

# STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

## ISSUE PAPER: LEADERS AND CHAMPIONS IN RESPONSIBLE TRANSITIONS

January 2020

Grace Boone, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects

Isabella Jean, Independent Consultant

Kiely Barnard-Webster, Independent Consultant



## DISCLAIMER

This document was developed by Grace Boone from CDA Collaborative Learning and Isabella Jean and Kiely Barnard-Webster, Independent as part of Stopping as Success: Transitioning to Locally Led Development, a collaborative learning project in partnership with Peace Direct and Search for Common Ground, funded by USAID Office of Local Sustainability. It is part of a collection of documents that should be considered initial and partial findings of the project. These documents are written to allow for the identification of cross-cutting issues and themes across 20 case studies. Each Issue Paper represents the views and perspectives of a variety of people at the time when it was written.

These documents do not represent a final product of the project. While these documents may be cited, they remain working documents of a collaborative learning effort. Broad generalizations about the project's finding cannot be made from a single case study or Issue Paper.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

CDA would like to acknowledge the generosity of individuals and organizations involved in donating their time and sharing their experiences and insights that have helped shape this Issue Paper. We are particularly grateful for participants in the SAS online consultation, regional review meetings, and others who have contributed to this project.

For background information on the collaborative learning process and responsible transitions, please refer to the Stopping as Success website: <http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/>

## ACRONYMS

CDA - CDA Collaborative Learning  
CSOs - civil society organizations (CSOs)  
INGOs - international NGOs  
LIHC - Leadership Institute at Harvard College  
MC - Mercy Corps  
NGOs - non-governmental organizations  
SAS - Stopping As Success: Transitioning to Locally Led Development  
TB - Tuberculosis  
USAID - United States Agency for International Development

**This document was produced with INGOs, NGOs/CSOs, and donors in mind, however the findings presented here are broadly applicable to other stakeholders in the development sector.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Stopping As Success: Transitioning to Locally Led Development (SAS) is a collaborative learning project led by Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning (CDA), and Search for Common Ground (Search), funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The consortium seeks to derive lessons about responsible international transitions and create practical resources for international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), NGOs, civil society organizations (CSOs), and donors by conducting 20 different case studies of INGO transitions in 13 countries: Thailand, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guatemala, Timor-Leste, Bangladesh, Burundi, Kenya, Republic of Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, India, the Philippines, and Morocco. Based on cross-case analysis, the SAS team identified the topic of 'leaders and champions' as critical to responsible INGO aid transitions.<sup>1</sup>

This Issue Paper seeks to define and analyze the role of leaders and champions in responsible transitions by asking:

- How were leaders/champions identified and supported amidst the INGO transition?
- What role did leaders or champions play in the transition?
- How did their role influence the transition?
- How did the local or national organization change under their leadership after the INGO transitioned?
- How do power dynamics influence who is viewed as a leader/champion?<sup>2</sup>

- What aspects of leadership are incredibly important to a responsible transition but hard to quantify and/or teach?
- What do INGOs need to consider when transitioning in regard to leaders and champions?

This paper will define leaders and champions, explore the different types of leaders and champions found in the cases, and analyze the role of leaders and champions in organizational transitions and after the INGO transitions. After discussing power dynamics in regard to leaders and champions in transitions, it will conclude with further considerations for INGOs.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

### DEFINING 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.

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## LEADERS VS CHAMPIONS: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Although these two terms can be difficult to differentiate, this paper seeks to clarify the roles of each and use the evidence drawn from case study interviews to see how they affected respective transitions differently.

### LEADERS

Defining leadership is quite a challenge because there are various ways that leaders emerge and act depending on the context. However, the Leadership Institute at

Harvard College (LIHC) defines leadership as "the skill of motivating, guiding, and empowering a team towards a socially responsible vision."<sup>3</sup> In the SAS project, leaders are often local actors who work directly with the INGO to shape the transition, collaborate with staff members to get buy-in, and in some cases engage the community to develop the local entity. Additionally, leaders are often the ones who go on to serve as the Executive Director or other senior leadership roles of the local entity after the transition.

