

STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

ISSUE PAPER

COMMUNICATING INGO TRANSITIONS

January 2020

Alex Martins, Peace Direct



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The StoppingAs Success project would not have been possible without the guidance, collaboration and contributions of many people and organizations. Enormous gratitude goes out to all who offered their time, expertise and support for producing this report. In particular, thanks go to Isabella Jean and David Yamron for their in-depth review of this issue paper. Thanks also go to the Communications teams at Peace Direct and Search for Common Ground for their ongoing support.

INTRODUCTION

This issue paper 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 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.¹

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 FOCUS ON COMMUNICATION?

Effective communication is vital to the success of INGO transitions. Most importantly, communicating the decisions, plans and outcomes of transition should be approached as an ongoing process rather than a one-off event. Drawing on findings from across the 20 SAS case studies, as well as additional insights from SAS stakeholders, we focus on the following aspects of communication:

- INGOs sharing information about their transition plans or strategies with staff, local or national partners and communities;
- Transparency and communication about timelines, decision-making processes, and relationship management;
- External communication to relevant audiences and stakeholders about future plans.

We recognize that communication on transition is multidirectional – that is, it takes place between a wide range of different actors, for instance donors to INGOs, INGOs to NGOs/CSOs, NGO/CSOs to communities, communities to INGOs, etc.

Communicating well is key because while stopping can be viewed as success (if done responsibly), ending a program or transitioning from an international to a local or national entity often creates a sense of deep uncertainty. The stakes are high, as described by an Indian staff member who was involved in the transition from Plan International to Plan India: “The transition had to be correct the first time, because you are dealing with people; there are no second chances.” It is therefore vital to clearly and transparently communicate the reasons behind the transition, alongside any anticipated risks or challenges.

WHAT IS COVERED IN THIS ISSUE PAPER

This issue paper first outlines five empirical approaches to communicating INGO transitions. We identified these approaches through a review of all findings related to various aspects of communication across the 20 SAS case studies. We focus primarily on internal communication (within or between an INGO and its local or national entity), but many of these approaches can also be used to communicate externally with stakeholders, including national governments and other partners.

We examine this issue both from the perspective of programmatic transitions, in which communication

centers on when and how a particular program will be closed down and transitioned over to a local/national entity, and organizational transitions, whereby an INGO seeks to communicate a transfer of ownership and responsibility to a local or national entity.

The issue paper then puts forward considerations for how best to communicate INGO transitions based on lessons and promising practices identified across the SAS case studies, as well as during regional review meetings composed of SAS consortium members and civil society representatives. The final section proposes a series of questions for further research and future consideration.

APPROACHES TO COMMUNICATING INGO TRANSITIONS

INGOs approach communication on transitions very differently, depending on the context in which they operate and their own institutional structures, histories and capabilities. We have identified five principles to keep in mind that are adopted by INGOs in SAS case studies: early, brokered, consultative, continuous and organic. These principles are not mutually exclusive: several can be applied at the same time. We present these principles to highlight patterns in transitions across varying contexts, and to highlight important aspects around communicating exits, from timing to channels.

I. EARLY COMMUNICATION: LETTING STAKEHOLDERS KNOW AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

In several of the SAS case studies, INGOs, CSOs and NGOs and spoke about the importance of international actors signaling early on their intention to either withdraw or to transfer ownership of a program or institutional entity – the earlier the better. Transitions can create a high degree of uncertainty and even tension, particularly when it is not yet clear that the new or devolved local/national entity is entirely viable (especially financially). Early communication can also help to solidify partnerships from the outset, especially since most local and national actors are all too aware that international funding can end at any point.

In the case of the transition from Mercy Corps to Partner, a Bosnian micro-credit foundation with non-

profit status, the intention to transition from an economic development program to an independent and financially viable Bosnian entity was set virtually at the beginning of the program. Because this was articulated by international staff from the outset, there was a clear understanding between Mercy Corps and Partner's future Bosnian staff that once the program came to an end there would be an opportunity to create a new entity. But communicating the intention to transition was not enough; Mercy Corps staff also understood the need to consistently communicate a vision for the future entity in order to gain buy-in from colleagues at HQ and at the national level. As we note in the case study, "the [international] staff champions of transition had to maintain a consistent internal advocacy effort and repeated articulation of 'why this should be a Bosnian organization' and 'how this is a clear success story for MC's capacity development efforts' to gain senior management support at HQ and to see the transition through."²

