

STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

THOUGHT PIECE RESPONSIBLE TRANSITIONS AND PARTNERSHIPS: ISSUES AT STAKE

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BACKGROUND ON STOPPING AS SUCCESS

This thought piece has 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 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.

INTRODUCTION

While there are many examples of short-lived or severed partnerships in the development sector, our consortium documented illustrative examples of genuine partnerships and relationships that have been sustained over time, even after the external organization had left a country or a region all together. At previous SAS evidence review meetings, learning events and conference panels, we noted a significant amount of questions and requests for lessons and guidelines on how to responsibly transition from long-term partnerships. This thought piece was developed to highlight key lessons learned on partnership transitions during SAS learning process. It complements the practical guidelines on partnership transitions which are available in a separate document on SAS website.¹

PARTNERSHIPS AND AUTHENTIC LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Our case study evidence underscores the nature and quality of partnerships between insiders and outsiders as an essential ingredient for responsible transitions. Over the last several decades, many INGOs have shifted from direct implementation to partnerships with local NGOs and local entities in order to support local development. Despite the increased roles and responsibilities placed on local organizations, many partnerships have been characterized by hierarchies, paternalism and top-down and instrumentalist approaches to partnership- and relationship-building.² Local organizations want to have meaningful collegial relationships and partnerships with trust, respect, transparency, joint decision-making, and commitment to local ownership.

Given the different types of transitions examined by the SAS project, we documented a range of practices and approaches to partnerships that support locally led development. Our case studies demonstrate that partnerships based on collaboration, trust, mutual respect and power-sharing not only lead to more effective and locally relevant programs and activities but allow for more successful transitions and continued relationships between international and local actors beyond exits and transitions. The way transition processes are planned and managed plays an important role in positioning local partners as authentic and capable local development actors and in strengthening continuing relationships and future collaborations.

EARLY STEPS IN PARTNERSHIPS MATTER

How organizations enter into partnerships matters. The soil in which meaningful partnerships grow needs cultivation and regular nourishment to ensure honest, mutually beneficial, and mutually accountable relationships. In many of the successful cases we documented, international organisations invested a great amount of time and resources to build relationships with local entities from the outset. For example, in Mindanao, the Mennonite Church devoted three years solely to relationship building with local communities. This early phase, which took place prior to funding an official program, was important for gaining the trust of local communities impacted by conflict, understanding the needs of the communities, jointly identifying priorities and laying the foundation for future activities.³

VIGNETTE I

In Migori County, Kenya, [Nuru International](#) spent months listening to community members before collaboratively deciding on the nature of their programming and sector focus. Only after close consultation with communities was it decided that the primary development challenge in the area was food security and that this would be the focus of Nuru's work. The communities also encouraged Nuru to implement through a system of cooperatives. Although most INGOs claim to listen and consult local people, unsurprisingly, it is still not the norm and is not always done in a meaningful fashion. Engagement with local actors is often described as tokenistic and paternalistic, and priorities are too often dictated by donor contracts and funding structures. This hinders the possibility of 'a meeting of equals' when it comes to international and local organisations entering into partnerships.

There are numerous examples of INGOs involving local actors as “local implementing partners”, but only a small number of cases where local partners were involved in designing projects and shaping priorities from the very beginning. Our cases illustrate the importance of working together with local actors and potential partners in order to determine the development needs and priorities in the local context. This requires listening and not imposing external agendas, consulting a wide

range of interlocutors and stakeholders and creating space and process to jointly shape strategies, theories of change, plans and program designs. The same is true for the process of transition during which the strength of relationships can be tested by uncertainty and poorly managed and non-participatory processes. To support better practices, we developed practical guidelines for responsible partnership transitions and fostering future collaborations during transitions.⁴

VIGNETTE 2

In Timor-Leste, we documented the establishment of a Timorese organisation, Belun. The founders of Belun (a group composed of internationals as well as Timorese) embarked on a process of “Timorization” which entailed systematic capacity development alongside a phasing out of international support. Timorese leaders were hired from the very start, which allowed for a truly collaborative approach to decision making from the outset.

