

STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT PROJECT METHODOLOGY

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Stopping As Success (SAS): Transitioning to Locally Led Development is a 3-year USAID funded collaborative learning project which aims to provide positive examples and guidance for how international development actors can foster locally led development through successful transitions out of projects or relationships with partners. The SAS project is jointly implemented by Peace Direct, Search for Common Ground and CDA Collaborative Learning Projects.

The SAS project addresses the overarching question: How can INGOs, NGOs, CSOs and donors transition responsibility in order to foster locally led development? To answer this question, we focused on two primary elements

- 1) INGO transitions; and
- 2) outcomes of the transition and its effects on local entities involved in the transition.

The SAS consortium chose not to establish an objective definition of ‘successful transitions’ for the project to allow for the use of flexible, diverse and locally-led definitions according to each context. The precise meaning of ‘success’ is unique to each case study and reflects what local actors feel best represents their experience of success. As such, ‘success’ should be broadly interpreted as ‘transitions that result in a positive outcome as defined by local communities.

SAS PROJECT APPROACH

The SAS project employed a qualitative case study design using a [“collaborative learning approach”](#). Collaborative

learning takes an iterative approach of “looping” back through the evidence-gathering and analysis phases to ensure findings are well-informed, reflective of local realities and useful for those who might engage with the final materials produced through the work. The project had five primary phases:

1. DESK RESEARCH: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE, POLICY AND PRACTICE

At the start of the SAS, the consortium conducted a desk review of relevant literature and information to inform the overall methodology, research questions and framing of key lines of inquiry for the SAS project. The review included analysis of academic and grey literature as well as key informant interviews with practitioners who had direct experience with aid transitions. This process allowed the consortium to identify various current perspectives regarding what “responsible” and “successful” transitions required. The published literature review can be accessed [here](#):

2. ONLINE CONSULTATION: “AID EXITS AND LOCALLY-LED DEVELOPMENT”

Building on the knowledge developed through the desk review, the SAS consortium convened an online consultation to begin initial discussion on the topic of INGO transitions and locally led development. From 3 to 6 October 2017, 95 participants working in over 40 countries engaged and responded to prompts organized around daily themes such as: power dynamics; the role of local actors; and capacity building and sustainability. A report which discusses the findings of this consultation was published and these insights were used to inform the following phases of the SAS project. The report can be accessed [here](#):

3. CASE STUDIES

The case study phase of SAS forms the most substantial aspect of the project. Over the course of two years, the consortium documented the experiences and results of different transitions between INGOs and local entities. In all, 20 separate case studies were conducted across 13 countries.

CASE STUDY IDENTIFICATION

The SAS project conducted 20 case studies in 13 different countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, Republic of Georgia, Kenya, Morocco, the Philippines, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Thailand, Bangladesh, Burundi, India, Guatemala, and Timor-Leste.

To identify case potential case studies, an open call was disseminated online, through various networks, and in-person through local contacts. Upon compiling a tentative list of both specific organizations for case studies and of the potential country focuses, the consortium selected final options based on geographic diversity, sectoral diversity (health, micro-finance, gender equality, governance, peacebuilding, etc) and the types of transitions reported. Furthermore, only cases of ‘positive deviance’, or in other words ‘successful transitions’, were selected for the activity. By focusing on successful transitions, SAS aimed to provide examples where transitions were done well in order to learn what went right and why. Challenges within the transitions were reported within the case studies, however the outcome of each case was considered successful by the participants and no ‘negative cases’ were examined.

CASE STUDY METHODOLOGY

The case study process employed a qualitative case study design, including desk review of relevant documents (public reports and grey literature such as strategic plans and protocols), key informant interviews and focus group discussions. Where relevant or possible, observation of transition related meetings with partners (in one examination of a real-time transition) were also conducted. Data collection and analysis was conducted by SAS consortium members and local research partners.

The amount of resources available for evidence-gathering and the amount of evidence itself varied from case to case. Therefore, case studies vary in length and depth, loosely categorized into “maxi”, “midi”, and “mini” case studies. However, each case study features the following six focus areas:

- i. Context overview (historically informed)
- ii. Analysis of recent trends in aid
- iii. Background and description of the transition
- iv. Motivations and triggers for the transition
- v. Description of the transition process
- vi. Outcomes and impacts of the transition.

