MUTUAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING GUIDELINES *for* TRANSITIONS TO LOCAL OWNERSHIP

PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE

This resource provides practical guidelines to practitioners at all levels, and was developed as part of the [Stopping As Success: Locally Led Transitions in Development (SAS+)](#) activity, implemented by a consortium consisting of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Peace Direct, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It draws from 19 case studies of transitions involving international[1] and local actors,[2] as well as through experiences accompanying and learning alongside 10+ SAS+ partnerships with transitions taking place in nearly 30 contexts.[3] Here we highlight mutual capacity strengthening as a way to encourage shared ownership over transition processes and support equitable, authentic partnership, as well as to assist with planning and implementation of capacity strengthening activities during responsible transitions, such that they enable locally led development.

AUDIENCE

Though intended for practitioners, there are multiple additional stakeholders to whom this resource will be useful. In particular, those in charge of institutional learning, and those determining capacity strengthening and support activities. The relevant parties for this resource include:

1. Local and international actors within the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors
2. Donors and funders of transition processes

Responsible transition refers to a jointly led, planned, and gradual process of transfer of technical and procedural ownership from an international to local level, while maintaining some form of relationship. Responsible transitions can happen at an organizational, programmatic, or activity level. They focus on achieving a shared vision of transition that sets up local actors to sustain and grow their impact.

This resource addresses familiar challenges to capacity strengthening and new challenges drawn from our experience relevant for anyone planning, implementing, or funding a transition process. For simplicity, in many instances this resource directly addresses 'international' and 'local' audiences. However, those using the guidance may take liberty to tailor advice as appropriate. Finally, this guidance is not sector specific. Guidelines are meant to be organizational and relational, rather than tailored to a specific type of programming.

SUMMARY

Capacity strengthening during programmatic[4] and organizational transitions[5] should be considered a joint, mutually beneficial process; one that not only addresses a diversity of needs but also acknowledges the context and power dynamics surrounding a transition. In practice, international actors and donors based in the Global North are often defining the timeframes and benchmarks within transitions, including the capacity strengthening criteria for local actors involved. This imbalance of power in decision-making and determining priorities often leads to a lack of consideration for how the partnership can grow capacities or transform each actor involved.

Partners learn from each other during capacity strengthening processes in transitions, and, as a result, grow and change. International actors learn a great deal about local contexts and the appropriateness of certain development models and program designs from local staff, partners, and other interlocutors. They test ideas, strategies, and programmatic options with local actors and communities and (often, though not always) learn from their failures and successes. Likewise, local actors learn from the experience of international colleagues from other contexts, as well as international standards and innovations.

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[1] 'International actors' refers to the range of individual practitioners and consultants, networks, and the leadership and staff within organizations whose programmatic and operational work takes place across multiple geographies that are not limited to one country.

[2] 'Local actors' recognizes the diversity of people working in their communities or at the sub-national or national level. It encompasses individuals, communities, networks, and practitioners working in nongovernmental or community-based organizations, private entities, and governments that set their own agendas, develop solutions, and lead to make those solutions a reality.

[3] SAS+ partners (case study partners and partners in accompaniment) have been based in Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Colombia, DRC, Dominican Republic, Georgia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Liberia, Moldova, Morocco, Myanmar, Netherlands, New Zealand, Nigeria, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Uganda, UK, USA, and partners spread across multiple geographies. Examples of SAS+ partnerships include local organizations transitioning into leading and managing an activity or a project, international organizations and their country office(s) planning to transition into an independent entity, and donors looking to understand how responsible transitions can be better planned for, among other forms of partnerships during transitions.

[4] Programmatic transitions refer to the transfer of responsibility of a project or activity.

[5] Organizational transitions refer to transitions that may happen outside the scope of a project or grant, and often involve a transfer of responsibility or ownership of a local office/entity to local staff.

SAS+ defines **mutual capacity strengthening** as a process where all entities in a transition engage as equal partners to explore and strengthen relevant skills, knowledge, experience, and network contacts.[6]

These practical guidelines combine our findings across both[7] the SAS (2017-2020) and SAS+ (2021-2025) projects:

1. **Transitions should consider making capacity strengthening a mutual process.** This challenges existing power dynamics and false assumptions that local partners are the only ones who need capacity strengthening, and allows for a greater sense of shared ownership over the transition.

2. **It takes more than mutual capacity strengthening to plan and implement a responsible transition.** In addition, responsible transitions often factor in communication norms and practices, a transition vision shared by all partners, transition champions, and more.

3. **All partners should consider their existing capacities and explore capacity needs relevant for their role in a transition.** Capacities such as material and operational support, and support that addresses power imbalances and builds trust, should not just be a focus for local actors, but should be considered by all actors.

4. **The starting point for mutual capacity strengthening is listening, and it remains essential throughout the transition.** Create space for active listening to be able to understand existing capacities, capacity gaps relevant for the transition, and the long-term interests of each entity[8] to see if the transition could support those as well.

5. **Mutual capacity strengthening processes should use shared language and inclusive framing.** Language matters as an indication of 'whose learning and capacities' are important during transition. Inclusive framing over the process avoids misunderstandings about the transition and each other's role in carrying it out. This is also an effective way to promote solidarity, respect, and a shared vision.

