

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:  
PLANNING FOR SUCCESS FROM START TO EXIT**

# CASE STUDY: CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES GUATEMALA

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## GUATEMALA

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### ACRONYMS

CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSO	civil society organization
ECADI	escuelas de campo para el desarrollo integral (integral human development field schools)
FFP	Food for Peace
INGO	international non-governmental organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
SAS	Stopping as Success
SEGAMIL	Seguridad Alimentaria Enfocada en los Primero Mil Días (Food Security Focused on the First Thousand Days)
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

### TYPE OF TRANSITION

This case study is an example of the transition of project activities from an international organization (Catholic Relief Services) to community organizations. It focuses on the example of the creation and strengthening of integral human development field schools in Guatemala, which aim to improve food access.



## 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 report examines the transition of project activities in Guatemala from Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to community organizations over the course of the seven-year (2012–18) Food Security Focused on the First Thousand Days (Seguridad Alimentaria Enfocada en los Primero Mil Días/SEGAMIL) project. SEGAMIL, funded by USAID’s Food for Peace (FFP) initiative, sought to improve food security in marginalized areas of Guatemala through three strategic objectives:

- Improve food access for farmer households.
- Reduce chronic malnutrition among vulnerable rural populations in targeted micro watershed.
- Improve local and municipal food security resilience systems.

Given SEGAMIL’s significant scale, this report will focus on the transition as it relates to the first of these strategic objectives. This objective involved the creation and subsequent strengthening of integral human development field schools (*escuelas de campo para el desarrollo integral/ECADIs*) in order to train producer families in good agricultural practices (such as animal vaccination), provide nutrition counseling and growth monitoring, and receive food distribution. ECADIs were

critical to the larger project—as CRS’s SEGAMIL exit strategy notes: “The ECADIs are the key structure to integrate all learning activities and behavior change promotion from the three strategic objectives and a principle strategy in the design and sustainability of the SEGAMIL program.”<sup>11</sup> The SEGAMIL sustainability plan, developed in close consultation with target communities, called for capacity building and support to institutionalize these ECADIs within local communities, thereby ensuring their survival beyond project close.

A total of six semi-structured key informant interviews and four large focus group discussions were conducted with CRS staff and ECADI participants in the departments of San Marcos and Totonicapán, Guatemala. Focus group discussions were carried out with the following ECADIs: Rayitos de Sol, Maria Guadalupe, La Montañesa, and Las Floresitas.

## 2. CONTEXT

Guatemala is a Central American country of some 17 million inhabitants bordering Mexico, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador.<sup>12</sup> It is divided into 22 departments and 340 municipalities, with Guatemala City as its capital. Guatemala’s official language is Spanish, though 23 indigenous Mayan languages are constitutionally recognized. Its main exports are coffee, sugar, bananas, and clothing items. The 2016 Human Development Index ranked Guatemala 125<sup>th</sup> in the world, with a life expectancy at birth of 72.5 years. The Index has grown at an annual average rate (2006 to 2014) of just under 0.3 percent per year, representing very slow growth. According to the most recent National Survey on Living Conditions,<sup>13</sup> 53 percent of the population did not earn enough to cover the cost of a basic monthly food basket (about US\$470 for a family of five), while 76 percent did not earn enough for a basic package of household goods and services (about US\$1,000). Accordingly, as of 2018, the country had the fourth highest rate of chronic malnutrition in the world, with almost 70 percent of the population in indigenous areas chronically malnourished.<sup>14</sup>

A large majority of the population lives in rural areas, relies on subsistence agriculture livelihoods, and participates in the informal economy. Some regions have experienced consecutive years of drought, while others are characterized by severe dryness. This has resulted in

poor harvests of staple crops and food insecurity. Most of the country’s population lacks social security and does not make a living wage (the official minimum wage is US\$370 per month). According to the most recent data available, the poverty rate in 2014 was 49 percent, an increase from the rate of 43 percent recorded in the previous household survey in 2006.<sup>15</sup> Approximately 10 percent of households receive remittances from abroad, which, in 2018, amounted to US\$9 billion, equivalent to about 12 percent of GDP. Income from remittances is growing at an annual rate of 3 percent. While this is insufficient to overcome poverty rates, remittances from the estimated 1.2 million Guatemalans living abroad often sustain the family economy, which have suffered from a reduction in labor income and purchasing power over the last 15 years.

