

STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES RESPONSIBLE TRANSITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

These practical guidelines have been 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 to 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.

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.

I. PARTNERSHIPS TRANSITIONS IN SUPPORT OF AUTHENTIC LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Despite the structural barriers and power dynamics inherent in the aid system, SAS case studies demonstrate that respectful and mutually beneficial partnerships are possible. We've also heard that they can be supported through better processes and targeted resources. As the global development landscape evolves, there is a growing number of international organizations closing country operations, shifting their operational models, or transitioning from existing partnerships to supporting new or different types of organizations. The guidelines we offer below are not prescriptive, but rather serve as practical considerations for managing such exits and transitions responsibly. These guidelines complement a thought piece on responsible partnerships transitions which highlights issues at stake as informed by case evidence.¹

There are important assumptions in these guidelines. We assume, based on the case evidence, that most transitions and exits are triggered by the external organization and that timelines are rarely mutually agreed on with local counterparts. We assume that external development actors see their local counterparts as equals, and as capable leaders and agents of change. Partnership as it is discussed here is not transactional, and local partners and staff are not discarded once joint projects are over. Instead, the guidelines are meant to support partnership transitions grounded in mutual respect, equity and solidarity.

The guidelines are informed by three fundamental principles and values that have been echoed during

our case study visits, key informant interviews, and consultations held with practitioners in the Global South. Their experiences, observations and calls for power shifts in the current ways of working are distilled here in order to frame and underpin the subsequent practical considerations:

- **Recognize local leadership, knowledge and capacity.** Don't bypass it or assume it doesn't exist. Local knowledge, derived and tested in local contexts, underpins sustainability of development outcomes. Recognize when the capacity of external organizations has been strengthened as a result of local knowledge and years of joint work and learning with partners.
- **Respect and elevate local leadership.** Reserve a seat at the decision-making table for trusted local actors who will be doing development work long after external partners have left. Listen for and ask for local input to shape the exit strategy and transition process and put local actors in charge of planning the next phase(s) after the transition is complete.
- **Cultivate local leadership.** Promote capable, influential and visionary local staff, local organizations, and community leaders and boost their social capital by helping them expand relevant national and international peer, professional and funding networks. Learn when to step aside and to reduce the role, responsibility and visibility of external actors.

2. PLANNING FOR RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS

How external organizations manage partnership transitions is one measure of their commitment to local ownership, respectful working relationships and continued collaboration. One important consideration raised by practitioners in our case study locations, was the importance of mutual accountability for program results and outcomes as well as for the process and outcomes of the transition itself.

It can be helpful if an organization has a clear strategy for exit or transition from the start of its engagement in each context that covers necessary aspects, including partnership transitions and relationship management. However, as our case evidence indicates, exit strategies and transition plans are often developed in real-time. This offers an opportunity for an inclusive and more effective process in which local staff, partners and other relevant stakeholders are meaningfully engaged in shaping the strategy and the associated action plans.

Sustainability exit[ing] is not just walking away. It is walking away leaving an agreed upon result and an agreed upon level of self-performance and self-capacity that is where you decided you were going to go. And if that is not there then you have got nothing.²

Bangladesh case study

VIGNETTE I

The NGO Belun in Timor-Leste was designed for independence from the start and continues to have a strong relationship with its international co-founders. The USAID-funded NGO Sector Strengthening Project (2004-2008) in Timor-Leste, had two objectives: to strengthen local civil society, and to implement its interventions through a newly created Timorese NGO, Belun, that would continue beyond project close. Decision-making and management responsibilities were shared among a nucleus of international and Timorese staff with strong preexisting relationships built on mutual trust. Accordingly, international staff saw their roles as temporary and invested significant time, resources, and personal effort into working themselves out of a job. The team created a capacity building plan to support Belun's increased self-reliance over the course of the project, and followed through, developing local capacities in both technical areas but also organizational and operational skills such as human resources, financial management, leadership, and grants management. International staff supported proposal development, passed on policies and strategic approaches, and included local staff in every level of management decision.

These design decisions had three major effects: they tangibly developed local skills; psychologically prepared local staff for the international exit; and built a sense of ownership over Belun and the project's activities. In this sense, the transition occurred from the very beginning as reflected on by one of the founders: "[F]or us I think this question of handing over, in a way, it doesn't resonate with me. For me it wasn't about handing over; it was always about the partnership. And how we determine what it is that we think that we all want to work on, and how do we collectively work toward or contribute to the ends that we're trying to achieve, or the goals that we're trying to realize.