6. **Clearly outline roles for mutual capacity strengthening.** This should be done at the onset of the transition, prior to making decisions about capacity needs. These roles should be complementary, avoid redundancy, and should factor in essential 'soft' skills; empathic listening, mutual respect, and open dialogue are effective in dealing with challenges during the transition. Additionally, establishing a clear, shared vision for the transition from the design phase is crucial to maintain accountability in the roles and the actions taken on by partners in transition.

7. **Determine capacity strengthening priorities mutually, and narrow the focus to support what transition stakeholders say matters most.** Provide support that strengthens existing agency and is customized to the needs of the partners in transition, as well as the aims of the transition itself. Consider capacity strengthening beyond training, and that will address needs in addressing power and build trust, as well as organizational and technical support.

8. **Regularly reflect on mutual capacity strengthening activities and progress towards the transition vision and objectives, as well as interest and opportunities for continued partnership.** Having pause and reflect moments with a focus on mutual capacity strengthening processes allows for reflection on both how mutual or not the partnership is, as well as the actual progress in strengthening capacities. This supports adaptability within the transition, and allows for greater awareness of the ways that make sense to remain in partnership or otherwise connected post-transition.

By inclusively exploring existing capacities and needs among all entities, the transition will be able to prioritize what is most relevant for both the current priorities in implementation, and the local entity's continued impact beyond the transition. The process of shifting decision-making and authority from internationally to locally led not only requires careful planning on how this is done, but also consideration of who is involved, and what types of support matter most during these processes.

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[6] This definition has been adapted from Fair, Green & Global Alliance's Mutual Capacity Development (2017).
[7] SAS+ sought not only to generate new learning in the current phase of the project, but also sought validation of existing learning, including through sourcing feedback from SAS+ champions and partners.
[8] SAS+ uses the term 'entity' to refer to a range of organizations, social enterprises, networks, and other organizational structures that we have seen be a part of transition processes. 'Organizations' will be used throughout the document to refer to specific examples and for referring to organizations involved in SAS+ case studies.

UNPACKING MUTUAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING

This section will address the questions: Why "mutual capacity strengthening"? What are examples of mutual capacity strengthening in practice?

The humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors are grappling with approaches to advance local ownership, and to work towards locally led development[9] and decolonization[10] in practice. Specifically, many international actors and donors are turning to capacity strengthening as a solution to increase locally led development and support local sustainability and impact.

Several challenges come with these well-intended efforts, which often fail to understand the interests of local actors. "Training from INGOs is often a blanket package, not contextualized, often irrelevant for local contexts."[11] When capacity strengthening activities are not tailored to the context, existing capacities, nor the goals for the transition of the local actors, it is often not useful. Though this is not to discredit some of the ongoing advancements and innovation in capacity strengthening activities and processes, SAS+ has heard from local actors that "we must get past the training paradigm."[12] The 'paradigm' in this sense is not merely the prevalence and persistence of training methodologies, but also how capacity is delivered, the assumptions behind whose capacities need developing and why their capacities need strengthening, and even what capacities are prioritized and by whom, are at the foundation of the issue. However, when locally-driven, "capacity [strengthening] is not a waste of time, but can be important and constructive."[13] Furthermore, SAS+ has seen that exploring the capacities of all actors and addressing them mutually further breaks traditional training paradigms and allows for a more authentic sharing of capacity in transitions.

Approaches to mutual capacity strengthening beyond the training paradigm

How capacity strengthening and support activities are provided during transition differs, though many often center around classic training approaches. Beyond training, a simple list of recommended approaches for international actors during transition include:

- **Resource mapping exercises to assist in strategic decision-making during transition.** Determine skill or resource gaps, and identify individuals and institutions with relevant knowledge, skills, and/or material resources to assist either in an indirect or more direct role.

- **Approaches that build on relationships with local authorities by including them in support activities.** Engaging government and local authorities during and after transition can be critical for a program or organization's successful continuation. Local authorities are often aware of, if not working directly with, local staff, partners, or communities already. Engage this key stakeholder group at the outset of transition planning, throughout capacity strengthening processes, and during the life of the new organization.

- **Approaches that intentionally recognize and break down power differentials between team members.** Support relationship and team skill-building activities that emphasize active listening, the sharing of lived experience, open discussion, and shared notions of accountability and respect particularly between external and local staff.

- **General accompaniment approaches.** Develop a 'transition plan' that defines the intended accompaniment process including how to manage expectations and relationships. Also, as transitions are not always straightforward, include in this a timeline to reassess the accompaniment approach and/or adapt based on emergent information and lessons.