## AID CONTEXT

Guatemala has received international development aid for nearly a century, including bilateral and unilateral aid; refundable loan and non-refundable donations; North–South cooperation grants; South–South cooperation grants; and tied aid. This has come from government agencies; private entrepreneurial investment; philanthropic support; international NGOs and foundations; religious groups; municipal councils (for example, from Spain); among other sources.

In brief, post-Second World War global reconstruction efforts and the launch of the United Nations (UN) in 1945 kick-started the era of international development efforts. Development aid to Guatemala continued to flow in the 1950s and 60s, particularly in the form of capital flows, mainly from the US. Following the 1976 earthquake, Guatemala was subject to a heavy influx of international aid for infrastructure and reconstruction projects. It was then that NGOs and CSOs began to form in order to manage international relief funds. Prior to this, CSOs were mostly farmer, union, religious, guerrilla, or political party-affiliated groups.

At the end of the 1970s, with the intensification of armed internal conflict and the outbreak of widespread political violence, Guatemala began receiving international aid from the US for counterinsurgency efforts; humanitarian aid for victims and displaced populations; and support from international advocacy groups toward social and political protests. However, the Guatemalan government made it difficult for the latter two types of aid to enter



the country. In 1985, Guatemala returned to free elections and a constitutional regime, and peace talks began. During this time, the government permitted more open international relations, and allowed international donations to be more freely accepted. Much of these international funds focused on achieving peace through dialogue, respect for human rights, protection of the displaced population, and assistance to war victims.

The signing of the 1996 Peace Accords was a historic milestone, and marked a huge increase in international investment and presence in the country. These were aligned with country development strategies for economic, institutional, and political progress. The UN created a commission—the UN Mission for Guatemala—which supported the international aid influx and triggered various new trends: unmonitored and loosely measured capital funds; a spike in the number of CSOs formed from social movement groups during the war; and the formal recognition of NGOs as legal entities to administer international funds. This explosion of aid was focused on strengthening the state, the rule of law, and CSOs.

Through the 1990s and the turn of the century, increasing numbers of funds focused on community and economic development, aligning with the

Millennium Development Goals. In the current century, international aid has become less focused on solidarity funds, with much more emphasis placed on results-based programming, and transactional agreements with reporting and compliance verification of results. International cooperation programs have grown stronger and further established their missions within the country (USAID, European Union, Canadian, Swedish Cooperation, etc.). This has invited a much larger INGO presence in Guatemala, including for-profit development companies that would benefit from more rigorous accountability standards and compliance with international regulations. In addition, this has created more resources for INGOs such as Save the Children, World Vision, Mercy Corps, CRS, Population Services International, and local universities. This shift toward larger projects with more complex administrative procedures has made it increasingly difficult for smaller NGO and CSOs to compete with large INGOs. As a result, many local NGOs and CSOs have lost funding or become entirely dependent on support from INGOs managing large international cooperation grants.

Recent trends in international support have been toward pushing local CSOs and NGOs to increase their administrative and financial capacity, offer results and evidence-based programming, and diversify their

funding sources. Many small Guatemalan CSOs and NGOs are struggling to meet such expectations. Instead, they are looking for alternative ways—such as consultancy work, forming cooperatives to sell related professional services, or joining other struggling CSOs to form coalitions—to continue working in their fields. However, competition for international resources remains extremely high and CSO collaboration is difficult.

In an effort to encourage more collaboration, USAID and other international development agencies are requiring project proposals be submitted in consortium (for example, through Broad Agency Announcements). In order to support local implementation of selected project strategies, INGOs have responded by embedding sub-grant mechanisms into their project designs. This has further increased competition among local CSOs/NGOs.

During the period 2008–16, Guatemala reported receiving approximately US\$1.54 billion in non-reimbursable international development funds through 27 different sources, including:

- **Bilaterals:** US, Spain, China-Taiwan, Germany, Japan, Canada, Venezuela, Korea, Italy, Sweden, Brazil, Morocco, and Russia.
- **Multilaterals:** WFP, UNEP, UNDP, FAO, UNICEF, UNFPA, PAHO, and other UN Agencies, EU, Global Fund, and OEA.
- **Financial Entities:** IDB, BCIE, and BIRF.