## CHAMPIONS

Champions use their passion, vision and practical experience to advocate for and lead the work they do.<sup>4</sup> In 2012, CDA conducted internal research on champions for the Do No Harm program.<sup>5</sup> Champions can serve four main roles, two of which were identified during case interviews:

- 1) Advocate for ethical, locally led transitions and
- 2) Coaching other staff members' competence.

In SAS, champions play a particularly unique and important

role to ensure the ethical direction, locally led nature, and overall success of transitions in nearly every case study. Usually, although not always, champions are international or headquarters staff that advocate for the inclusion of locally led processes, seek continued funding and when called upon, serve as a mentor or coach for their fellow staff members. In the Bosnia and Herzegovina case study,<sup>6</sup> Mercy Corps (MC) assigned a staff member to coach the new CEO for an independent Bosnian microfinance organization, Partner, that was born out of an MC economic development project. In this way, the MC staff member served as a champion for the microfinance organization and coached the new CEO while MC was transitioning, supporting a more sustainable and responsible transition.

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## TYPES OF LEADERS AND CHAMPIONS

The three types of leaders and champions that emerged in the case studies were individual, group and organizational leadership. Individual leaders and groups often drove local entities forward during and after transition, whereas organizations catalyzed change at sector post-transition.

### INDIVIDUAL LEADERSHIP

In this paper, individual leaders/champions are defined as people who were, in large part, primarily credited for the successful transition from an INGO and, where applicable, the creation of a local or national organization. In Kenya, Nuru International began transitioning out of Kenya in 2015.<sup>7</sup> The first step of their transition involved the departure of all international INGO leadership in 2015; the second phase is to withdraw all financial support by 2020. The appointment of the new Kenyan Country Director triggered Nuru International's leadership transition because they believed in her abilities to sustainably lead the Kenyan entity post-transition. There are two core reasons identified in the case for why she was successful:

- She embodied Nuru International's mission of locally led development, collaboration, and Servant Leadership.<sup>8</sup>
- She was a visionary. She was identified to lead the transition by Nuru International due to her visionary nature and developed a post-transition relationship with Nuru International. She continues to lead Nuru Kenya in a locally-driven and sustainable way.

### GROUP LEADERSHIP

Sometimes leadership is a collective effort. We documented several cases of people in official or unofficial roles who took ownership over the transition process and worked to establish a local entity after the transition. Across the case study interviews, local staff often articulated the vision and served as champions for the future entity. In the Plan India case study,<sup>9</sup> the Indian senior management created a tight-knit team, and focused on teamwork and solidarity, which allowed for a smooth transition. During the last year of the transition, a national director was appointed alongside the existing international director, and the role of this internal champion allowed the staff to feel as if they operated "with one voice." The senior management team (with previous transition experience), a transition manager, and the local, active board were all important leaders in the Plan India transition.

Similarly, in the Iloilo City TB Task Force Philippines case study,<sup>10</sup> Task Forces made up of volunteer health workers at the Barangay level<sup>11</sup> in the government and played a leading role in mobilizing communities and carrying out campaigns that challenged the stigma around tuberculosis (TB). These Task Forces grouped together to form a federation, which continued advocating for further financial support from the local government to continue the work after World Vision's program came to an end. Without the leadership of Barangay health workers, it is unlikely that the TB project

would have been sustainable in Iloilo city. World Vision acknowledged the important role of Barangay health workers in mobilizing local communities and delivered a series of trainings on advocacy, communications and organizing.

## ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Organizational leadership is a form of leadership in which a local or national entity lead their peers and advocate on behalf of the entire sector, or a specific sub-sector, after the INGO transitions. In these instances, the local or national entity carries on the legacy of its former international partners INGO becoming a leader in its professional community. A prime example of this organizational leadership is the Partner Microcredit Foundation, established in 2000 as part of Mercy Corps long-term transition plan. Partner was the first microfinance organization in Bosnia and Herzegovina. They led the charge in ensuring that the new Bosnian government after the war put laws in place to support and regulate the microfinance sector. Partner staff and Board members discussed and advocated for the need to regulate the sector with the BiH (Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina). They were concerned that if there were no regulations, there could be many detrimental efforts for the poor and

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The unity of our team played a more significant role than external support. It is vital in situations like this, that everybody has a sense of ownership.

BRIDGE staff member, Georgia case study

vulnerable populations due to risky lending practices and schemes by other lenders and microfinance entities. Another concern was that the government could easily pronounce microfinance organizations illegal and close them or unfairly tax them if there was no regulatory framework in place. Championing this work, USAID gave invaluable technical assistance to Partner during the early period of its development and developed its own policies and parameters<sup>12</sup> on how to support microfinance enterprises in former socialist republics. Partner showed tremendous leadership in advocating for laws that protect both microfinance organizations and the local population seeking credit for small business development.

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## LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPACT

The following section analyzes the process of leadership succession and the consequent impact on the local or national entity after the INGO transitioned; specifically looking at individualized examples while also looking at prevalent themes across all, or most, of the case studies. This section will also discuss how essential skills are critical to leadership succession.

### LEADERSHIP SUCCESSION

Leadership succession, meaning how decision-making and leadership is transitioned to local actors during the transition, is very context specific. In some cases, local leadership was intentionally cultivated and became an enabling factor for a successful transition. In the Belun Timor-Leste case,<sup>13</sup> it was always the plan that a Timorese national would lead the organization. Over the course of the five-year grant, international leadership roles were

designed to phase out. This phased transition allowed “locals [to be] technically and psychologically prepared for the departure of internationals,” as the case study notes.

In other cases, local leaders stepped into decision-making roles out of their own motivation to continue doing their mission driven work and to sustain a local entity after INGO transition. In the BRIDGE Georgia case study,<sup>14</sup> Oxfam announced a four-year transition period in 2014 and the Georgian staff had already begun the legal process to establish a spin-off organization, called BRIDGE – Innovation and Development by 2015. This case is interesting for multiple reasons, one being that Oxfam gave Georgian staff a lot of support so they could create and run their own organization by the time Oxfam transitioned. According to the current Executive Director, “Georgian staff were officially allowed to use 10 percent of their



Leaders during transitions make decisions that have long-term impact on the identity, reputation and viability of the future or new local entity.

Bangkok regional review participant

funded time for working to establish BRIDGE in parallel with managing Oxfam's projects." She added that: "the biggest and most important support received from HQ were human resources, access to Oxfam's knowledge management system, individual approach to Georgia's case and flexibility and freedom to let the local team drive the process even though they were not given special funding for it." This transition was successful for many reasons, notably that the Georgian staff worked tirelessly to ensure that the rights-based development and gender equality work Oxfam was doing would be continued, despite slowly losing their funding from Oxfam between 2014-2018.

In the Thailand case,<sup>15</sup> CARE USA transitioned their Thailand office in 1997. A Thai citizen, and a new CARE hire, would go on to lead the transition from INGO to a Thai NGO, the Raks Thai Foundation. Initially, CARE USA, particularly the Board, did not want to transition CARE to a local NGO. Therefore, the Thai staff member recognized that his role was to advocate for and help move the transition forward. Along with speaking with the Board and influencing their decisions, he was part of strategic planning conversations that involved determining Raks Thai's management structure, legal name, fundraising strategy, and more. The success of CARE's transition and of Raks Thai, which continues its work to this day, is largely attributed to the Foundation's leader. As one senior staff from Raks Thai noted: "It was [his] guidance that set us on a more detailed path [during the transition]." His continued advocacy during the actual transition process determined many outcomes for Raks Thai, particularly the relationship with CARE and the sustainability plan post-transition. Currently, Raks Thai is a large and established NGO in Thailand, becoming CARE International's first country office to reach independence and re-incorporate as a CARE member, in 2003.<sup>16</sup>