When partnership transitions and exit strategies have not been agreed upon from the start, international organizations should consider the following steps, agreed on and implemented collaboratively with local partners and/or staff at the onset of partnership transition planning:

- Establish organizational mechanisms for regular engagement of staff and partners to provide input and lead on different aspects of the transition.
- Review organizational systems, procedures, and practices with a commitment to reduce bottlenecks, bureaucracy and to prioritize issues and steps that matter to local counterparts.
- If the exit or transition strategy is being shaped externally (i.e. by the headquarters, by the Board, external consultant team), seek feedback

on it from local partners and advocate for adjustments and adaptations to the process with relevant decision-makers.

- Transition planning involves multiple steps and timelines, many of which will shift due to unforeseen changes in the local and institutional context. Together with partners, develop a clear process by which changes to the plans will be approved, transparently communicated and implemented. Supplement it with explanation of roles and responsibilities and decision-making process that will be followed.
- Appoint a local “transition manager” to coordinate and oversee the transition process (see vignette 2 on Plan India’s practice)
- Allocate necessary resources and time to support quality transition process (see vignette 3 on Oxfam’s practice in Georgia).

VIGNETTE 2

During the transition to a locally registered entity, Plan India, the Plan International team appointed a transition manager, who was well trusted and respected by all staff. It was important that the transition manager was not part of the senior management team. He was perceived as a non-controversial ‘neutral party’ and staff felt comfortable to approach him with concerns and queries. The transition manager along with the senior management team instituted an open-door policy inviting staff to walk into their offices and raise questions and concerns.

NOTE ON INVOLVING LOCAL STAFF AND PARTNERS IN TRANSITION PLANNING

Partnership transitions should not be unilateral. Local partners and CSOs play a crucial role in transition planning. Our cases of successful transitions indicate that national staff and local partners should:

- Decide if they want to transition the organization at all; and if so, what the new entity will look like, what values and objectives it will advance, and how it will be organized.
- Demonstrate leadership capacity and local ownership by engaging and participating in dialogue

and planning with international partners. Several case studies showed that when local leaders step up to the challenge, it increases staff morale and expands the available options for local partners (see vignette 9 on Oxfam’s practice in Georgia).

- Advocate for an increased role in decision-making and increased responsibilities for implementing aspects of the transition, especially aspects that impact local organization’s reputation, viability, sustainability, and resource mobilization for continued work.

VIGNETTE 3

In the Republic of Georgia, Oxfam's exit was at first seen as a challenge and disappointment to its long-standing partner organizations working in community, rural and economic development, but the question of their readiness to take on the poverty reduction and rights-based development agenda and carry on the work did not come up as a barrier. As noted by one of the former Oxfam Georgia staff members: "Oxfam has worked with local partners for a long time, more than 20 years... Oxfam was not the only donor supporting them so there was a feeling that they could carry on independently. Of course, their organizational structure was not as strong as Oxfam's but their experience means a lot, and it is a serious asset for local organizations to know how and in which context to operate."

Before Oxfam exited its country operations in Georgia, it also supported the establishment of a spin-off organization, BRIDGE to continue rights-based development and policy work that Oxfam had spearheaded. The new entity was developed in parallel with Oxfam's exit strategy implementation. Oxfam reserved 10 percent of national staff funded time for the tasks related to establishing BRIDGE which staff did in parallel with managing Oxfam's ongoing projects. After the transition was completed, they reflected on several aspects that made this process successful: "A big group from Oxfam HQ worked with us to assess what we were doing, whether we were doing it correctly or not and in what direction should we have gone in terms of transition. The most important factors in the process were the full involvement of local staff, transparency and enough time until the deadline. It was an intensive process of brainstorming to establish a working portfolio for the new organization. We took it as a project, like we have before for our beneficiaries, and we wanted this project to become successful and continue helping the people."

NOTE ON THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS AND DECISION-MAKING APPROACHES

Organizational leaders have tremendous influence over transition planning and implementation processes. SAS stories of successful transitions highlight notable international and local leaders who were principled and capable of both visioning change and managing the subsequent change processes. Their leadership styles and more specifically, approaches to decision-making were noted as critical to the process.