We have also seen examples of early communication that were driven not by an international organization, but by a national representative. This was the case in the transition of PeaceBuilders Community Inc (PBCI), a Filipino organization seeking financial independence from its main international partner, the Mennonite Church Canada (MCC). The desire to become less dependent on the Church's funds over time in order to achieve financial sustainability was communicated from the outset by PBCI's founders Dann (a Canadian

Filipino missionary) and Joji Pantoja to stakeholders at the Mennonite Church. They viewed this independence as critical to self-determination and to affirming the local character of PBCI and thus to its credibility among the conflict-affected communities with which it engaged. PBCI subsequently set up small Peace Houses across seven locations in Mindanao (the second largest island in the Philippines), which then led to the creation of a social enterprise called Coffee for Peace.³

2. BROKERED COMMUNICATION: EXTERNAL SUPPORT IN MANAGING THE PROCESS.

Many transitions involve some form of an ending, whether this be the end of funding or the withdrawal of an INGO from a particular area or country. As already noted, this can lead to high degrees of uncertainty, reputational risk and potential tension between international and national actors. In recognition of this, several international actors have hired external agents to manage communications and to broker transition processes. Importantly, however, this does not mean INGOs should entirely outsource their communication strategies. As ActionAid Association in India noted: “Hiring a consultant to come in and write a strategy is the death of a strategy.”⁴

During the transition from CARE Thailand to a national entity, Raks Thai Foundation, CARE brought in external support to help it communicate and manage the transition process.⁵ As part of the process, CARE and the future leadership of Raks Thai created space for Thai staff to voice concerns about the transition before it took place, including through multiple meetings across Thai provinces to elicit concerns about the process (including job security and benefits). CARE hired a consultant to help broker this process and manage ongoing communications to ensure that clear channels remained open. CARE then worked closely with the newly hired Thai Program Director to discuss the new management structure, name, and funding strategy. Out of the 120 staff members employed by the CARE Thailand office, only three left after the transition.

Brokered communication is even more important in contexts where national staff may potentially lose their jobs as a result of a transition. In Georgia, for instance, Oxfam hired an external consultant to communicate

with the national team during the transition process and to advise on potential business models for the spin-off organization that Georgian staff decided to establish, thereby supporting sound planning for institutional and financial sustainability. Bringing in external support was helpful in providing a buffer between Oxfam’s wider institutional transition decision-making and the specific circumstances faced by Oxfam’s staff based in Georgia. Oxfam’s Georgian staff then took ownership of the transition planning process, in particular the creation of the new entity: BRIDGE – Innovation and Development, now a Georgian NGO.⁶

3. CONSULTATIVE COMMUNICATION: INCLUDING STAKEHOLDERS IN THE PROCESS.

The decision to transition is almost always determined unilaterally by international actors. In these instances, consultations with national actors about the decision to exit or transition would only serve to unhelpfully raise expectations. But even when the decision is made by international actors, SAS has documented several cases where INGOs have adopted an inclusive approach to communicating with local or national actors, who subsequently drive the transition process.

In the case of the transition from Plan International to Plan India, for instance, strong efforts were made to include Plan’s Indian partners in the transition process. Communication was clear from the outset: partners were assured that their terms of engagement with Plan International would not change following the transition to Plan India. However, partners were initially concerned not about the continuity of the relationship, but about the fact that Plan India would lose its international status. As one partner lamented before the transition: “Now we can’t tell the government we are working with an international organization.”⁷ Plan staff took great care to articulate the vision for Plan India in order to reassure partners that work would continue uninterrupted and that international linkages would remain. During the transition, Plan Board members occasionally attended meetings to provide further assurances to partners. Crucially, partners were also involved when the transition plans took shape. One interviewee commented that “partner organizations were involved in a consultative process right from the beginning of the transition... To date, in addition to annual in-person

partner meetings for strategic planning, regular email and telephonic communication exists between Plan India and its partners.”⁸ This approach enabled Plan’s partners to feel bought into the transition process and helped to cultivate strong relationships once the process was completed.

We return to how Plan managed internal communications in the section below.

4. CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION: STAGED MESSAGING ON EXIT TIMELINES.

Communicating the decision to transition can be challenging in cases where the exact end date is unknown or unclear. The SAS case studies demonstrate how the decision to end a program originates in most cases from the international donor and therefore is not in and of itself locally led or driven. This is also true of how the decision is communicated (i.e. from the donor to the INGO, and from the INGO to the communities). It can therefore be important to implement continuous, reinforcing communication throughout a program in order to manage expectations about the eventual transition process.