## ESSENTIAL SKILLS FOR LEADERS AND CHAMPIONS<sup>17</sup>

In our case evidence and through conversations with stakeholders, it is clear that successful leaders require essential skills in a post-transition setting, and these skills are hard to quantify and difficult to teach. What are more commonly known as "soft skills," essential skills such as team-building, problem-solving and cultural competency were often stated as just as important as technical skills. In the Bangkok regional review meeting, the 9 executive directors in the room (who had all led their own transitions) spoke collectively about how difficult and lonely leading a transition can be. One specifically mentioned that it is isolating and therefore qualities such as vision and committed leadership are needed to sustain a transition. These types of skills and qualities are essential, and difficult to teach, particularly amongst the multiple moving parts of a transition.

## IMPACT OF LOCAL LEADERS AND ORGANIZATIONS POST-TRANSITION

In each and every case that looks at a complete and successful transition, it is evident that the local entity has gone on to create a positive impact in the contexts where they operate. In the case evidence, local entities that were created or sustained after the INGO transition took two main forms:

- 1) spin-off organizations created after INGO transitions that continued the legacy of the former international organization and
- 2) local CSOs and NGOs that changed course and became major players in their sector.

In Georgia, BRIDGE was created intentionally to be a spin-off of Oxfam and has maintained a similar programmatic profile after the transition; in addition, they have developing plans to grow a social enterprise branch and to offer fee-based consulting services for revenue-generation. In the Philippines, the Federation, which evolved out of World Vision's transition, now sits on multiple governmental department committees, works closely with the City Health Office's Tuberculosis service delivery network, and works with other NGOs and CSOs in the sector. They are now known to be a major actor in the city's health sector.



In some cases, the local entity goes on to influence the global sphere. In Morocco,<sup>18</sup> CARE Morocco became one of the first Member Affiliates to CARE International from the Global South. In this way, they were able to influence the global confederation and bring the voice of Morocco (and Africa more widely) into the confederation’s discussions. As a Moroccan staff member noted: “I think the fact of us now being part of the federation would allow us to be influencing more than before... now the arena where all these strategic discussions are made, we are going to be at the table. And we can be putting forward ideas that are important for us and for other countries too.”

In some cases, the local entity shifted the organizational focus to be more contextually relevant and locally owned. In the Kenyan case study, the Nuru International model is quite different from other INGOs documented by SAS. Nuru International, by design, establishes transition strategies from the start; in this way, staff and other partners are aware that international support is time bound and will come to an end. When Nuru International was planning their transition, it was the Kenyan staff who championed local leadership at a community level, which resulted in the current farmer cooperative model that Nuru Kenya uses today. There are currently 14 cooperatives that Nuru Kenya oversees which are all collaboratively designed and community-owned. These farmer-driven cooperatives are owned and run by the farmers, with Nuru Kenya serving as a resource for technical expertise and management capacity as needed. The plan is for these 14

It is important to note [the leaders’] personality, experience, and leadership skills were crucial to the early success of the [project] and the establishment of the [local entity].

Interpeace Timor-Leste case study

cooperatives to be completely self-reliant by 2020. This model is quite revolutionary, according to the Country Director, considering that “this is a community that was used to things being done for them.” She adds, “Now we are telling them, ‘Think! Think how you’re going to get the inputs, think how much you’re going to charge your members, the profit you’re going to make and what you’ll need to be responsible for, the decisions you’re supposed to make.’”

Although local entities often go on to make a positive impact in their communities, transitions are not without difficulty. Before concluding, the following sections of the paper will discuss power dynamics and considerations for INGOs when supporting local actors **planning a transition**.

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## POWER DYNAMICS IN REGARD TO LEADERSHIP IN TRANSITIONS

As with all aspects of transitions, power dynamics showed up in<sup>19</sup> different aspects of leadership. There are two main power imbalances noted in the case studies and through the lived experience of regional evidence review meeting participants:

- 1) decision-making<sup>20</sup> on aspects of the transition sat with international, headquarters staff and
- 2) how a leader’s identities are perceived in their context can present obstacles to overcome.

