STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

PROGRAM TRANSITION AT THE COMMUNITY LEVEL: INTERNATIONAL RESCUE COMMITTEE'S TUUNGANE PROGRAM IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO

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CONTEXT

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is a fragile and conflicted-affected country suffering from high levels of violent conflict, political instability, extreme poverty, and multiple health epidemics, including Ebola. This, though, is only part of a much more complex picture. DRC is the second largest on the African continent and one of the most populous, with approximately 80 million inhabitants. Following 32 years under the dictatorship of Mobutu Sese Seko, DRC endured both civil and international wars between 1997 and 2003. The International Rescue Committee (IRC) estimates that some 5 million people died from violence, disease

and starvation during this time. In 2006, following an extended peace process and a transitional government, Joseph Kabila was elected President in the country's first democratic elections for 41 years.

During Kabila's presidency the country initiated two governance reform processes: découpage, which carved up the country's 11 provinces into 26 new ones, and decentralization, which aimed to bring decision-making closer to the local level. The Tuungane program was designed to operate in this context, fostering locally led service delivery and development. While Tuungane did not directly fund formal civil society organizations, it did provide funding and engaged at the village-level with community members and leaders (some of whom were part of the civil society sector), and, later on, with local government officials.

STORY OF TRANSITION

This case study tells the story of Tuungane, a community-driven reconstruction and development program funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The program was implemented in approximately 1,300 conflict-affected communities in eastern DRC by three large international NGOs: IRC as the lead, CARE International and Search for Common Ground. IRC has worked in the DRC since 1996 and is one of the largest INGOs operating in the country.

Tuungane commenced in April 2007 and ended in June 2016, operating with a total budget of £104.5 million (US$133.1 million). Tuungane's core activity was providing small and large grants to communities, who would then fund infrastructure projects (including classrooms, latrines, health facilities, and roads) based on self-determined priorities. The grants were managed by village development committees (VDCs) and community development committees (CDCs), which each comprised a collection of VDCs.

Tuungane is an example of an INGO program exit driven by the end of a donor funding cycle. Given its success, Tuungane was extended twice, resulting in three phases – T1, T2, and T2+ – before DFID decided to bring the programme to a close.

IRC thus treated T2+ as the exit phase of the program. During this phase, IRC began to transition away from providing grants to VDCs and CDCs towards working more closely with pre-existing Congolese structures, such as local health and education bodies. IRC also made other changes to prepare for exit, including: 1) shifting focus from socio-economic recovery to the sustainability of service delivery improvements; 2) moving beyond accountability tools to capacity development activities and equipment purchases; and 3) decreasing the size of available grants and narrowing down the choice of sectors from five to three (education, health, and water and sanitation).

In addition, IRC organized a series of lessons learned events in DRC, including conferences and workshops at the local, provincial, and national level. The aim was to communicate lessons from the program's lifespan to a wide group of stakeholders, including the DRC government, international donors, NGOs, civil society, and the media.

Communities were told from the outset that funding would be temporary and were informed of the exit three to four months before the program's closure. Though communities were inevitably disappointed to lose such a large source of funding, program evaluations showed the highly participatory way in which the program was run was appreciated and that several outcomes of the program have been sustained since the end of Tuungane.

KEY LESSONS

Planning for exit can be challenging in a context of a time-limited development program that may or may not be extended. Tuungane was extended twice during its lifetime, something that was seen as very positive by both IRC and participating communities. However, the extensions also in some cases created an expectation that the program exit would continue to be pushed back, especially as the political and security situation in eastern DRC worsened over the same time period.

In highly participatory, community-driven programs, not having a say in the decision to exit or end the program can cause tension. One of the challenges INGOs face when a community-driven program winds down is precisely the fact that it has hitherto been led by community priorities. The decision by an international donor to end a program (for whatever reason) is not community-driven, nor is the way in which the exit is communicated (that is, from the donor to the INGO, and from the INGO to the communities).

Processes and practices, such as accountability mechanisms, often last longer than infrastructure. While building service delivery infrastructure is a core part of locally led development, less tangible elements – such as reinforcing existing social accountability mechanisms – can be equally important in the medium- to long-term.

Where feasible, transition funding for communities to continue activities beyond the program's exit could help to mitigate the cliff-edge. Former Tuungane staff and participating community members spoke of the challenge of funding coming to an end within a few months of program closure being formally announced. While hope was expressed that program activities would continue using other funding sources, communities noted that transitional funding for use after the program ended would have been helpful. While providing funding post-program exit may not be feasible for many international donors, other ways of sustaining financing could be explored.

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