In the case of the International Rescue Committee’s (IRC) Tuungane program, which funded community-driven reconstruction initiatives in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the UK’s Department for International Development (the donor) took the decision to extend the funding for the program twice. Overall, Tuungane ran for just over nine years, much longer than the average five-year development program cycle typical of other UK-funded programs.

While communities that participated in the program were appreciative of the extensions, the fact that extra time and funding had been granted on two occasions raised expectations that Tuungane would continue for even longer. When DFID took the final decision to close the program, communities were inevitably disappointed because they would no longer receive external funding for their local development projects in the areas of water and sanitation, infrastructure, education and health. This was further complicated by the fact that the program ended at a politically challenging time in DRC,

and communities felt that support at the local level was needed more than ever.

In anticipation of these challenges, IRC sought to communicate the program’s eventual exit in a phased way. First, it made clear that grants given to communities for locally determined projects were timebound so as not to raise expectations of extensions in case they did not materialize. Second, the program exited from several communities that participated in the first phase of the program and IRC was careful to communicate with the remaining community groups that once again, the new grants were timebound. The final phase of communication on Tuungane was to share lessons from the program with a wide range of stakeholders, including community participants. As part of its exit strategy, therefore, IRC organized a series of lessons learned events, culminating in a national Tuungane conference held in June 2016 on social accountability in DRC, attended by other DFID implementing partners, the DRC government, and Congolese civil society.

This case study demonstrates that in community-driven approaches, not having a say in the decision to end the program can cause tension. A phased approach can therefore be adopted by INGOs seeking to manage expectations and communicate the medium and long-term plans for the program in a constructive manner.

5. ORGANIC COMMUNICATION: LESS FORMAL MESSAGING ON TRANSITION ONCE TRUST IS BUILT.

In several cases examined by SAS, communication about transition occurred in a more organic way, meaning it was not structured in accordance with a formal process. Organic communication can help to create a more horizontal power dynamic during a transition process, as it denotes partners working together on a more equal and less hierarchical basis. It is important to note, however, that organic communication is only successful in cases where a high level of trust between international and national actors already exists or is built. That is to say, organic communication does not mean it is appropriate to ‘wing it’ or improvise; rather, it only becomes a viable communication approach once strong partnership foundations have already been established.

This organic approach was demonstrated in the case of the transition from Nuru International to Nuru Kenya. Because the partnership between international and Kenyan actors was strong and productive from the beginning, international staff did not feel the need to ‘make a big thing of’ communicating the transition in a formal way over time. This happened organically because the exit of international staff from Kenya was intended and communicated from the outset (also an example of early communication).

A similarly organic approach transpired in the case of the transition from Interpeace to the Center of Studies for Peace and Development (CEPAD), an NGO from

Timor-Leste. The decision by Interpeace to disengage financially from CEPAD was initially communicated directly to the organization’s Director. Interpeace opted not to communicate the decision in person at that time, nor did it hold any specific exit events. This was both because the strength of the partnership allowed Interpeace to communicate the decision in a more organic, less formal way and because it was only the financial element of Interpeace’s support that was coming to an end. The broader relationship between the two organizations, which includes ongoing technical support from Interpeace, has continued to evolve since the completion of the financial transition in 2016.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR INGOS

SAS offers the following guidance to INGOS seeking to transition either a program or organization.

COMMUNICATE CONSISTENTLY AND TRANSPARENTLY AT ALL ORGANIZATIONAL LEVELS.

It is important to deliver clear and consistent communication from start to finish – this is especially critical in cases where INGOS plan to withdraw financial support as part of an organizational transition. As advised by a senior INGO staff member in a SAS consultation, “you need to be brutally honest up front.” SAS has also documented demand for transparent communication when it did not happen, for instance in the case of an INGO operating in the South Caucasus. The organization communicated its decision to exit from the region through written assessments drafted by external consultants, rather than having senior international staff visit country programs to discuss the decision in person. As a result, national staff noted that they were surprised by the INGO’s decision and felt the process was too centralized, with minimal engagement of national staff and local partners. (We do note, however, that at the time of writing this transition is still ongoing so it is too early to assess its outcome). In the case of Nuru Kenya, transparency was highlighted as a key component of the transition. In some cases, important communications did not trickle down to junior staff, and this became a point of contention. Senior international staff knew about

the transition, but others, including many Kenyan staff members, did not. Overall, however, the transition was defined by staff members as a success, largely because of the strong relationship cultivated over many years of joint working (see above).