An additional challenge that exists is a prevalent assumption among international actors that is harmful to achieving equitable partnership; that capacity strengthening is only necessary for local actors. This **traditional view of a one-sided transfer of**

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[9] SAS+ uses the word "local" to refer to people within their own context, which may be at a community, sub-national, or national-level. We see "locally led development" as local actors owning and setting their own agendas, developing solutions, and leading to make those solutions a reality.
[10] Locally led development and decolonization can be mutually supportive, but are distinct. Decolonization seeks to address the roots of colonization within modern systems, so solutions often seek to create new systems while dismantling the old.
[11] Participant, Stopping As Success regional evidence review meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, March 2019.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Quote from consultation participant, SAS online consultation, October 2017. Cited in: "INGOs as Yeast, Not the Flour," CDA, April 2018.

capacity reinforces existing power dynamics[14] rather than challenging them, which should be a key component of any effort meant to contribute to locally led development and decolonizing the sector. As international actors look inward, more and more are identifying internal mentality and knowledge gaps, as well as their own capacity strengthening needs to foster quality partnerships with the Majority World, fund more sustainably, work more responsibly with their local counterparts, and ultimately better fulfill their missions.

There is an organic exchange of know-how, lessons, insights, and tacit knowledge gained from real-time experimentation. Local actors are often operating in ways that require them to remain highly adaptive based on the immediate needs of their context. Capacity strengthening, therefore, should also allow for adaptation and the flexibility to test new and dynamic approaches, and to respond to ongoing and remaining needs while capacity strengthening activities are being carried out. When we fail to acknowledge this and continue to push for mono-directional "capacity strengthening" from international actor to local actor, we risk reproducing poor and colonial development practices that compound the challenges that local actors face when navigating the sector.

This is why SAS+ believes in **mutual capacity strengthening,** or **a process where all entities in a transition engage as equal partners to explore and strengthen relevant skills, knowledge, experience, and network contacts.** Mutual capacity strengthening can and should look differently depending on the partnership and existing capacities of all actors, as well as the transition goals and objectives. International and local entities undergoing transition will have unique needs, based on contextual and relational factors, as well as existing capacities.

> **Transitioning is not the same as Mutual Capacity Strengthening**
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> **Responsible transitions often involve mutual capacity strengthening, but transitions should not be mistaken for capacity strengthening processes alone.** In addition to mutual capacity strengthening, responsible transitions involve a shared vision that captures what the goals of the transition and partnership(s) supporting it are, clarified roles and responsibilities necessary to achieve the shared vision of transition, agreed upon communication norms, identified transition champions, as well as the criteria for the transition specified. For support with transition planning, see the SAS+ Transition Plan Template.

GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING MUTUAL CAPACITY STRENGTHENING PROCESSES DURING TRANSITION

This section will address best practices with mutual capacity strengthening, and how to integrate this into your transition.

Regardless of which types of capacities are involved (i.e., before, during, or after transition), the purpose of capacity strengthening is to enable changes that are sustained over time and tailored to existing abilities and needs. In order for mutual capacity strengthening to contribute meaningfully to sustainable change, it must be deliberate in seeking to understand and build around all actor's needs in order to foster ownership of the transition process and leave the local entity well-positioned for post-transition success. To this end, there are many instances where useful support during transitions is often not 'classic' capacity strengthening in the form of training.[15] Support that clarifies roles for joint learning and joint action, develops respectful framing of capacity strengthening processes, and touches on key themes such as strong organizational systems, psychosocial and mentoring needs, and leadership skills, also deserves attention during transitions.[16]

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[14] Power imbalances are common across the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding fields, with donors and international actors often writing grants or proposals that are designed with minimal local leadership or insight, and thus, the priorities that are addressed through this work are often not fully (and at times, not even partially) reflective of local needs.

[15] Though, to be clear, training was at times important for achieving some specific capacity strengthening objectives (e.g., technical training to assist program managers and other implementers). Read more in the SAS+ issue paper on Capacity Development in Responsible Transitions.

[16] Refer to the SAS+ issue paper on Leadership and Champions in Responsible Transitions which offers a short typology of leaders and champions that may exist and serve as important resources during transition.

Listening at the start and throughout the transition

The starting point for mutual capacity strengthening is listening, and it remains essential throughout the transition. Part of that process involves **understanding existing capacities and strengths** that can support the transition. Another consideration that aids a mutual capacity strengthening process is **what partners want to achieve and how they want to grow post-transition.** For local actors, this could be technical areas of focus or network partners they are interested in collaborating with; for international actors this could be learning how best to support local actors with capacity strengthening and partnership, or testing methodological approaches. Once there is shared understanding, develop capacity strengthening activities that support each entity's goals and consider their context.

To support effective listening and planning sessions for mutual capacity strengthening, SAS+ has seen the following questions for all actors (international and local) be effective across several key decision-making stages of a transition:

Stage of Transition	Key Questions
When working in a new context	• How can we develop respectful, transparent, and accountable relationships and maintain these for the life of the project? • What is our proposed work adding to this community/context? Were we invited to do this work? Who are we doing it alongside? • How can we ensure sustainability once our proposed work is finished?
Co-creation / co-design This stage is important, especially when a transition process may need to be accelerated, making it easy for key people to quickly feel 'left out'.	• Who needs to be included in strategic decision-making conversations? • How should strategic decisions be communicated so all staff feel there is shared transparency throughout the process? • In the spirit of sustainability, what capacities would we need to strengthen to be effective once our proposed work is done? What strengths already exist that will support sustainability? • What resources exist to support the needed capacity strengthening activities?
As soon as a transition process begins It is critical to involve local communities as soon as transitions begin, if not sooner; transitions to local entities do not always intentionally include community perspectives.	• What are the roles of each entity when it comes to assessing capacity, determining priorities for the capacity strengthening activities, and carrying out those activities? • What steps do we need to take to make this a mutual process that all actors feel bought into, and power dynamics are accounted for? • What role will local community stakeholders play in this process?
Post-transition In some cases, this is also where the formal partnership ends, but SAS+ has seen that continued partnership post-transition supports sustainability of the outcomes.	• Are there further areas of support or capacities needed by any actor involved in the transition? • What else is needed to support a useful discussion about the transition's capacity strengthening objectives, and the possibility of continued partnership?