How partnerships begin influences how they evolve during and after a transition or exit. In cases where open and transparent partnerships were formed between local and international actors from the outset, smoother transitions occurred and partnerships after

exits continued. Long-term strategic partnerships that were mutually reinforcing and provided opportunities for joint learning and continued collaboration after the completion of grants were often shaped by the relationships cultivated at the entry point.

VIGNETTE 3

“Belun began with a relationship.” The story of Belun in Timor-Leste is an excellent example of an intentionally collaborative approach between insiders and outsiders, which shows how you enter a country matters just as much as how you exit it. Belun’s former international staff were invited into Timor-Leste and their peacebuilding and conflict prevention programs were driven by the needs of Timorese people as opposed to the agendas of international donors. The external team took the time to understand the local context, build relationships, and learn the language. The importance of diminishing the language barrier cannot be underestimated as this issue continues to be raised in many critiques about insider-outsider relationships. Belun’s project plans were shaped by local staff and decision-making and management responsibilities were shared among a nucleus of international and Timorese staff with strong pre-existing relationships built on mutual trust. Importantly, although Belun was designed for independence from the beginning, it continues to have a strong relationship with the original co-founders.

DECOLONIZING PARTNERSHIPS: FROM POWER AND COMPETITION TO RESPECT AND COLLABORATION

Against the backdrop of multiple aid effectiveness agendas over the last decades, development donors and organizations have stated intentions and articulated policies on supporting local capacity and local ownership. Our case studies indicate, that indeed, local organizations and communities have received a tremendous amount of capacity strengthening support (some helpful, and some not).⁵ However, when it comes to local ownership and control over decision-making, much remains to be done to decentralize power, decision-making and to shift the current norms.

Developing trust and building equitable partnerships is crucial for supporting locally led development. This requires partnership arrangements to go beyond tokenistic and surface level handovers, and instead working on mutually agreed exit strategies. Otherwise, localisation becomes a process of shifting the locus of activities without addressing structural power imbalances. Shared decision-making and power-sharing in institutional partnership arrangements are critical to rebalancing these relationships and addressing the sense of powerlessness on the part of local actors.

VIGNETTE 4

The partnership transition between Interpeace and its counterpart in Timor-Leste, CEPAD, is a case in point. Interpeace provided financial support to cover CEPAD's core operational costs, as well as technical support in the areas of grant applications, financial management and software. But ultimately Interpeace adopted a "silent partnership" approach, in which it allowed CEPAD to drive its own projects. As noted by one Interpeace staff member: "it is not about sticking our flag in the sand and saying, 'we're here!'" When the transition occurred, there were no big exit events or ceremonies, precisely because only the financial support from Interpeace was coming to an end and not the broader relationship.⁶

IMPLICIT MESSAGES COMMUNICATED THROUGH RESOURCE TRANSFERS AND BEHAVIORS

Implicit ethical messages are communicated through partnerships. They impact the nature and quality of the relationships between external and local actors. These messages can be rooted in neo-colonial ideas about what constitutes capacity, knowledge and expertise, all of which influence the assumptions made by INGOs and donors in their policies and practices. Several empirical research publications

have described how implicit ethical messages convey a lack of respect for local knowledge and existing capacities. These are communicated through attitudes and behaviors towards partners and local staff, and besides shaping everyday practices, they impact development outcomes.⁷ Examples of implicit messages and norms that have negative and positive impacts are offered below for illustration.

