TALKING POINTS AND CONSIDERATIONS FOR INTERNAL CHAMPIONS OF RESPONSIBLE EXITS AND TRANSITIONS

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BACKGROUND ON STOPPING AS SUCCESS

This document is one of the many practical resources produced by the Stopping As Success (SAS) consortium. This consortium consists of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground (Search), supported by USAID Local Works. SAS is a 3-year collaborative learning project with the goal of promoting locally led development and peacebuilding by bringing greater awareness to the international community of the multiple dynamics at play when ending or transitioning a development program and by providing practical guidance and resources to support donors, INGOs, donors, and CSOs/NGOs when transitioning to a local entity. The SAS team conducted 20 case studies of responsible and successful transitions of INGOs. The case studies illustrate a wide range of transitions, including project handovers, devolution of country offices and the gradual phase outs of INGO presence.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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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.

INTRODUCTION

SAS case studies documented examples of INGO staff at different levels in the organization who championed responsible transition to local entities. In some cases, these internal efforts took place before relevant policies and exit strategies were articulated by senior management at country office or headquarters. Examples include country-level staff advocating for an exit strategy and laying the groundwork for a successful transition process that informed leadership of the best direction. It also includes headquarters-based staff who commissioned presence reviews[1], partnership and capacity reviews and designated focal points to manage transitions.

It is not enough to merely articulate a vision for a transition. Our cases demonstrate that internal advocacy, staff commitment to principled action and support from the senior management enable the management of responsible transitions. We developed this set of considerations and talking points for internal champions who advocate with senior leadership to review existing exit strategies or develop new ones, commence transition planning, and transform partnerships in support of timely and responsible transitions. The talking points are intended for INGO staff at country level and HQs. The talking points draw on illustrative examples from SAS case studies and input gathered during regional review workshops in Washington DC, Bangkok and Nairobi.

RESPONSIBLE TRANSITIONS ARE CRITICAL TO ORGANIZATIONS' CREDIBILITY AND LEGITIMACY

The international commitments to support localization, locally led development and self-reliance of national actors have been made in parallel with rapid changes within civil society across the Global South. There is a growing demand for increasing South-South cooperation.[2] The number of locally established and emerging forms of local philanthropy[3] has increased along with local organizations adapting to the changing realities and needs by creating hybrid organizational models and social enterprises.[4] This changing landscape highlights the need for international organizations to adapt the ways they operate, fund, and partner with others.

International NGOs are keenly aware of the steady decline in development funds[5], the changing nature of partnerships and open challenges to their legitimacy and dominance as external development actors.[6] Some INGOs are already facing the reality that they have to significantly adapt and shift their traditional role as an external development partner and service provider. Among the alternatives described in recent thought pieces is for INGOs to play the role of a convener or broker in processes that help facilitate development by engaging multiple stakeholders to tackle complex development challenges. In the "Fit for the Future? Development trends and the role of international NGOs", Duncan Green at Oxfam GB argues that "At the heart of these changes is the need across all aspects of Oxfam's work to relinquish a command and control approach, in favour of embracing a systems approach. In terms of investment, this means increasing the ratio of 'change capital' to 'delivery capital.'" This and other similar thought papers[7] raise implications for development and peacebuilding INGOs and by extension, for their longstanding and current partners across the globe.

> " I will step out of the spotlight. Sustainable solutions to poverty come from within, are bottom-up, and flow from local leaders who are taking the risks of holding their politicians accountable and challenging the status quo.
>
> From the Sidekick Manifesto

How do these developments in the broader aid landscape reverberate across the INGOs? The governing boards and leadership teams at INGOs are juggling multiple pressing priorities including existential organizational decisions, significant strategic shifts and considerations of alternative operational models. Conversely, the quality of ongoing partnerships and the importance of managing transitions and exits with mutual accountability, transparency, and trust are not always prioritized. The considerations presented below aim to address some of the gaps in how senior leadership links broader commitments to support locally led processes with evolving organizational policies, practices and procedures.