ALLOW STAFF OPPORTUNITIES TO COMMUNICATE THEIR FEELINGS ABOUT THE TRANSITION.

Staff and partners may be anxious or unsure during a transition for a variety of reasons, especially given the high levels of programmatic and organizational uncertainty. As one staff member of ActionAid Association (ActionAid International’s partner in India) said in a SAS interview:

“Have some degree of openness [with staff and partners], have transparency. Human Resource teams [often] have this task, people have queries! It’s maybe out of lack of information, or genuine concern, but share whatever is there with the staff. With the partners we always have an MOU, an organizational commitment for their partnership, so to some degree it is less uncertain, but also important to share with them what this process means and how it has progressed. Keep doing reviews and reflections together.”⁹

We outline several mechanisms for allowing staff space to communicate their thoughts and reactions to exits and transitions in the box below.

COMMUNICATION SPOTLIGHT: CASE STUDY OF PLAN INTERNATIONAL/ PLAN INDIA

To illustrate how a successful communications process can take place, here is a short case study on the transition from Plan International to Plan India. Plan adopted a people-centric communication approach for its staff and partners, which included a comprehensive external communications strategy. As one stakeholder noted in an interview: “the key to a successful transition is, communication, communication, communication!” The strategy included the following elements:

Communicating the need for transition: Plan International’s Indian staff were quick to question: “Why is this [the transition] happening?” The transition team in charge of implementing the process explained the rationale by offering a clear vision for Plan India’s future post-transition. This served to motivate staff to see transition as a common challenge, and to promote the goal of working together to achieve a successful transfer of ownership.

Regular and timely transition team meetings and updates: In addition to their regular jobs and responsibilities, the Senior Management Team (SMT) made time to come together and update each other regularly. As the transition deadline approached, they began to meet daily, sharing any concerns they had heard and dedicating time and resources to address them. “Every question from staff and partners was attended to.” Regular updates were also shared to the wider organization to ensure all staff were kept informed of any changes.

Multi-channel, staff-specific communication: The SMT used a wide range of inclusive communication tools to ensure all voices were heard, either in person or anonymously. These tools included:

- **Town hall meetings:** An opportunity to explain the transition to all staff at the same time, face-to-face. This avoided speculation or the spreading of rumors and facilitated transparent communication. As an Indian staff member noted: “If we would have kept each other aloof, it would have been different.”
- **Secure email:** The transition team created and managed a transition-specific, secure email address. This was used to provide staff with regular email updates on the transition or for staff to ask anonymous questions.
- **Suggestion box:** A suggestion box was created that invited critical feedback from staff. This became an additional space for staff to raise their grievances while keeping their identities anonymous.
- **Open-door policy:** Both the SMT and the Transition Manager encouraged staff to walk into their offices to raise any questions or concerns about the transition in person.

Creating a positive narrative of change: Throughout the transition process, the SMT and transition team chose their words carefully and strove to communicate positively about the process. By creating a shared vision and a common goal, the senior leadership was able to develop a sense of loyalty and belonging across the new, devolved organization: “We are transitioning into an Indian entity because of all of your hard work and effort.”

CAREFULLY CONSIDER HOW TO PRIORITIZE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION, WHILE RECOGNIZING THAT BOTH ARE IMPORTANT.

There are multiple audiences and decisions about what needs to be communicated, to whom and at what time. This balance is important to a smooth transition process, as well as strong relationship and reputation management. For example, as part of its devolution from INGO SOS Children’s Village, Aldeas Infantiles Colombia developed a transition strategy that prioritized the need for an

entirely new communications department to do outreach and externally communicate the change to Colombian stakeholders. In the case of the CARE Morocco transition, on the other hand, internal communications were prioritized: before embarking on an application process to join the CARE International Confederation, CARE Morocco conducted an internal strategy session over the period of a week, whereby the NGO’s leadership garnered input from all staff. Discussions encompassed a wide range of topics, from the advantages and disadvantages of membership to how they would become a financially independent organization (one of the requirements of becoming a member of the Confederation).



