inculcate at that level that flows through the entire organization.” AAA’s board not only supports and mentors, but also challenges and questions organizational decisions, providing constructive suggestions. It incorporates representation from various sections of society, including different genders, those from marginalized communities, people from diverse religions, and differently abled people. As noted by a senior AAA staff member: “You cannot challenge externally, until you imbibe the same values internally.”

**Feedback from all stakeholders during a transition process can enhance perceptions of local ownership.** Feedback from communities, staff, and partners is still used today by AAA's leadership during strategic planning processes. The process of formulating AAA's five-year strategy is a case in point of the organization's bottom-up, inclusive approach toward agenda setting, with a senior staff member noting: "Hiring a consultant to come in and write a strategy is the death of a strategy." Strategic planning is an extensive and thorough process in which regional offices articulate local agendas based on community consultations. A rigorous internal and external review takes place, with subject experts consulted on the feasibility of the strategy. Hence, the strategy is not a document imposed from above, but rather an agenda that evolves from the community and staff of AAA.

A senior AAA staff member elaborated on the process as follows: "Our strategy is bottom up. First, we look at our previous five-year agenda, then we check if government policies exist in this agenda and if they don't then we do a lot of campaigning for the needed policy changes. For example, in dealing with the critical issue of droughts in Maharashtra, we have done a lot of community consultations and subsequently trained people. We find experts who have subject knowledge, they visit the field and then the experts make a report. We believe in expanding and improving existing programs. For example, agriculture and gender-justice programs are converged, and interesting initiatives are developed focusing on women-led agriculture."

**Supporting locally led development does not necessarily mean supporting CSOs, CBOs, and NGOs.** Often, locally led development can be achieved by supporting existing people's movements and collectives. This can be done, for example, by taking the message of a movement and using ActionAid networks to amplify this message (locally, regionally, or even globally) in order to direct attention to relevant issues. AAA supports, among others, various farmers' movements, trade unions, tribal community collectives, Muslim women's groups, urban informal sector workers, construction worker trade unions, and migrant laborers. In AAA's experience, strengthening these movements has often catalyzed change. This is because NGOs may not always truly represent marginalized sections of society.

**A successful transition is not simply a technical or programmatic exercise, with a start and end date.** Rather, for AAA, the commitment to a transition of power should be something continuously strived toward within the organization. As a senior staff member explained: "The transition is a technical term which does not mean much. It is the thought that is powerful." Thus, more than a technical process, it is an organic process that must imbibe the organization's strategy and functioning, with a senior staff member noting: "The transition means that we have to reach out to people in a rooted, organic way, in a large strata of society, with whom we share our mission and vision."

**A decentralized structure may be a useful model for INGOs and NGOs to consider.** A senior staff member at AAA described in detail why this might be the case: "Federalism [or decentralization] is such an important part of AA globally. It is said that democracies are mainly meant for the minorities. In a democracy, the rights and freedoms of the minorities ought to be protected. A federal structure allows for independent thought and no one country or person can dictate how AA functions at a global and national level. A federal structure ensures for greater voice and agency from local countries. I would say that AA International and AA India share a lot (for example on funding, resources, and issue-based campaigns) but the transition has ensured that the umbilical cord has been cut."

**Complementing, rather than duplicating, ongoing government initiatives that enhance citizen's rights can support state systems while also promoting an organization's vision.** As a senior staff member at AAA observed: "Don't duplicate the government's work because restoring and ensuring fundamental rights is the responsibility of the state. We need to help the state to delegate their mandate instead of taking up responsibilities assigned to them. If we start doing all the work, then, why do we need the state and what will the state do?"

## ENDNOTES

1. Sherine Jayawickrama, "Diversifying Membership and Building Inclusion in Governance: Lessons from Plan International's Experience," The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, at Harvard University, May 2012.
2. Tushar Dhara, "Greenpeace India May Be Forced to Halve Staff, Operations Amid Government Crackdown," The Caravan, 24 January 2019. <https://caravanmagazine.in/government/greenpeace-crackdown-halve-staff-operations>
3. Krishna N. Das, "Amnesty India Says Raid, Frozen Accounts Aimed at Silencing Government Critics," Reuters, 26 October 2018. [www.reuters.com/article/us-india-amnesty/amnesty-india-says-raid-frozen-accounts-aimed-at-silencing-government-critics-idUSKCN1N00IK](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-amnesty/amnesty-india-says-raid-frozen-accounts-aimed-at-silencing-government-critics-idUSKCN1N00IK)
4. The Economic Times, "NGO Crackdown has Foreign Fund Inflows Plunging 40%," 10 March 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/ngo-crackdown-has-foreign-fund-inflows-plunging-40-since-modi-govt-era-report/articleshow/68342585.cms>
5. India's Corporate Social Responsibility Act, 2013, states that all companies falling under the legislation "... shall ensure that the company spends, in every financial year, at least two per cent of the average net profits of the company made during the three immediately preceding financial years, in pursuance of its Corporate Social Responsibility Policy." [www.mca.gov.in/SearchableActs/Section135.htm](http://www.mca.gov.in/SearchableActs/Section135.htm)
6. ActionAid International website, Spring 2019. [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)
7. Sherine Jayawickrama, "Diversifying Membership and Building Inclusion in Governance: Lessons from Plan International's Experience," The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, at Harvard University, May 2012.
8. ActionAid International website, cited in Sherine Jayawickrama, "Diversifying Membership and Building Inclusion in Governance: Lessons from Plan International's Experience," The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, at Harvard University, May 2012. P.3.
9. A district is an administrative division of an Indian state or union territory. As of 2019, there are a total of 725 districts in India.

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Cover photo: Strengthening public education. This village in Chamba district, of Himachal Pradesh, India, has seen a steady increase of enrolment of girls in the primary school. Photo credit: Raul Irani Kirmani/ActionAid