I. EXAMINING AND STAYING TRUE TO ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES AND MEETING OUR COMMITMENTS

TALKING POINTS AND ACTIONS STEPS[8]

a. The development sector and the different actors within it must change and move away from the externally driven aid system and the business as usual. It is imperative that our organization makes principled decisions about its future direction. We can do this by adopting operational models, approaches and roles that genuinely support locally led development and increase self-reliance and resilience of local institutions. If we haven't made commitments to do this already, we ought to start now. If we have made commitments to our local partners, to the governing Board, and have articulated an internal strategy and signed on to external, industry wide benchmarks, let's put these into action.

b. Call for the relevant team in the organization to explain how progress towards these commitments, both internal and external, are being measured.

c. Ask senior management team to regularly report on progress towards these commitments. It is important to establish benchmarks and allocate sufficient resources to track progress and to facilitate the process of adapting approaches and organizing subsequent steps.

d. Agree on a process by which future decisions and resource allocations are made to ensure that the organization closes the gaps in implementing these commitments.

> " I will explore my dark side. Do I want poverty to end? Who would I be without it? What would I do? Do my politics and consumption patterns perpetuate poverty? As I complicit in its persistence?
>
> From the Sidekick Manifesto

> I will ignore sirens singing songs of scale. Building dignified relationships is a mutual process of learning about and from one and other. This takes patience, humility and authenticity – these things cannot be rushed or easily scaled. "
>
> From the Sidekick Manifesto

Your organization has stated its values and commitments related to localization and local ownership. Are these commonly understood by staff at HQ and country offices? Are actions that support these commitments transparently shared and reported on? Talking points and actions steps:

TALKING POINTS AND ACTIONS STEPS

e. If we believe in the goal of "working ourselves out of a job" we need to understand and accept the implications of that goal. How do we determine when our assistance is no longer welcome or needed? Is our continued presence distorting local realities and undermining local capacities?[9] Is it time for our partnerships and relationships with local actors to shift to different modalities (e.g. advocacy, convening, brokering, facilitating, etc)? One place to start is to assess our presence by asking and listening to partners and communities at the country level.

f. Organize an open and internal discussion with program teams and senior management about aspects in the organizational culture that presents barriers for change, incentives for changing institutional size and strategic direction, and the current process for shaping and implementing exit strategies for country programs.

g. Consider the following options that have been used by other organizations to commission operational or presence reviews that informed exit strategies and sustainability planning.

- **Presence reviews** have been used by CARE International (CI) since 2011 to support CI's Transformational Change process and CARE's 2020 strategy. CI's Executive Committee prioritized the need "to identify potential new operating models and country presence that are cost competitive and relevant in light of changing modalities of development assistance" while ensuring the relevance, impact and effectiveness of country office structures.[10] The presence reviews include extensive outreach to external actors, inviting their input to help frame CARE's future presence. As a result, the lessons from presence reviews are not narrowly focused on operational models or decisions on how and when to close country programs and offices and include insights on how CARE's relationships need to change. The presence reviews ask:

  1) How is CARE's partnership landscape shifting with its evolving presence? and
  2) What are the implications of these shifts for CARE's partnership practice and the investment/support required?[11]

- **Exit Strategy reviews and reassessment.** SAS case studies show that very few organizations had a fully articulated exit strategy as the start of country operations. In addition, decisions to exit were driven externally by the leadership team at HQ or the Board and were tied to broader shifts in funding, strategies and geographic priorities. While there are few examples of 'mutually agreed exit strategies'[12] determined in concert with local partners, staff and communities; such collaborative and iterative processes are exactly what local staff and local partner organizations want to engage in. There are several examples of participatory and consultative processes that were followed to shape the exit strategy and transition timeline in SAS cases. One of these is Nuru International transition planning in Kenya.