Shared language and inclusive framing of mutual capacity strengthening processes

Language matters. It is often used to underscore power dynamics and assumptions around what learning/capacities are important enough to be strengthened.[17] To see language simply as a tool to describe or explain ideas would be to miss the politics of how its use can shape concepts, narratives, and debates. As a participant in an online SAS+ consultation shared, "language is also [often] used to construct the realities of certain actors."

For practitioners, at the essence of any responsible transition is the understanding that **nuanced, inclusive, and respectful language can signal solidarity, respect, and a shared vision.** When framing the mutual capacity strengthening process, it's important to avoid unnecessary jargon, as well as terms that don't resonate with all actors. For example, it can be helpful to jointly define the terms 'local' and 'external' and who is represented or not by those terms with communities and partners. These categorizations mean different things to different actors, and thus require contextualization.

Clearly outline roles for mutual capacity strengthening

A few themes and patterns have emerged from SAS+ work that can help guide those considering roles for mutual capacity strengthening activities.

- **Role clarity is vital at the outset, prior to decision-making about support activities.** Create space for active listening to ensure all actors are able to gain clarity in each other's role and how those roles interact to assess, prioritize, and achieve the targets for mutual capacity strengthening. This includes organizational roles, as well as the roles of individual key staff involved in the transition. This action helps to manage expectations, avoid miscommunication by establishing responsibilities clearly, and contribute the trust necessary for nurturing ongoing collaborations.[18]

- **Capacity strengthening roles should be complementary and avoid redundancy.** This might require a joint SWOT analysis for local and international actors, communities, and government or donor partners to inform strategic team building and planning.

- As transitions can take place over the course of many months or multiple years, partners should **consider how to institutionalize the capacities strengthened.** This supports sustained impact of the strengthened capacities in the case of staff turnover during the course of a transition or afterwards.

- 'Essential skills' (more commonly referred to as 'soft' skills) are a key ingredient during role clarification processes, particularly for those leading mutual capacity strengthening activities. SAS+ evidence highlights that **transitions benefit from teams that prioritized empathic listening, mutual respect, and open dialogue as a means to overcome misunderstandings, frustrations, and other barriers when navigating shifting roles.** These 'essential skills' require attention and no small level of effort in their application.

- This step of ensuring **shared understanding over each actor's role** to carry out mutual capacity strengthening from the design phase **is crucial to maintaining accountability** in the roles and the actions taken on by partners in transition.

Determine capacity strengthening priorities mutually, and focus support[19] on what transition stakeholders say matters most

Consider enhancing transparency of the process by jointly determining with all key stakeholders: **Whose capacities need strengthening? Who is responsible for capacity strengthening activities? What is the most context-appropriate approach for achieving this?** Early conversations between international stakeholders, local leaders, and communities must address these questions, as they are important for establishing shared priorities and expectations. Any discussion of expectations should consider long-term impact within communities, as well as the investment in staff time and resources to carry out the planned activities. These conversations also provide early opportunities to create appropriate communication channels between stakeholders, if these don't already exist, fostering transparency and participatory decision-making.

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[17] For more on this, see the SAS+ Legitimacy and Power in INGO Transitions thought piece. A helpful external resource on this topic is Oxfam's Inclusive Language Guide: https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/inclusive-language-guide-621487/
[18] Refer to our Responsible Transitions and Partnerships: Issues at Stake and Practical Guidelines for further resources on principles and guidelines for developing stronger partnerships.
[19] 'Support' here refers to knowledge and skill-building support, in addition to moral and physical (material) support.

Continued check-ins and feedback can then be used to monitor the quality of capacity strengthening processes and adapt them to emerging needs and circumstances. There should always be an option to stop joint learning or mutual capacity strengthening efforts if those involved feel they are no longer productive or collaborative.

Based on SAS+ learning, **four broad types of support activities matter most to stakeholders in the midst of a transition process: psychosocial support, organizational support, leadership support, and material support.** It is important to note that several of these key support elements require very little time or resources, making them particularly important for entities undergoing a transition with minimal dedicated funding to support it.

1   **Support that addresses power and builds trust (psychosocial or moral support).** Many international entities considering transitions have long institutional histories in the contexts where they operate; histories which haven't always been rooted in equal power sharing or equitable handovers. In many instances, mentoring and psychosocial support are critical for those engaged in a transition to ensure collegiality and confidence building. For instance, developing formal or informal structures that ensure long term relationships are maintained, jointly determining what knowledge is relevant to boost confidence and finding the means to provide this, or jointly deciding if team building sessions would be valuable.