Messages and norms with negative impact	Messages and norms with positive impact
<p>A common assumption is that INGOs are entering a capacity-free zone and that outside ‘experts’ are there to teach ‘best practice.’ This signals that ‘we know better.’ As noted by an African participant during a SAS global online consultation: “bringing in experts implies that outsiders have the knowledge that local people are lacking...thereby legitimizing the inequality.”⁸</p> <p>Often local partners are referred to only as service providers, instrumentalized for the purpose of achieving milestones and program objectives. In addition, “local stories” are filtered and told by external organisations as part of their marketing strategy and in an effort to position themselves for more funding. This exacerbates power dynamics and reinforces the narrative frames centered around “passive and voiceless aid recipients” and “external saviors” who arrive to help.</p>	<p>During key informant interviews, the SAS team noted instances of collaboration and knowledge transfers that went beyond traditional top-down models of “capacity-building”. For example, Chrysalis, a social enterprise formed by Sri Lankan staff as part of Care International’s phasing out of Sri Lanka, continues to have a strategic relationship with Care International. Recently, when Care International was delivering a series of gender programs in Sri Lanka, Chrysalis staff were brought in as experts to advise them. This illustrates a case of an equal partnership based on mutual respect and a willingness on the part of the INGO to be influenced by a local entity. The invitation of Chrysalis leadership to advise Care International Secretariat signals respect and acknowledgement of deep expertise and competence that former national partners possess and are willing to contribute.</p>

VIGNETTE 5

Partnership and accompaniment are interchangeable concepts at the Mennonite Central Committee. To accompany a partner is to listen deeply to their needs and the wellbeing of the communities they are serving, provide complementary support to fill gaps, and improve quality of work by better understanding the local context and reporting. MCC works exclusively with local partners, by providing direct support to their programs in most contexts, including in India. Accompaniment, or ‘partnership,’ moves far beyond the provision of training or similar services. Rather, the idea of accompaniment involves in-depth work with multiple institutional aspects and priorities of each organization and community that MCC partners with, in support of holistic organizational and programmatic growth.

FINANCIAL PROCESSES

Funding is another area where power dynamics manifest themselves in partnerships. Even in partnerships where local organizations and communities take part in shaping the programmatic choices, the external organizations and funders still maintain principle control over the use of resources. This is particularly true in cases where unrestricted funding is limited, and only project-based funding is provided. From the perspective of many key informants interviewed for our case studies, rigid funding modalities and mechanisms do not always reflect local concepts and ways of operating which require more flexibility and real-time adaptation.⁹ A Nuru Kenya staff member shared this reflection: “[From previous experience] short-term fragmented approaches don’t work. I’ve been in them for so many years. I’ve wound up their programs according to their work plans. After one

year they’re supposed to run for three years and in the middle, you’re told, stop, change directions, go left. And you have no say. If you don’t change, no more funding.”¹⁰

Expectations regarding financial audits and financial management are unrealistic and inherently disadvantage smaller local organisations and privilege larger and more established national organisations, which are not always representative of the communities they serve. This concern was raised by one participant at our global online consultation: “the requirements of the large donors generally tend to shut out smaller, newer, locally based initiatives – including possibly new and innovative ideas – in favor of large organizations which have the extensive resources needed to meet donor bureaucratic demands and which are all too often set up just to chase new project opportunities, defined by the donors.”¹¹

Vignette 6

In Mindanao (the Philippines), the local organization, Peacebuilders Community Inc (PBCI) and the Mennonite Church developed a relationship that went beyond traditional donor-recipient partnership. The PBCI and the Mennonite Church encouraged local ownership of projects from the start and invested in relationship building with actors at the community level. For example, a budget was allocated for “social contributions” for which receipts could not be produced. Ultimately, the trust and flexibility offered to PBCI by the Church was replicated in the relationships that were formed between PBCI and local communities and eventually between subsequently developed Coffee for Peace social enterprise and local communities.

PBCI staff described a starkly contrasting experience with other international NGOs, noting that local civil society organisations are “forced to use words that the funders can relate with even though it is really not part of their identity.” The few times where PBCI accepted money from other INGOs, staff spent most of their time on administrative tasks and writing reports. Staff spoke about INGOs’ lack of consciousness about local cultural sensitivities: “The way [INGOs] do reporting is not culturally appropriate. In our culture when we go to a house, we bring food. By bringing food we are saying we want to relate with you. But Western financial management systems require that pastors and households sign your vouchers.”