Decision-making can be decentralized, inclusive, top-down, authoritarian, or consensus-based. The type of decision-making process used and how well it is understood and perceived by others is important because critical aspects of current and future organizational relationships are at stake. SAS cases point to the need for a considered approach that doesn't obviate authority, decisive action or pragmatism, but allows for decisions to be shaped by a range of perspectives, insights and considerations. We've seen decision makers in charge of well-managed and transparent transitions using the following steps to ensure a better, more inclusive process:

- Agree on a common set of operating principles during transition. Explain the decision-making and communication process to be followed during the transition process and manage expectations.
- Prioritize staff and partner input in decision-making as opposed to being exclusively driven by priorities set from the headquarters or by funding pressures. If decisions are heavily driven by external decision-makers (i.e. headquarters, the Board, donors) and there remains a level of uncertainty about future outcomes, acknowledge this uncertainty and engage partners in scenario planning that can inform decisions made by external counterparts.
- Listen to partners to better understand the impact of the transition on local counterparts including peer organisations, networks and communities and generate options for reducing risks to local actors and other unintended negative impacts.

- Ask partners to identify top priorities in the transition process that require immediate decisions and action, as well as medium term, and long-term plans to support organizational development and resource mobilization.
- Solicit concerns about risks, continuity, and sustainability of institutional and programmatic outcomes and jointly develop practical suggestions, options and solutions to support partner's plans.
- Improve communication processes, provide timely and relevant information, especially on the outcomes from decision-making processes and the implications for the transition.³
- Devolve authority and decision-making to local partners over aspects of the transition that are directly impacting their organization's future and viability. This gives local partners a greater share in the decision-making process in a transition that directly impacts their future, their horizontal and vertical relationships with local communities, peer organizations, authorities, and funders.⁴

VIGNETTE 4

CARE USA's first experience with transitioning country offices took place in the late 1990s in Thailand. A skilled Program Director, a Thai national, was hired early in the transition process, and he understood his role as helping to advocate and drive the transition forward within CARE. At this moment in CARE's history, there were still doubts about the transition given the potential risks this process could bring to the organization.

Changing the minds of CARE USA staff from phasing out completely to transitioning the organization over to a local entity was not easy at the beginning. The early conversations between the new Program Director, the CARE Country Office Director and the Regional Office Director (the latter two were international staff) influenced CARE USA team to accept a proposal to transition rather than exit. In 1997, after internal conversations about the feasibility and importance of making the case to CARE USA about a transition, the Thai Program Director traveled to the U.S. to speak to CARE's CEO at the time. The CEO, the most senior decision-maker, was convinced by the proposed plan and supported the idea of transitioning from CARE to Raks Thai Foundation. The CEO's position also positively influenced CARE Board members after which the final decision to transition was accepted and steps taken to begin planning for this eventuality.

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NOTE TO DONORS ON RESOURCING RESPONSIBLE PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS

Donors can support partnership transitions with funding, learning and technical support. Doing so directly meets donor commitments to localization and locally led development.

- Provide direct, unrestricted funding to local partners for organizational, partnership and network development.⁵
- Don't fuel or incentivize competition between external and local entities. Foster collaboration and opportunities for local development
- Ask your grantees and implementing partners, both international and local, what funding practices facilitate collaboration and responsible partnership transitions and which practices impede and cause harm.
- Invite regular feedback from local organizations on Requests for Proposals, program development and partnership expectations.

and peacebuilding actors to shape priorities, program strategies, proposals, and to jointly manage funding.

3. MANAGING CHANGE AND RELATIONSHIPS DURING TRANSITIONS AND AFTER EXITS

Strong, accountable and effective partnerships take time to cultivate. They grow stronger through collaboration, mutual accountability, celebration of achievements and tackling challenges together. They can also be unraveled, faster than it took to build them, due to poorly managed transition processes and detrimental practices. Some of these practices shape staff attitudes and actions and some are deeply embedded in institutional practices and norms and are hard to break. How organizations choose to address these and the level of honesty and commitment to dialogue that is maintained is critical to a good transition process.