Local and international actors looking to develop useful support activities should consider:
- Conducting a power analysis and capacity assessment prior to transition and discussing findings with international and community stakeholders.
- Jointly prioritizing areas where mutual coaching and confidence building may benefit the longer-term learning and support process.

2   **Organizational support (organizational systems and knowledge strengthening).** Capacity strengthening that focuses on bolstering organizational systems can help new or growing entities run smoothly and competently and establish positive reputations at national and community level. Strong systems support institutional development, accountability, transparency, and comprehensive learning.

Ideas and advice to develop useful support activities for all partners:
- Consult local accounting and financial experts, or local anti-corruption/anti-fraud groups, on good practices and locally compliant financial, administrative, and operational systems.
- In cases where an international entity's local office is transitioning into an independent entity, invest in joint organizational system development with local staff throughout the duration of the international entity's programming in the country. In this way when transitions do occur, there will already be strengthened capacities.[20]
- Invest in support packages from the beginning of the transition discussions to strengthen resource mobilization and fundraising capacities (including proposal writing, fundraising strategy development, and institutional and private donor cultivation and relationship management). Several SAS+ partners have seen value in part of this support including drafting a business plan, which we've seen done effectively internally or through the support of an in-country consultant. The SAS+ Financial Sustainability in Responsible Transitions issue paper and guidelines on how to support financial sustainability during and after transition would be critical resources to consult.

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[20] This does assume that staff from the local office transition into roles within the new or independent local entity, as staff turnover can be a challenge, especially if the initial transition discussions and decision-making processes do not meaningfully include local staff. Involving all impacted staff in these critical processes fosters greater transparency and shared ownership of the transition which, in turn, supports staff retention and the sustainability of the transition.

3 **Support for and development of leadership through individual leadership skills, as well as organizational mindsets and governance structures** is often necessary in transitions where a local entity is being formed or taking on ownership of an activity involving a high level of coordination. Developing leadership skills during transition was considered by several SAS case study organizations as "perhaps the single most important ingredient in the change management process."[21]

When determining roles, the individuals or groups driving or leading a local entity forward will often become evident, and should have significant sway in determining the team dynamic. Once established, such leaders may also choose to identify areas for further support, to continue developing skills and leadership expertise. Or, depending on the arrangement during a transition, the international entity may require additional information to know how to develop and/or remotely or indirectly support leadership capacity strengthening.

Some ideas and insights to support the capacities of leaders and transition champions[22] include:
- **Ongoing accompaniment to effectively communicate as a leader,**[23] including managing donor and community expectations during transition and communicating to external partners.
- **Collaborative visioning and identity formation discussions** to help leaders establish an appropriate mandate and mission for the new entity, if necessary. Doing this internally across different teams and listening to what community members would value and respect in a local entity helps make this process transparent and accountable.

Local and international actors might consider the importance of hiring external consultants (preferably at the national or community level) specializing in communication or messaging to work with leaders and Boards. Utilize this for leadership with international entities as well, who may be new to handing over leadership and management to a local entity.

4 **Material support during transition.** Material assistance, though not a typical or classic type of 'capacity strengthening' resource, can become a powerful tool for local entities navigating complex transition processes. An example of this could look like a donation and/or writing off assets as an investment into local entities' sustainability by reducing their operational costs,[24] such as investing in funding staff time to plan and implement transitions, purchasing a new office space, or providing seed funding.

Approaches that prioritize flexibility, adaptation, mutual vulnerability, and some degree of risk-taking have been shown to benefit mutual capacity strengthening in transitions to local ownership. For one local entity in Thailand, allowing room for 'experimentation' with their partners allowed both parties in the partnership to attempt a trial-and-error approach, knowing there would be risks and possible failures before learning and capacity strengthening was achieved. This 'experimentation' took several years but eventually worked: it produced sustainable organic farming outcomes, was approved as a valid process by others within the community, and strengthened the relationship between farmers and the local entity supporting them.

Regularly reflect on capacity strengthening activities and progress towards the transition vision and project objectives, as well as interest and opportunities for continued partnership

Ensure that regular reflection captures updates and learning within the mutual capacity strengthening process. Having pause and reflect moments with a focus on mutual capacity strengthening processes allows for reflection on both how mutual or not the partnership is with regards to capacity strengthening, as well as the actual progress in strengthening capacities. This supports adaptability within the transition, creating space for all actors to discuss what is or is not working with mutual capacity

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[21] Great Lakes Inkingi Development (GLID) case study.
[22] 'Transition champions' are individual staff within a transition organization that are dedicated to supporting the development of a transition plan and regularly coordinating with partners to see the plan carried out or adapted as necessary. Also refer to the SAS+ Issue Paper on Leaders and Champions in Responsible Transitions.
[23] See our Communicating INGO Transitions issue paper for different approaches to communication (e.g., early, phased, brokered, organic, or structured approaches to communication).
[24] See our Financial Sustainability guidelines for more examples.

strengthening, and how best to tailor capacity strengthening activities to the current set of needs, which can shift and evolve over the course of the transition.