In most of our cases, local actors were not directly involved in the decision-making about a country office transition. Usually, the decision to transition was made

at the INGO headquarters and then local actors were consulted on if and how to manage the transition to a local entity. In some cases, local actors were given options on next steps, rather than brought in to shape the transition from the beginning. For example, according to one staff member of SOS Colombia,<sup>21</sup> they were given three options:

- 1) wind down slowly between 2013-2020;
- 2) wait and wind down abruptly by 2020; or
- 3) wind down quickly in 2013 then slowly taper out the rest of the remaining funds by 2020.

In this case, staff helped determine how to manage the

transition rather than if/when the transition should take place at all. This suggests there are inherent power dynamics that impact strategies and decision-making processes related to transitions.

In addition to decision-making, the identity(ies) of the leader and how their identity(ies) are perceived in their context, particularly around gender, sex, class and political affiliation, can present different obstacles to overcome when rising to the ranks of “leader” and when

leading an organization post-transition. One particularly stark example was shared in the Bangkok regional review meeting when one participant told us that he was training indigenous women to run his organization after he and his wife retire. On multiple occasions they have received criticism from investors who claimed their organization is riskier because indigenous women would be in the lead. It is important to consider the particular obstacles that a leader may have to overcome when taking over an organization post-transition.

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## CONSIDERATIONS FOR INGOS

According to the case evidence, transitions are rarely planned from the beginning of an INGO’s work in a country, or at the start of programs. Most transitions are triggered by financial difficulties or changes in strategic priorities (among other triggers), causing organizations to plan transitions amidst programming, which is quite a challenging task. The SAS consortium has seen themes of what INGOS did or did not do, and how those actions affected the transitions. Those lessons are compiled below.

- **Viewing and engaging local actors as partners and agents of change** and not passive implementers of decisions is essential to a successful transition. In Iloilo City TB Task Force Philippines case study, the strength of the relationships between the local volunteers and World Vision staff were attributed to the fact that the World Vision staff were from local communities. Additionally, local actors are often viewed as more trustworthy than foreigners and can gather greater buy-in and support from the community. In the Philippines case study one Filipino volunteer speaks to this dynamic: “[The staff] have the heart of a Filipino – they understand what it means to give to a fellow Filipino.”
- **Communicate at all levels.** Staff and partners, at every stage, should be aware of the transition and be equipped to support as needed. Additionally, communication has to trickle down to every level of leadership in the organization. In the Kenyan case study, senior management staff and Board members reported transparent and open communication, while field level staff said communication was only vertical and did not reach field level staff. This created tension within

the organization as the field level staff did not feel included in the transition process.

- **Work alongside local staff and partners to support a local leader who will lead the local entity post-transition.** In most cases, an influential local leader or a group of leaders (e.g. Board) were credited with the success of the transition from an INGO to a local entity. The case evidence suggests (and regional review participants echo) that having a charismatic, committed, and technically and managerially competent leader allows for a successful transition.
- **Trust the local leaders and champions** who come up with innovative ideas about the transition. Transitions are compiled of multiple moving parts over a period of time and the original transition plan may need to change and adapt as the context develops. Trusting the ideas and suggestions of local leaders and champions is a critical part of this change. A large part of the successful transition in Kenya was the flexibility of the INGO to adjust to Nuru Kenya’s ideas because there was “freedom to fail”.
- International funders and partners have responsibility over **advocating and inviting local organizational leaders into decision-making spaces.** Post-transition, we have seen examples of Moroccan and Thai NGOs that have gone to re-join international confederations or structures as members. However, as international development becomes more crowded with local and organizations, it is important for international donor organizations and other actors to accommodate, sometimes at their own expense, local or national organizations, particularly from the Global South.