- **Partnerships quality assessments** are used by INGOs to evaluate the quality and performance of their partnerships and to inform decisions about continued collaboration, priority areas for investments and a timeline for phasing out joint work.[13] Keystone Accountability Partnership Surveys have been used by many INGOs to assess the quality of partnerships and to gather feedback on what future partnerships should look like. Keystone plays a third-party role to collect anonymous feedback and safeguards the sensitive relationship between the international organization and its partners. According to Keystone, a typical survey consists of questions that assess relationship quality, communication, financial support, non-financial support, and others.[14]

2. IMPROVING PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS BY SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY PLANNING AT THE COUNTRY LEVEL

> " I will ride in the sidecar. I will not lead. I will listen as those already doing the difficult work of building a better future for themselves, their families and their communities define and determine how to end poverty.
>
> From the Sidekick Manifesto

What does effectiveness mean in the long run? Long-term development takes generations and should be driven by national and local actors who are embedded in the evolving socio-economic and political context. If we define effectiveness as solely the achievement of intended project objectives in a long string of often disconnected projects across multiple donors and INGOs, we miss the complexity of social change processes that cannot be projectized, packaged and delivered on a donor timeline. Conversely, if our understanding of effectiveness encompasses the cumulative impact of tangible and intangible support and collaboration provided by multiple external and local actors, then we need to improve how we invest in and manage relationships between "insiders" and "outsiders," listen more and cultivate collaborations that elevate local actors, voices and priorities.

TALKING POINTS AND ACTIONS STEPS

a. **How do we know?** Do the current MEAL processes and methods in use capture the many ways that effectiveness and sustainability are understood at the local level by those who are expected to sustain the outcomes? As we look at transitions and exits, have we invited input from partners on how we should measure effectiveness and sustainability after exits?

b. **Whose process?** Local development actors should not be participating in *our* processes, we should be participating in *their* processes. As we begin planning for transitions and exits, have we asked our local staff and partners about their concerns, priorities, plans and strategies? How we can best support them during transitions and beyond?

c. **Sustainability planning beyond projects.** SAS cases highlight critical investments that donors, INGOs, local partners, local communities and governments have made in the past to ensure sustainability of achieved program outcomes. These investments included strengthening the civil society infrastructure by allocating core funds for institutional development of local organizations, by expanding the skills sets and competencies in specific technical areas and non-profit management, and by supporting the development of legal and regulatory regimes (e.g. supporting the establishment and later influencing the regulatory environment for micro-finance institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina). Without a conducive regulatory, legal and political context local organizations cannot flourish and achieve their development objectives. In some cases, external actors fostered the development of local resource mobilization and philanthropy. [15] These past investments signalled an embrace of a systems-based approach that recognized the limitations of building up a single organization or "capacity building" of select staff.

Exit strategies and transition planning done with attention to long-term institutional effectiveness and sustainability should consider the broader context in which local entities operate and how their policy, advocacy, and service provision are impacted by legal and other barriers. These are aspects that INGOs and donors have decreasing influence over in some contexts, but where they still can, ongoing support should ensure that past investments are reinforced and leveraged by local entities.

3.   STRENGTHEN LOCAL AGENCY AND POWER BY SHARING RESOURCES AND REDUCING OUR FOOTPRINT

Continued presence of external actors creates a veritable zero-sum game and competition for scarce development resources. SAS debrief sessions with USAID missions in several countries highlighted the fact that INGOs and other international actors are bidding for the same funding pots that are meant to support locally led development. A global funders collaborative that allocates significant unrestricted funds for poverty reduction designed and driven by local actors has received a steady stream of solicitations from INGOs who make the case for why they should be considered as local actors deeply embedded in the Global South. This behaviour perpetuates competition and inequity and does not enable self-reliance of local actors.

> "
> I will welcome my sidekick slaps. I will make mistakes. And, when I do, I will take responsibility, hold myself accountable and act differently moving forward.
>
> From the Sidekick Manifesto

TALKING POINTS AND ACTIONS STEPS

a. **Recognize when your organization is contributing to detrimental resource competition.** Raise concerns with senior leadership at country and HQ level and take concrete actions to stop competing for resources with local organizations.

b. **Advocate for direct funding for local organizations.** Self-reliance can't be built on handouts. Unrestricted institutional support and core funding is what has allowed many INGOs to grow, flourish and improve their organizational systems. Local organizations need the same opportunity to grow.

c. **Walk the talk on local ownership.** Build relationships with local organizations, trust their abilities and decisions and learn how to relinquish control. Listening to you partners, using collaborative decision-making processes and starting to phase down control over program decisions are all critical steps in this process.

d. **Support local leadership and invest in social capital: from the onset.**

   • Invest time to build relationships with authentic, representative and independent local leaders and organizations.