SAS+ has found that **outcome harvesting,** and looking back to understand not just intended outcomes but also **identifying emergent and unintended outcomes, is useful when reflecting on transitions and processes involving accompaniment and partnership.**

Reflection is also important when determining the endpoint in a transition, which is not always narrowly time-bound, and can also be based on the meeting of certain objectives, including those related to mutual capacity strengthening. At the same time as mutual capacity strengthening and other transition activities are winding down, actors should ask and reflect on what interests and opportunities exist for continued support. We have identified several that we've seen in practice below:

- **Ongoing professional / collegial relationship between international and local entities after transition to provide advice, solidarity, and ad hoc support.** International entities show solidarity by simply 'staying close by,' even if no physical or material support is being provided to a new entity. This demonstration of solidarity, providing support to emergent capacity or other needs, shows committed partnership throughout the challenging process of growing and developing a new entity. For instance, in the Philippines, communication between former program staff and volunteers continued informally in the form of personal and professional updates. Volunteers also chose to invite ex-staff to return as trainers and resource persons on an ad hoc basis.

- **Larger international entities' managing funds during transition to ease initial administrative burden on new entities,** allowing room for growth and capacities to further develop. In Burundi, the U.S. Embassy – aware of a local organization's thoughtful and effective work – requested their partnership. However, the local entity was unable to meet the U.S. government's financial requirements. A former trainer with the local organization was, in parallel, directing an American non-profit that had prior approval to receive U.S. assistance. The American non-profit facilitated a partnership with the local organization so that the latter met the administrative and other compliance requirements of the U.S. Embassy and work could proceed.

- **A 'hands on' technical support role providing observation and oversight on the ground.** In Guatemala, specialized field officers within an international organization continued observing savings groups. They provided ongoing mentoring or coaching to these groups to ensure technical skills and knowledge were passed on.

- **A 'hands-off' role of international entities who transition entirely out, to allow space for communities and local entities to grow.** For example, an international entity might introduce local leaders to their network, open doors, and make recommendations, then 'exit' so that local leaders can forge their own partnerships, relationships, and collaborations. In Burundi, the Country Director of a local organization pushed for space so they and their partners could grow and further develop current work into broader social movements.
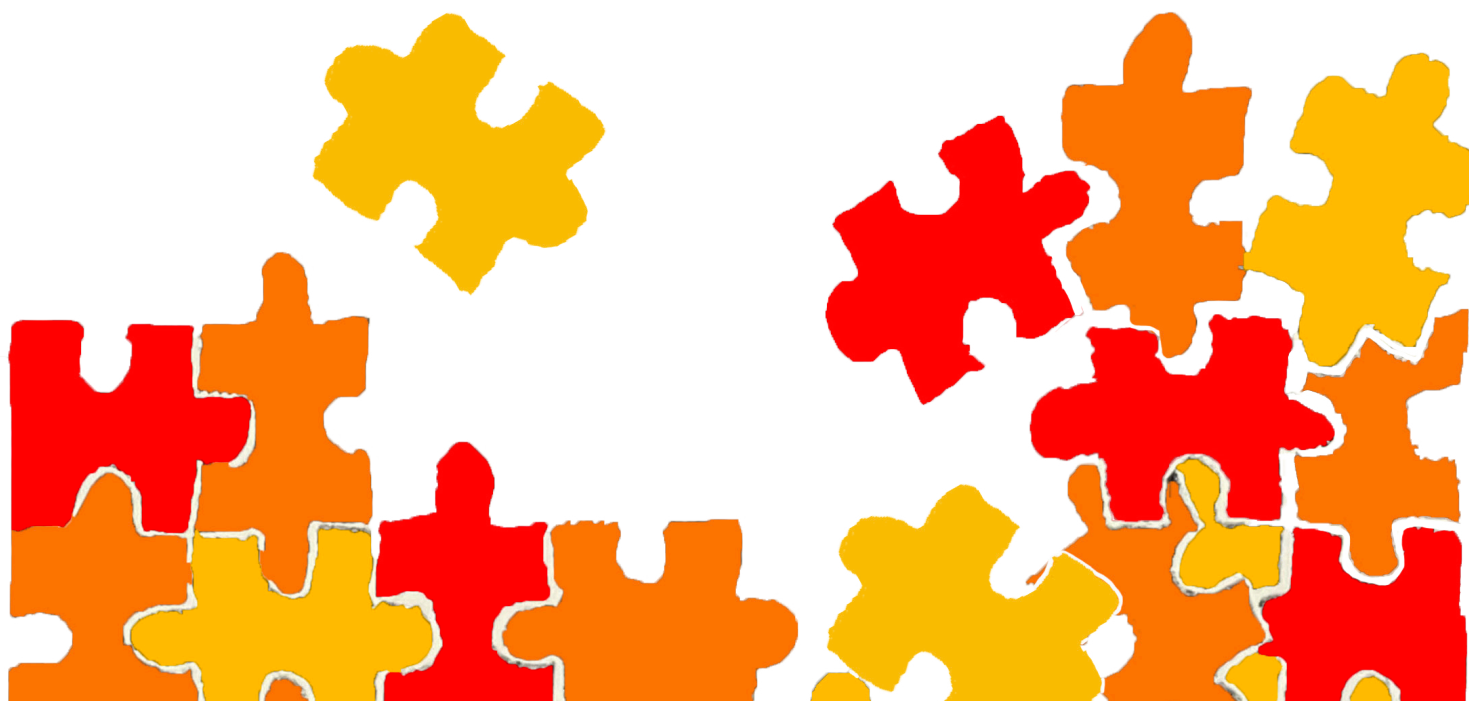
Local to International Capacity Strengthening. SAS+ has seen numerous examples of local actors sharing capacities with international actors, and supporting donor learning as well, including:

Significant existing social capital within communities and the lived experience of staff

Many local actors driving transition processes are well networked within the communities they work in, local government departments, as well as other entities operating at the community or national level. Many play a bridging role between governments, communities, and other international entities. From a sustainability standpoint, it is important for international actors to recognize and support these existing systems within transitions, and to recognize that not all local actors will need support to build social capital. Additionally, the staff that make up these entities have both professional and personal knowledge and experiences that can provide valuable insight into transition planning and implementation.

Expertise in determining appropriate organizational models

In many instances, local actors have already determined appropriate organizational models suitable for their respective contexts. In the SAS+ Georgia case study, BRIDGE studied other local Georgian organizations to teach themselves about a range of governance and organizational models that worked well in their context. In the SAS+ Bosnia and Herzegovina case study, the local entity (Partner) established a successful governance model. In fact, the model worked so well that the international entity (Mercy Corps) retained two positions on the Board for both governance and observational value – to inform Mercy Corps microfinance programming elsewhere. In the SAS+ Colombia case study, the local entity (SOS Colombia) instituted wide-scale operational changes to successfully transition the organization and also enable rapid scale up post-independence.

Learning that contributes to wider organizational transition or other strategies that aim to increase locally led development

SAS+ worked with many entities who were simultaneously planning multiple transitions and used the learning from their first transition to support a wider strategy, including hosting learning exchanges with previously transitioned country offices and offices going through or planning for transitions. HelpAge International, an organization dedicated to promoting the wellbeing of older men and women across the world, has been going through their own transition with 13 country offices. Their Transformation Team put in place a "localization strategy" that brought to light the various governance models adopted by their transitioning country offices to shape the future of their work. These models – the nationalization model, social enterprise model, and non-nationalization/network based model – have allowed the HelpAge International Transformation Team to be able to support and learn from diverse transitions, and thereby cement themselves as a thought leader in this space.

Increasing donor capacity to support locally led development in their funding practices

Mutual capacity strengthening doesn't have to be limited to actors implementing a transition, but can also factor in donors by demonstrating strong practices or approaches that can impact the ways donors make funding decisions in the future. SAS+ has worked with a USAID Mission implementing a USAID Transition Award Process[25] involving an international prime supporting a local subrecipient (who has not previously worked with USAID) to strengthen capacities necessary to prime a USAID award while implementing an activity, with the intention of the subrecipient eventually transitioning into becoming the prime recipient of a USAID award. By working together from the beginning of the award to structure a capacity strengthening process that would ultimately prepare the subrecipient for a prime opportunity with USAID, implementing partners were able to demonstrate the local subrecipient's expertise, skills, and growth of organizational systems to inform USAID's decision on the local subrecipient's readiness to prime. This process allows for strengthening of the local actor's capacities, while also increasing the number and diversity of USAID's local partners, which supports Agency strategies and targets[26] on funding directed to local organizations.

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[25] See USAID's ADS Reference 303mbb for details on transition award processes.
[26] https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2022-12/USAIDs_Localization_Vision-508.pdf

Related to this, SAS+ has helped to facilitate exchanges of learning and experience between local actors. For instance, with one of our local helpdesk partners, Talking Drum Studio Liberia (TDS Liberia, which transitioned from being Search for Common Ground's Liberia country office) reached out to SAS+ asking to be connected with a SAS+ case study organization who had also transitioned from a country office to an independent, nationally-registered local organization (BRIDGE Georgia). The **interest in local-to-local capacity strengthening and learning exchange is important to consider** when engaging in mutual capacity strengthening, especially in cases when advancing locally led development is a goal or motivating factor for the transition.

International to Local Capacity Strengthening. SAS+ has also seen a number of capacities that international actors shared with local actors in transitions, included in the categories listed below. The range of examples come from SAS+ support to and learning with partners in transition when there was a pre-established local entity that was taking on leadership, as well as cases when a new local entity was formed as a result of a transition. An additional consideration when reviewing these examples is highlighted by the SAS+ CARE Morocco case study, where local actors felt international actors could contribute effectively by strengthening several capacities, **"as long as it was properly tailored to local needs and was not an imposition."** International actors, donors, and other entities interested in supporting local actors' efforts to strengthen capacity will find this section useful.

Partnership and networking

Many local actors are well-networked on their own, but are still interested in expanding that network further, particularly in gaining greater visibility with regional or international actors and donors. For example, SAS+ has seen international actors play a valuable role in establishing strong relationships (particularly within government and donor partners) and facilitating introductions with local actors during and after transition.

Governance and leadership

Leadership skills were considered by several original SAS case study organizations to be a critical element for any change management process.