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## CONCLUSION AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

In summary, the importance of local leaders and champions cannot be underestimated in INGO transitions. When a local entity is established post-transition, not only do champions who advocate for locally-driven transitions and coach other staff need to be present, local leaders also need to step up to lead the transition process and the local entity post-transition. Local and national leaders are most often not the ones who drive the decision to start a transition, but they step in to lead on different aspects of the transition. When the decision to transition has been made (usually at the headquarter level), a leader is identified, or a champion emerges, and subsequently help shape and lead the transition to a local entity.

Although this Issue Paper analyzed leadership succession and impacts of the local entity, there is still more analysis to do on the topic of leaders and champions in transition. The following questions were not covered in depth in this Issue Paper and may be areas for further consideration.

**1** As the current aid system aspires to shift towards locally led development, what is the role of outsiders (INGOs, donors, etc.) in international aid? One prevalent answer to this question that was shared during the SAS regional review meeting in Bangkok was that there is usually room for accompaniment and long-term partnership. How can outsiders partner with local civil society and communities in a respectful and collaborative way to ensure local and national actors are driving social change, and shaping priorities in development and peacebuilding?

**2** In the Thailand case, a Thai citizen was a new hire and had a significant impact on the success of the transition from INGO to Thai entity. Thinking about hiring processes and power dynamics, how can INGOs who often shape hiring and promotion processes think strategically about cultivating local and national leadership to support responsible and successful transitions later? What personal qualities should be prioritized in potential hires? How should local and national staff, partners, and peers be consulted?

**3** In some cases, INGO and national staff shared leadership and decision-making to ensure a collaborative and successful transition. What have you seen as most effective in such collaborative decision-making processes? How should INGO and local and national staff and partners work together and manage the decision-making process during the delicate transition process?

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## END NOTES

1. Learn more on the SAS website: <http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/>
2. For more research on power dynamics in transitions, see the Power and Legitimacy thought piece.
3. Leadership Institute at Harvard College, <http://harvardleaders.org/mission-values/>
4. Porter, Robert L. "How to foster champions," In Leading Beyond Walls, edited by Peter Drucker, [http://www.enginesofinnovation.com/Champion-Final\\_v6.1.pdf](http://www.enginesofinnovation.com/Champion-Final_v6.1.pdf)
5. CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, The Do No Harm Program, <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/cdaproject/the-do-no-harm-project/>
6. Partner Microcredit Foundation, Bosnia and Herzegovina case study.
7. Nuru Kenya case study.
8. Servant Leadership is described by the Servant Leadership Institute as "a set of behaviors and practices that turn the traditional "power leadership" model upside down; instead of the people working to serve the leader, the leader actually exists to serve the people. As a result, the practice is centered on a desire to serve and emphasizes collaboration, trust, empathy, and the ethical use of power. Its primary goal is to enhance individual growth, teamwork and overall employee involvement and satisfaction." Find out more here: <https://www.servantleadershipinstitute.com/what-is-servant-leadership-1/>
9. Plan India case study.
10. Iloilo City TB Task Force Philippines case study.
11. Smallest administrative unit in the Philippines.
12. USAID, Microfinance Development, ADS Chapter 219, July 8, 2011, <https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1865/219.pdf>
13. Belun Timor-Leste case study.
14. BRIDGE Georgia case study.
15. Raks Thai Thailand case study.
16. CARE International, Where we work: Thailand, 2018, <https://www.care-international.org/where-we-work/thailand>
17. Muir, T. (2019, February 7). Stop Calling Them Soft Skills; They're Essential Skills. [Blog post]. The Epic Classroom. Retrieved from <http://www.trevormuir.com/new-blog-avenue/soft-skills>.
18. CARE Morocco case study.
19. For more detail on power dynamics in transitions, read power and legitimacy piece.
20. Read Participation in Decision-Making Would Truly be a Revolution blog for a deeper analysis on how to deepen participation and address critical power imbalances: <https://cdacollaborative.org/blog/participation-in-decision-making-would-truly-be-a-revolution>
21. SOS Colombia case study.

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.

Cover photo: Bangkok Regional Evidence Review Meeting participants, March 2019