EXPERIMENT WITH COMMUNICATING TRANSITION AS A BEGINNING, RATHER THAN AN ENDING

Focusing on the positive, forward-looking aspects of transition is a powerful way to motivate staff through the process, which can be difficult. In the case of Plan India, for example, staff members talked about the importance of sharing a positive narrative about the future, rather than communicating that the transition was being driven by the increasingly restrictive environment for international actors in India (which was indeed part of the story). As mentioned above, in the case of the partnership between Interpeace and CEPAD in Timor-Leste, financial disengagement was communicated as the beginning of a new type of partnership, one in which CEPAD had attained financial independence from Interpeace but also the ability to

consult them in technical areas. As such, no transition events or ceremonies were held; rather, the continued partnership between the organizations was seen as a new phase of the relationship. Following the creation of the Raks Thai Foundation, Thai staff noted the importance of communicating and celebrating a new, local identity in order to position the organization as part of Thailand's civil society (as opposed to being a former branch of an INGO).

Interviewees that participated in the SAS literature review¹⁰ highlighted that celebrating accomplishments can be incredibly important, and can involve external elements too. For instance, CARE Madagascar staff produced a mural to celebrate all the work and achievements, before CARE left the country. This too is a form of communication and meant a great deal to local communities whose strength and accomplishments were featured in the mural.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR NGOS/CSOS

DECIDE ON YOUR OWN VISION FOR THE TRANSITION AND USE COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS THAT RESONATE BEST IN YOUR CONTEXT.

Participants in a SAS regional review meeting in Bangkok noted that transition can be communicated as a new organization but with the same vision and mission. For example, in the case of PBCI in the Philippines and the creation of Coffee for Peace, the organization used storytelling and other indigenous forms of oral communication to communicate the messages about the transition from the Mennonite Church.

KEEP IN MIND HOW YOU WILL COMMUNICATE YOUR OWN EVENTUAL TRANSITION TO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS (COMMUNITIES, GOVERNMENT, PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS).

Having completed its transition from Nuru International, Nuru Kenya now faces a new question: how and when will it communicate its own eventual transition out of Migori County? Its long-term goal is to ensure that the cooperatives Nuru Kenya partners with are fully self-sustaining in the future. Nuru Kenya's Country Director has this question in mind, and it informs the way in which the organization operates at the community level.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

While this Issue Paper has presented some of the key considerations in relation to communicating INGO transitions, further analysis beyond the SAS case studies is needed. The following questions were not covered in depth in this Issue Paper and may be areas for further consideration:

- 1** What are the risks of poor communication and lack of transparency, and how do these affect the successful implementation of transition processes?
- 2** Do all types of internal communications need to be fully transparent, particularly when there are sensitivities around staff retention?
- 3** In what ways can communication tools be used to further embed and promote locally led approaches to transition?
- 4** In which circumstances should international actors adopt a more bottom-up (versus top-down, leadership-driven) approach to communication? What process should be used to make that decision?
- 5** What is the role of local and national organizations in supporting constructive and open communication channels during transition?
- 6** What unique challenges do local/national staff and organizations face in communicating the decision to transition onwards to partners, program participants, or communities at large? How can communications strategies address these challenges?

ENDNOTES

1. Read more about Stopping As Success on the program website: <http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/>
2. Bosnia and Herzegovina: Mercy Corps and Partner case study, Stopping As Success, January 2020. For additional information about the important role of leaders and champions during transition processes, see the Stopping As Success Issue Paper: Leaders and champions in responsible exits and transitions, October 2019.
3. Coffee for Peace. Available at: <https://www.coffeeforpeace.com/>
4. India: ActionAid International to ActionAid Association case study, Stopping As Success, January 2020, p.4
5. See the SAS Issue Paper on 'Leaders and Champions in Responsible Exits and Transitions,' March 2019, for further examples of transitions driven by national leaders.
6. BRIDGE – Innovation and Development. Available: <http://www.bridge.org.ge/en/about>
7. India: Plan International to Plan India case study, Stopping As Success, January 2020, p.8
8. Ibid.
9. India: ActionAid International to ActionAid Association case study, Stopping As Success, January 2020.
10. Planning for success from start to exit: A review of literature, policy and practice, 2018, <http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Planning-for-success-FINAL.pdf>

This document was made possible by the generous support of the American People through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents of this case study are the sole responsibility of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning and Search for Common Ground, and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.