Organizational structures and policies

This support focused on the development of clearly articulated values and principles, and strong administrative systems that ensure organizational transparency and accountability. Local entities, especially those transitioning in fragile or conflict-affected contexts, benefit from this type of support given the low-trust environments in which they often operate.

Strategy development

Where strong local leadership is already in place, strategic vision for post-transition entities often comes naturally. When necessary, search for experienced consultants or staff involved in the transition that can help further develop necessary strategic planning skills.

Financial management

Training in business development and financial management was cited by nearly all of SAS+ accompaniment partners and case study organizations as either a need or a major asset that they received. For more, see the SAS+ Practical Guidelines for Financial Sustainability.

Knowledge management

Strengthening the skills required to manage key documents and records like core policies, legal records, program or partnership contracts, monitoring and evaluation reports, activity reports, etc was seen as valuable by many of our partners. Such skills include knowing how to manage relevant knowledge management platforms (e.g., Google Drive) or developing and managing organizational processes (e.g., flow charts) to track who is updating key documents and when.

Evaluation and learning

During a transition, ongoing feedback and learning is imperative. Thus it can be necessary to strengthen internal feedback collection, analysis, and utilization skills to continually improve programming and transition activities. This also involved collecting

and using partner and community feedback to assess effects at the community level. In many instances, these skills exist before transition and/or are developed by local entities during and immediately after the process, such as in SAS+'s [SOS Colombia](#) and [Raks Thai](#) cases (skills were often self-taught). Consider joint design of feedback processes during transition, in which international and local actors continuously navigate challenges as they emerge.[27]

Program management

This involved assisting local actors through training and support in program management knowledge and skills, such as proposal writing, donor reporting, and the development and management of program budgets. Technical skills training to assist with ongoing program implementation is also useful.

Accompaniment

An example of this form of capacity strengthening support comes from Nuru International, a SAS+ partner since 2017, who deliberately designed its staff structure as a dual hierarchy: for each position, an expatriate technical staff was paired with a host country-based counterpart, the Kenya Team in this case. The expatriate staff, called the Field Team, consisted of a Team Leader who worked directly with the Kenyan-national position of Country Director, and Program Specialists who worked directly with Kenyan-national Program Managers across each program area. This collaborative process meant that expatriate and Kenyan teams worked together to combine knowledge with the goal of triangulating on optimal activities and outcomes. Furthermore, the Field Team was responsible for mentoring and building the capacity of host country team members. This team was by design not integral to the Kenyan team's management structure, so it could ultimately phase out. This process also informed Nuru International on how to plan for and implement a future transition with Nuru Nigeria, whom SAS+ accompanied during that process. After Nuru Nigeria went through a similar transition to Nuru Kenya and the Field Team had officially left Nigeria, the partnership and support continued with regular calls and country visits between the Field Team and Nigeria Team. Through these visits and the ongoing support, the sense of solidarity and collaboration remained, and in ways even grew after the transition.

CONCLUSION

Through research, partnership, and accompaniment, SAS+ has seen that one of the most important ingredients of a responsible transition, regardless of context or program type, involves a consideration of all actors' existing capacities, paired with the understanding that each actor has capacities worth sharing. When engaging in capacity strengthening processes, especially if the purpose of doing so involves transitioning and increasing local leadership, all entities involved should thoroughly explore their own capacity in order to utilize their strengths and improve upon capacity needs. Engaging in these processes mutually boosts trust and collaboration in ways that benefit transitions in leadership and ownership of programmatic and organizational work.

SAS+ has developed this resource in response to our learning and experience on responsible transitions, as well as to meet the needs we saw as the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding fields further explore transitioning leadership and ownership to people working in their own contexts. To learn more about planning for and implementing responsible transitions, you can visit www.stoppingassuccess.org/resources/ where we have over 50 resources including case studies, practical guidelines, issue papers, templates, and blogs.

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[27] This was seen in the [Nuru Kenya case study](#). "The measured, iterative nature of the handover process was designed so that staff could give feedback about how the process was going and training could be adjusted accordingly...The leadership team also provided feedback questionnaires and assessment alongside the trainings to collect feedback and update materials and presentations."

ABOUT STOPPING AS SUCCESS (SAS+)

SAS+ is a four-year cooperative agreement (2021-2025) funded under the Local Works Program of the Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships, and Innovation (IPI) in the Local, Faith, and Transformative Partnerships Hub (USAID/IPI/LFT Hub). SAS+ generates learning about how to facilitate development transitions from international to local actors at the organizational, project, and activity level. The SAS+ goals are:
- To enable development partnerships to be more locally led;
- For transitions to be more effective and sustainable for the local actors involved; and
- For systems of development actors to be more responsive to the communities in which they work, especially the dynamics of conflict affected contexts.

From 2022-2024, SAS+ has accompanied organizations actively undergoing or planning for transitions, and leveraged the learning outcomes of the original Stopping As Success (SAS) program (2017-2020), including 19 original case studies and 25+ corresponding tools and resources. To foster participatory validation, SAS+ released an earlier version of this resource available for public comment from March-June, 2024, and has been updated after integrating the feedback gathered by this process.

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DISCLAIMER