In 2017, the governments of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador signed the Alliance for Prosperity—a development agenda designed by these, with support from the US government and the Interamerican Development Bank. The agenda sought to increase economy-wide productivity in strategic sectors through attracting investment, broadening access to finance, and improving connectivity. This increase in productivity would in turn—through institutional strengthening and increasing citizens’ trust of government—create economic opportunities, develop human capital, and improve citizens’ security and access to justice. USAID, historically the agency with the most bilateral funds committed to Guatemala, has pledged several million dollars toward the initiative and the US government remains an important bilateral aid partner. However, beginning in March 2019, some US government officials

began to link aid commitments to immigration policy considerations which has led to uncertainties related to continued bilateral aid.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. BACKGROUND TO USAID AND CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES IN GUATEMALA

USAID’s FFP office executes emergency and development programs in Guatemala. In the 2018 financial year, FFP provided US\$21.5 million in assistance to the country, 40 percent of which went to cash transfers for food; 53 percent to development programs; and 7 percent to complimentary services. Through December 2018, FFP supported two multi-year development programs in Guatemala, one of which was implemented by CRS.<sup>17</sup>

CRS has operated in Guatemala since 1963. From 2012 to 2018, CRS implemented the SEGAMIL project, which focused on reducing chronic malnutrition in eight municipalities in the departments of Totonicapán and San Marcos. The program’s first strategic objective was to improve food access for farmer households, and one of the ways it worked toward achieving this was by training producer families in ECADIs. Over the course of the project, CRS made significant investments in strengthening ECADIs through organizational and strategic development activities.

#### THE TRANSITION

In mid-2016, CRS began developing a sustainability strategy in order to maintain the benefits of the SEGAMIL program after its official close-out. This sustainability strategy was based on five pillars:

- 1) Institutionalization of project platforms and interventions.
- 2) Market-driven demand for project interventions.
- 3) Accreditation of local human resources.
- 4) Formation of partnerships.
- 5) Behavior change communication.

As CRS thought through its sustainability strategy, it developed an exit plan to “... outline the steps CRS will take to transition key program elements to local actors.” The exit plan documented the sustainability mechanisms selected (phase down, phase over, and phase out), what actions would be taken toward sustainability, and the

benchmarks CRS hoped to achieve. For example, one benchmark was “... institutionalization of the project formalized through signed agreements with 60% of ECADIs.”

CRS supported institutionalization of the ECADIs in several ways. First, it worked with municipal governments to foster ownership and support for the ECADIs. Additionally, CRS and implementing partners sought to institutionalize ECADIs at the community level. CRS also invested in organizational and strategic development activities. Significantly, some of the ECADIs were supported by local CRS partners that had received long-term institutional capacity-strengthening training over a period of approximately four years, while others were supported by CRS implementing partners that had not received such training. One line of inquiry in terms of the case study was whether there was any difference between ECADIs working with local partners that had participated in capacity-strengthening trainings versus those working with other CRS partners after the end of the SEGAMIL program.

## 4. OUTCOMES AND IMPACTS

### INCLUSIVITY

One of SEGAMIL’s strengths was that it focused on women within communities as change actors for food security and nutrition. Women served as ECADI leaders, health and agricultural promoters, new mother monitors, and savings group participants. Moreover, many ECADIs became tight-knit centers of solidarity in a traditionally patriarchal society, with, for example, a woman in the Maria Guadalupe ECADI sharing a story about how her daughter lost her child and found comfort in the all-female savings group. This savings group seemed the most important part of the ECADI—they met regularly, with many women participating in other savings groups. The group’s participants also reported that on an ongoing basis they receive many requests from women in the community wanting to join. When a cycle ends, they decide which of these women can join based on their trustworthiness.

This inclusive aspect of ECADIs also works to improve gender relations. In the La Montañesa ECADI, women in the focus group emphasized how participation in SEGAMIL had helped improve their relationships

and communication with their partners. One woman indicated that her husband now recognized her leadership and respected her decisions more. Others agreed that the community had seen changes in the behavior of husbands, who were starting to help around the house and take care of their children when their wives attended group meetings or had other things to do. Similarly, the woman who hosted the Las Floresitas ECADI talked about how she had initially had to beg her husband to participate, but that once he saw the benefits of her participation, he became involved and was eventually hired as a program educator for the SEGAMIL project. This woman, a health promoter, also reported that one of her major responsibilities as a leader was to help recruit women whose husbands opposed their participation.

### LOCAL LEADERSHIP

SEGAMIL staff point to the emergence of robust local leadership as a key factor determining the survival of ECADIs post-SEGAMIL. One of the strengths of the ECADI system is that the leadership is chosen from program participants. Families only received food if they had children under two, meaning that once their children were older than this, participants often withdrew from trainings and activities. This resulted in the leadership, as well as the ECADI rules and regulations, being renewed almost every year. This in turn prevented the monopolization of program activities by a single leader, ensuring shared responsibilities and more democratic, sustainable practices.