Such bureaucratic processes can pose an obstacle to the development of non-transactional organic relationships with communities. PBCI has since refused to accept funding from other INGOs due to these overly bureaucratic processes and donor requirements, which they felt posed a risk to PBCI’s peacebuilding work with local communities who expect open and trusting relationships. This decision was informed by past experiences with power imbalances with external organizations, described by one senior leader: “It was like we had to be always conscious of the money that was assigned to us. Even when they gave us the money, they had to reaffirm the power they had over us. Every day they would remind us.”

This contrasted with how the Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Central Committee operate. As the budget for “social contributions” demonstrates they listen and interact with communities through focus group discussions and are open to changing their processes in response to the local context. As put by the senior leadership of Coffee for Peace, the Mennonites go into communities “not as teachers but as learners”. This is important when supporting sensitive peacebuilding processes where flexibility and adaptation is key to successful outcomes.

PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS DON’T HAVE TO MEAN AN END TO THE RELATIONSHIP

Partnership transitions should not be equated with advocating for ending partnerships between international and local organizations. As the world continues to grapple with complex challenges that require collaboration, solidarity and support from multiple and different types of actors, partnerships that are based on mutual understanding, shared values and principles, accountability and trust are more important than ever. However, as the international system of support for development and peacebuilding has evolved

around donor-grantee power dynamics, in some institutional quarters the terminology and practice of partnership has gradually lost its authentic meaning. It has too often been reduced to transactional, short-term mechanisms for contracting funds and project labor to the best suited organization. In such cases, partnerships are short-lived and often narrow cast within the results-based management and program delivery frame.

As the discourse and international commitments to support localization and locally led development gains momentum, our lessons and guidelines on transitioning partnerships should not be misunderstood as procedural steps for phasing out relationships. Transitioning

partnerships can be part of the broader process of strategic and sustainability planning in which ongoing partnerships are assessed and transformed to match the strategic objectives of all partnering organizations.

Our evidence shows that long-term relationships and partnerships that adapt to the evolving needs, capacities

and priorities and the peer-to-peer collegiality and solidarity are all critical factors in the long-haul efforts to tackle the most pressing development challenges. It is with this in mind that the SAS consortium developed the practical resources which can be applied to inform your organization's thinking about the future of your partnerships.

ENDNOTES

1. [“Practical guidelines: Responsible transitions and partnerships”](#) on SAS website.
2. SAS Online consultation report [“Aid Exits and Locally Led Development”](#) and SAS literature review [“Planning for success from start to exit: a review of literature, policy and practice.”](#)
3. Case study on Coffee for Peace, PCBI and Mennonite Church Canada on SAS website.
4. [“Practical Guidelines: Responsible transitions and partnerships”](#) on SAS website.
5. SAS guidelines on mutual capacity strengthening and blog post [“What is required for a conducive space for local agency and power?”](#)
6. SAS guidelines on mutual capacity strengthening have further examples of how INGOs and case organizations have shifted their roles in support of ongoing accompaniment and maintaining broader relationships.
7. For more on the “how” of assistance being as important as the “what” of assistance, see Anderson, Brown, Jean, [“Time to Listen: Hearing People on the Receiving End of Aid”](#) (2012), and Autessere, [“Peaceland: Conflict Resolution and the Everyday Politics of International Intervention”](#) (2014).
8. SAS Online consultation report [“Aid Exits and Locally Led Development”](#).
9. SAS resources on [“How to Access Unrestricted Funding”](#) and [“Financial Sustainability in Responsible Transitions.”](#)
10. [Nuru Kenya and Nuru International Case Study](#)
11. SAS Online consultation report [“Aid Exits and Locally Led Development.”](#)

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