Interpersonal skills and competencies such as listening, dialogue, conflict resolution and problem-solving skills are essential to good relationships and partnerships. These skills are in high demand during transitions given the level of uncertainty and change management challenges that arise. There are countless guidelines and tips on good listening skills, inter-personal and inter-cultural dialogue and conflict resolution, in addition to workshops that strengthen such skills. However, it is not enough to train staff in these skills, if the systemic and structural power imbalances are not addressed. What development practitioners tend not to do is identify detrimental behaviors, attitudes and practices and then stop them. This includes revising detrimental policies and systems as well as changing everyday behaviors.

There are a number of practices related to partnership transitions that we have identified⁶ as needing to

be stopped, and some that need to be fostered and strengthened.

DETRIMENTAL PRACTICES THAT NEED TO STOP:

Do not treat partnerships as transactional relationships to be discarded at will. Transition planning and exits should not be implemented abruptly and haphazardly.

- Do not disempower local partners by displaying disrespectful and paternalistic behavior.

For example: A staff member in a Bangladeshi local organization explained that when his organization partnered with some INGOs they treated his NGOs as a subordinate: "Many INGOs have this tendency ... although it is called partnership, but it is not. Sometimes it is a hegemonic attitude." The underlying problem in his opinion was the "project model". When funds ran out and the project ended, the INGO no longer treated the national NGO as a partner: "if [the relationship] continued without a project or not, that would have been a real partnership in the true sense."⁷

- Reject top-down, dominant and non-transparent processes for transition planning that exclude local partner input and participation and reinforce power imbalances instead of rebalancing the power.
- Avoid excessive emphasis on financial audits,

upward accountability for funds and results, while ignoring or diminishing the importance of locally led processes, locally determined definitions and indicators of success and existing accountability mechanisms.

- Share responsibility and risk with local partners when applying for joint funding and collaborate on reporting for financial compliance and results to donors.
- Don't reinforce competition for (renewed) funding between international and local development actors. This is especially detrimental when funding is scarce and international organizations do not live up to their stated intention of localization and shifting the power to local actors.⁸
- Stop displacement and disempowerment of local actors in contract arrangements, consortia arrangements and other donor funded partnerships. A staff member who manages a local advocacy NGO and works for an INGO – described USAID-funded projects in Bangladesh as: “implemented by primes [contractors], and they take subs [local sub-contractors], and subs and slaves are no different. Subs work at the pleasure of the prime. And prime takes most of the resources.”⁹ Participants in our regional review meeting in Washington DC (June 2018) shared examples of alternative and equitable contracting relationships. For example, having a local partner serve as the prime grantee in a consortium with international actors who play a supporting role has enabled local organizations to gain much needed institutional infrastructure, technical competence and social capital.
- Do not poach capable local staff away from local organizations.

PRACTICES THAT SUPPORT LOCALLY LED PROCESSES:

- Jointly develop exit or transition strategies, plans and co-implement these plans. When planning is done with genuine inclusion of local staff and partners, it broadens the menu of options and strengthens the organizational development and strategy planning processes of both local and international organizations. Merely sharing information about decisions already made elsewhere does not constitute joint planning.

- Require partnership “exit interviews.” As part of the transition, international and local partners can choose to conduct a joint assessment of the quality and performance of their partnership. This process offers an opportunity to jointly and transparently document the evolution of partnership, adaptations to strategies, operations and programs, and share ideas for continued collaboration and partnership in another form beyond the transition. As noted above, a two-way feedback process throughout partnership transition process is important for addressing ongoing issues. The exit interview can serve as an opportunity to close the loop on unresolved and lingering issues and to share feedback on the overall relationship and partnership with a view of improving the approaches to partnering for both external and internal actors in the future.
- Invest in relationship management and continuity of legacy and peer linkages within federated structures. SAS has documented multiple examples of transitions that took place in federated structures of large INGOs such as CARE and Oxfam. These cases demonstrate how relationships, organizational identities and legacies can be managed to leverage shared values and strengths.
- Support institutional learning by investing in and sharing knowledge management systems. Joint learning about effective and successful social change processes, both systemic and within a specific sector enrich the technical and tacit knowledge of both international and local organizations. Learning together should be prioritized throughout the partnership, not just during evaluation or strategy sessions, or when staff and partners can spare time for it. Learning from past and ongoing efforts should not be relegated solely to a training or institutional learning unit or a handful of staff. During transitions, the focus and content of the learning and reflection sessions should be shaped by local partners and their learning needs as they shape the next phase of their work.
- Develop and provide resources for coaching and peer-to-peer learning opportunities for local partners as part of transition and offer on-demand technical support on organizational and programmatic areas.¹⁰

