CDA PRACTICAL LEARNING for INTERNATIONAL ACTION

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STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES: COMMUNICATING INGO TRANSITIONS

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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 provide guidelines on how to ensure locally led development. In doing this, SAS looks beyond the technical aspects of an exit strategy to identify examples that demonstrate a transition toward locally led development. The 20 case studies produced by the project highlight the past and present realities faced by international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), local civil society organizations (CSOs), and local NGOs, focusing in particular on how partnerships evolve during transitions or devolvement to local entities.[1]

DEFINITION OF LOCAL

The term 'local' has different connotations in different contexts and is a contested term. In the context of SAS's research, 'local organization' is used to refer to CSOs or NGOs in the global South that are undergoing a process of transition in their partnership with an INGO. This encompasses organizations that work at the local and national level. The broader term 'local actors' recognizes the diversity of this group, which can include individuals, communities, newly created NGOs or CSOs, NGOs that have devolved from an international federation, or local and national governments.

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PRACTICAL GUIDELINES ON INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS FOR INGOS

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to communicating on INGO transitions. But in the SAS case study research and regional review meetings, practitioners who have experienced transition processes have identified several areas of best practice.

The following points are not intended to be an exhaustive checklist, but rather points of guidance when preparing both internal and external communications. Clearly this will need to be tailored to individual contexts, but the intention is that these points provide inspiration as a starting point.

1. INVOLVE NATIONAL STAFF MEMBERS IN THE DECISION ON WHETHER AND WHEN TO TRANSITION.

- Manage expectations by ensuring that staff members are clear on the extent to which they are genuinely able to influence the decision on whether to transition.
- If the decision is fully out of your hands (and ultimately driven by the corporate processes of your INGO), be fully transparent with staff members about the reasons behind the decision

2. CLEARLY COMMUNICATE YOUR INTENTION TO TRANSITION TO ALL STAFF MEMBERS

Share information about your intention to transition as early as possible, and no later than when the official decision has been taken.

- Once the intention is shared, communicate the envisioned outcome of the transition -- or the process by which this outcome will be determined -- at the outset.
- Do not sugarcoat: be realistic and authentic, presenting both the opportunities and challenges from the beginning. Transitions can be difficult periods of intense change. It is important to acknowledge this and not minimize the experience, particularly of national staff members

- Create time and physical spaces for internal reflection on the transition process as it unfolds, including space to communicate failures,challenges and concerns.
- Clarify what type of support your INGO is willing to offer to national staff both short- and long-term, for instance support in finding new job opportunities, potential funding for new projects, follow-on initiatives, etc.

3. INVEST SUFFICIENT RESOURCES IN PUTTING TOGETHER A COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

- Create a communications plan that includes metrics for measuring effective communication throughout the transition process, as well as clear benchmarks for how and when to communicate with key stakeholders.
- Combine formal and informal approaches: face-to-face communication in staff meetings about the trickier aspects of the transition process that require delicate messaging, but also follow-up in writing to ensure key decisions or feedback are documented.
- Jointly map out potential reputational risks that may arise during the transition process, and prepare tailored communication on these risks for different audiences (funders, government, communities, etc).

4. ALIGN THE COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY WITH A COMPREHENSIVE STAKEHOLDER MAP

- Create bespoke messaging for different stakeholder groups: staff members (as per the above guidance), donor organizations, partner organizations (local, national, international), and the recipients of your support (communities, CSOs, etc).
- Ensure that you have a system for tracking the departure of stakeholders and introduction of new contacts.

5. UNDERSTAND AND ADAPT TO CONTEXT AS IT CHANGES.

- Develop key messages about the transition process, but be ready to adjust as the context changes. Take the lead from your national staff, rather than following a blueprint from HQ.
- Ensure you fully understand the legal framework of the country (for instance regarding employment law) and any relevant national labour regulations and adjust the communications strategy accordingly.
- Proactively address rumors about the transition to stop mixed messages from circulating and undermining the process.

6. LISTEN TO YOUR STAKEHOLDERS, DURING THE TRANSITION AND BEYOND, TO BUILD TRUST

- Once agreed internally, share the vision and intention of the transition with external stakeholders to gain buy-in.
- When implementing your communications strategy, focus first on building trust and strengthening relationships before discussing the technicalities of the transition process, allowing time and space for critical reflection.
- Where possible, invite senior management from your organization's HQ to visit your country or region to meet with partners and recipients of aid to listen and share.
- Where relevant to your programming, work with national staff to determine the best way to communicate the changes and implications to communities in an open, inclusive way.

ENDNOTES

1. Read more about Stopping As Success on the program website: http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/

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