   • Invite local organizations to meetings and discussions that are often dominated by international organizations, or English-speaking staff and local elites.

   • Make introductions and connect local organizations to potential collaborators and supporters in your network. Facilitate networking and new collaborations wherever possible, and step aside when it is time for them to flourish on their own.

   • Don't build dependency on your support and don't try to become indispensable. Invest in capacity strengthening that is meaningful to local organizations. Share institutional memory, document lessons, transfer tacit knowledge, and equip organizations with the frameworks and templates that they can use to advance their own practice.

   • Educate other donors and peers on how to best support local agency and power and advocate for changes in the current funding criteria and requirements to lift barriers to entry for local organizations.

ENDNOTES

1   Presence reviews are routinely used by CARE International and were documented by SAS consortium in SAS literature review. They are explained further in this document.

2   See proceedings and resources compiled by the United Nations Office for South-South Cooperation https://www.unsouthsouth.org/

3   By emphasizing local resources and capabilities, community philanthropy helps shift the power closer to the people. See more on Global Fund for Community Foundations https://globalfundcommunityfoundations.org/

4   British Council Worldwide. "Kenya: Transforming an NGO to a social enterprise." https://www.britishcouncil.org/education/skills-employability/what-we-do/entrepreneurial-africa/news-events/kenya-transforming-ngo

5   United Nations, "Declining Aid, Rising Debt Thwarting World's Ability to Fund Sustainable Development." September 26, 2019. https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12191.doc.htm; OECD. "Development aid drops in 2018, especially to neediest countries." http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/development-aid-drops-in-2018-especially-to-neediest-countries.htm

6   Deborah Doane, "Are INGOs ready to give up power? Open Democracy, December 10, 2019. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/are-ingos-ready-give-power/

7   See "The Future of International NGOs" by Devex https://pages.devex.com/future-of-international-ngos.html and "The future of big INGOs: ways forward in a fast-changing world" by Penny Lawrence https://www.bond.org.uk/news/2018/12/the-future-of-big-ingos-ways-forward-in-a-fast-changing-world December 11, 2018.

8   The Sidekick Manifesto http://sidekickmanifesto.org/manifesto/

9   See Anderson, Mary. "Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – or War." 1999. Lynne Rienner Publishers.

10   Care International, "Guidance Note: Care International Presence Reviews, Strategy and Business Plans, v.4," (Internal Document, Care International, 2015), 2-3. And "CARE International Learning from Presence Reviews. The Implications of CARE's evolving partnership landscape June 2016" https://prezi.com/xz3_olncir3p/care-international-learning-from-presence-reviews-evolving-partnership-landscape-and-implications/

11   See also "Planning for success from start to exit: a review of literature, policy and practice." Stopping as Success consortium, 2018. http://www.stoppingassuccess.org/

12   INTRAC Praxis Note70 "Working at the Sharp End of Programme Closure: EveryChild's Responsible Exit Principles," June2015 https://www.intrac.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/Praxis-Note-70-EveryChilds-Responsible-Exit-Principles-Final-Lucy-Morris-Head-of-Programmes.pdf

13   See for example an excellent evaluation commissioned by Save the Children Norway "Partnership Review Final Report" https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/13389/pdf/partnership_review_main_report.pdf

14   Keystone Accountability Partnership Survey: https://keystoneaccountability.org/category/partnership-survey/

15   Experience from multiple ex-post evaluations shows that donors and INGOs make many assumptions about what could and would be sustained post program closure, but what is sustained and what becomes impactful in the long run is often not what was expected or assumed. See more lessons on Valuing Voices website, and summarized here: "What can we learn from Ex-Post (Post-Project) Evaluations?" http://valuingvoices.com/whatcanwelearnfromex-postevaluations/