VIGNETTE 5

MCC India has had several partners over the decades with whom they have maintained an ‘on-again, off-again’ partnership; for example, in Odisha one MCC partner roughly seven years ago asked to leave, as they wanted to experiment with other projects on their own. Recently, they came back to MCC with a larger, better project involving a consortium of NGOs and government partners, with plans to expand. MCC is currently determining if they would be able to fund this project again. MCC is transparent with partners when it comes to their internal organizational evaluations. For example, a partner interviewed for this case study had read MCC’s most recent evaluation and found they had influenced MCC’s work and partnership processes. One of the MCC partners in Kolkatta stated: “There are never abrupt changes, but there is continuous learning; MCC India has external evaluations every five to six years.” At the time of this case study, MCC was in the process of applying an evaluation’s recommendations to adapt approaches to programming.

GATHERING FEEDBACK ON THE QUALITY OF TRANSITION MANAGEMENT PROCESS

Just as organizations ought to assess the quality of ongoing partnerships, it is important to establish appropriate feedback mechanisms for monitoring the quality of the transition management process as it directly impacts staff, partners, other local stakeholders and program participants. Feedback from partners is a fundamental part of open and honest communication in a partnership

and should be an integral part of transition planning and implementation process. Transitions inherently mean change and can become a source of frustration and anxiety for staff, especially if they perceive the process to be opaque, confusing, inconsistent and dismissive of staff and partner input. Soliciting regular feedback and suggestions on both the what and the how of the transition process can help prevent unnecessary tensions. What organizational teams choose to pay attention to or to avoid can be critical in shaping transitions.

VIGNETTE 6

During its transition process, Action Aid’s team in India gathered feedback from community members, staff and partners which enhanced perceptions of local ownership of the process. The process of formulating Action Aid Association’s five-year strategy was a bottom-up, inclusive approach to agenda setting.

Effective feedback mechanisms use multiple communication channels to gather feedback, including anonymous methods such as surveys. A suggested sample of questions is offered below:

- Do partners feel sufficiently informed about the exit strategy, transition plans and timeframes, roles and responsibilities and close out activities?
- Do partners feel sufficiently involved in the process? Have their voices and suggestions been heard? Have they had opportunities to provide feedback and raise issues important to them?
- Do partner staff at all levels feel valued and respected in the process?
- Have local capacities, resources and assets been properly recognized and engaged in the transition process?
- Has the transition process so far provided opportunities for strengthening local leadership?
- Are there any concerns about risks and unintended negative impacts from the transition process? How can these be reduced or prevented?
- What is going well in the transition process? How should important positive developments in the transition and organizational development be highlighted and celebrated?

END NOTES

1. SAS Case Study on [Winrock International – Climate Resilience Ecosystems and Livelihoods \(CREL\) – Bangladesh](#).
2. For more please see the Thought Piece on [“Responsible transitions and partnerships: issues at stake”](#) on SAS website.
3. For more, see [“Practical Guidelines on Communicating INGO Transitions”](#) on SAS website.
4. There is a risk of locally led processes being dominated by hierarchical and autocratic decision-making style. For an alternative process, see the [Timor-Leste case study about Belun](#) which offers an example of a democratic, empowered senior management team that incorporated a broad set of local and international voices.
5. See SAS resources on [“How to Access Unrestricted Funding”](#) and [“Financial Sustainability in Responsible Transitions.”](#)
6. These practices were documented during case study visits and the [SAS online consultation](#) and regional evidence review meetings with practitioners from the Global South.
7. SAS Case Study on [Winrock International – Climate Resilience Ecosystems and Livelihoods \(CREL\) – Bangladesh](#).
8. See SAS blog post [On the nature and quality of partnerships: the assumptions we made](#) on SAS website.
9. SAS Case Study on [Winrock International – Climate Resilience Ecosystems and Livelihoods \(CREL\) – Bangladesh](#).
10. See [Practical Guidelines on Transitions Mutual Capacity Strengthening on SAS website](#).

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