DATA ANALYSIS

Document review, key informant interviews and focus group discussions formed the basis for all cases and allowed for data triangulation within a cases study, thus increasing the credibility of our findings. Each individual case study represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people interviewed at the time of the visit along with historical background. Broad generalizations about the project’s findings cannot be made from a single case study.

4. REGIONAL EVIDENCE REVIEW MEETINGS

Throughout the project, the SAS consortium facilitated regional evidence review meetings to conduct collaborative analysis of both case study developments and the overarching themes of the project, as well as solicit feedback on the tools/resources being produced. The joint analysis and feedback informed the project and allowed the SAS team to adapt further iterations of the research in order to better reflect the lived experience of participants. Meetings took place in Nairobi, Kenya; Bangkok, Thailand; and Washington D.C., USA, and participants included local and international development and peacebuilding practitioners, donor staff, and researchers focusing on aid effectiveness, local ownership and exit and transition strategies. This step in the collaborative learning process was critical to generating findings, recommendations, and practical tools that were grounded in broader experience and contain both generalizable lessons and context-specific examples.

5. TOOL/RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

In the final year of the project, the SAS team developed 20+ tools and resources based off of the feedback from regional evidence review meeting participants and consultations with other stakeholders. The consortium developed a series of issue papers (analyzing key themes emerging from the cases), thought pieces and practical guidelines to support INGO, NGO/CSO and donor staff planning for or going through a transition.

Three case study review meetings were organized where SAS program team members identified cross-cutting themes of the case studies. These themes were organized into four issue papers (capacity development, leaders/champions, financial sustainability, and communicating transitions). The themes also helped the consortium develop the tools and resources relevant to various aspects of transitions, both technical and political, including partnership and power and legitimacy.

The third and final year of SAS was dedicated to developing thought pieces and practical guidelines to support responsible transitions. The concept for the thought pieces, which are essentially condensed versions of issue papers, was created in partnership with Bangkok regional evidence review participants and other stakeholders. Drafts of the resources were shared with the Nairobi regional evidence review participants in order for the SAS consortium to make the resources more practical for INGO, NGO/CSO, and donor staff working on transitions. The tools and resources are considered to be 'living' documents, and the SAS consortium intends on informing further iterations of the resources through informal user feedback and through a potential piloting phase following the end of the project.

6. SYNTHESIS

Following the finalization of the case study process, the 20 case studies were cross analyzed to develop a synthesis of lessons across the project. The synthesis was developed by coding the key findings from each case study and using Dedoose to perform a qualitative analysis of recurring themes and findings. The synthesis report is the main document which summarizes lessons learned and practical insights for international and local actors about sustaining partnerships post-transition.

LIMITATIONS OF THE PROJECT

Overall, the SAS project aims to provide practitioners and stakeholders with positive and inspirational examples of how to support locally led development before, during, and after transitions. In light of this, the methods used for the project were meant to provide insight into the approaches and actions available to stakeholders planning for or undertaking a transition, rather than provide a rigorous analysis of the necessary or sufficient conditions for successful transitions. It is important to view this project as a collaborative learning activity. As such, there are a number of potential limitations to keep in mind for stakeholders wishing to operationalize the findings from this project:

- The focus of the SAS project was on the development and peacebuilding sectors specifically. We intentionally excluded humanitarian INGO exits and humanitarian localization efforts from this inquiry due to the differing political, operational and institutional contexts in which such exits or transitions take place.
- The lessons learned are drawn exclusively from cases analyzed by SAS. Since the case studies are not a representative sample of all INGO transitions, the lessons learned should be interpreted as insights drawn from a specific selection of findings that focus on responsible transitions..
- SAS did not evaluate or assess whether specific transition approaches or models were more effective than others; rather, the 'lessons learned' focus on the positive aspects of each case study transition.

RESEARCH ETHICS: ADDRESSING ASSUMPTIONS AND BIASES

The SAS consortium aimed to conduct best practice in research ethics throughout each stage of the project. At the center of the work was a recognition of the assumptions, biases, positionality, and the impact of researcher(s) on the research process and subsequent data analysis and interpretation of findings. In order to address the inherent biases, the SAS team explicitly acknowledged them in data collection and analysis processes. Where possible, the team partnered with local researchers for data collection, analysis and write up stages. Additionally, the SAS team ensure INGOs and local entities whose experiences are highlighted in the case studies were provided the opportunity to review and input before case studies were finalized.