### BUILDING TRUST

In order to best position ECADIs for long-term sustainability, CRS was strategic about building trust and local respect in the communities targeted for support. At the beginning of the project, strong emphasis was placed on food distribution as a means of establishing SEGAMIL’s brand and gaining entry to the communities. Over time, with an appropriate level of trust established, SEGAMIL was able to switch from direct food distribution to voucher food distribution. Generally, communities were pleased with this change as it gave them more food choice—they could select from different food basket options and collect from local distributors, which also supported the local economy.

This process takes time. However, one of SEGAMIL’s

built-in strengths was its seven-year timeline, which allowed for the building of trust and relationships. A project working to a more typical three- to five-year timeframe would likely have difficulty achieving similar results.

## **PLAN FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

SEGAMIL's project sustainability strategy was developed after the midterm evaluation. Many initiatives that were not considered sustainable (defined as the institutional survival and continued activity of ECADIs) were dropped. This planning provided a significant window to prepare for project close-out, with activities including institutionalization of program activities; formation of partnerships with municipalities and local NGOs and CSOs; and deepening access to markets. Alongside this sustainability strategy, SEGAMIL developed an exit plan in order to prepare ECADIs for CRS's withdrawal. Five benchmarks signaling readiness were designed:

- 1) Institutionalization of project to be formalized through signed agreements with 60 percent of ECADIs.
- 2) 80 percent of agriculture promoters and 70 percent of health promoters to complete formal certification.
- 3) 30 percent of COCODEs (community development councils, which ultimately took over management of ECADIs), eight OMMs (municipal women's offices supporting ECADIs), and eight OMAS (water and sanitation offices supporting ECADIs) to acquire public or private external resources.<sup>18</sup>
- 4) 60 percent of ECADI members and 70 percent of SILC (savings group) members to participate without project interventions.<sup>19</sup>
- 5) Six UTAMs (municipal agriculture support offices, which support ECADIs with agricultural activities) to be formalized and funded through municipal budget allocation.<sup>20</sup>

This multifaceted strategy, incorporating both sustainability and exit planning, allowed SEGAMIL to effectively transition program activities to local leadership.

## 5. KEY LESSONS

While it is too early to draw final conclusions, it is clear that CRS took the transition seriously right from project's initiation, investing in local capacity as a result. As one SEGAMIL program director said: "A responsible exit is giving sufficient time to people, showing the communities what they were able to accomplish, and helping them to become resilient and responsible."

**Inclusivity lays the groundwork for sustainability.** A program director explained: "One of the lessons learned during the process was to work with both mothers-in-law and male partners to encourage their support for best practices in health care and child nutrition, and to offer support for the women to participate in the program activities."

**Strong leadership is key to the sustainability of outcomes.** Allowing for a rotating leadership—especially when this rotation is built into the activities themselves—can avoid organizations becoming dependent on a single leader. Some ECADIs found an annual rotation useful, though the timing of such a rotation will vary depending on institutional context.

**Building trust over time, rather than around a single project cycle, is a critical first step to sustainability.** This may mean sacrificing efficiency, or pursuing short-term strategies—such as distributing food—that seemingly detract from long-term goals.

**Investments in institutional capacity strengthening can cascade through local partnerships.** Over a period of four years, CRS headquarters invested in intensive, repeated capacity-strengthening activities, composed of trainings and technical accompaniment with eight local partners. This capacity development was well received by participants. ECADIs from the SEGAMIL project benefited from these capacity-strengthening activities, as the local partners involved subsequently executed organizational development activities.

**Programs can benefit from distinct sustainability and exit plans.** Although "sustainability" and "exit plans" are sometimes used interchangeably, the terms are not the same. CRS conceptualized sustainability in terms of the benefits resulting from the program. In contrast, the exit plan consisted of a series of steps to be taken by the program in order to achieve these desired sustainability outcomes.

## ENDNOTES

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8. COCODE is Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo (Community Development Council); OMM is Oficina Municipal de la Mujer (Municipal Office for Women); OMAS is Oficina Municipal del Agua y Saneamiento (Municipal Office for Water and Sanitation).
9. SILC is Savings and Internal Lending Community.
10. UTAM is Unidad Técnica Agropecuaria Municipal (Municipal Agriculture and Livestock Technical Unit).

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