K4D | Knowledge, evidence and learning for development

Responsible exit from humanitarian interventions

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20 April 2020

Question

What are the lessons learned from situations when donor agencies, UN organisations, or NGO's had to close humanitarian or public health programmes at short notice in protracted crises and/or conflict settings?

- *Are there good examples of a responsible exit from programming?*
- *Where there are examples of poor exiting – what can we learn?*
- *What are the key issues which should be prioritised in exiting a response?*

Contents

1. Summary

Since humanitarian projects are intended to be temporary interventions responding to the needs of populations affected by crises, project closure is an inescapable component of humanitarian aid (Pal et al., 2019). The literature highlights various terminologies for responsible exits by humanitarian actors. Approaches vary across organisations with multiple ways to describe the process – including 'graduation', 'handing over', 'phasing down'/'out'/'over', 'ramping down', 'transition', and 'withdrawal'/'closure' (INTRAC, n.d.; Gross, 2014; WFP, 2015; Devereux et al., 2016; Lewis, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2018: 10). Further, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably. Many organisations and the individuals involved in responses are looking for ideas on best exit practice, as it is not easy to do well (Hayman et al., 2016; INTRAC, n.d.). However, in the aid effectiveness agenda, very little is mentioned on how aid exits and phase-outs should take place (Ahmed et al., 2018: 5).

There are guides on humanitarian exits from USAID (Ahmed et al., 2018), WHO (2003) as well as non-government organisations (NGOs) such as C-SAFE (Gardner et al., 2005). Expects consulted for this rapid review confirmed that existing literature and guidance[1] materials on exit strategies in international cooperation frequently recommend principles for good practice:

- Plan for exit from the outset;
- Think about sustainability early-on;
- Consult with partners and stakeholders regularly (using assessments to monitor challenges), and
- Communicate constantly.

This rapid review has found examples of exits from non-profit organisations, NGOs, as well as government agencies. Key points to highlight are:

- Three exit processes have been identified by a multi-donor evaluation (Slob & Jerve, 2008) for different contexts, and reflecting different management challenges: exit from **force majeure** situations (i.e. crisis management); exit from **aid-dependent countries** (i.e. exiting in a way that takes care to allow externally funded activities to continue sustainably), and aid transformation in **graduating countries** (i.e. exit in the context of transforming bilateral relations).

- Three broad approaches of exit processes undertaken by international non-government organisations (INGOs) are the **Full Closure Model** (used by EveryChild); the **Localisation Model** (used by CARE International), and the **Devolved Programme Model** (used by American Friends Service Committee [AFSC] to support continuity via local leadership) (Ahmed et al., 2018).

- Possible transition processes are related to **measurable indicators**, such as phasing out food aid to a limited number of schools (BMZ, 2005; Gardner et al., 2005). However, phasing out is problematic when targeting poor and food-insecure people, who may not be food secure after the intervention (BMZ, 2005).

- Developing and using short **responsible exit criteria** helped in a successful exit in Moldova (Morris, 2015).

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[1] See Appendix B for more on Guidance.

- **Senior staff** are critical points in an exit process (Hayman et al., 2016). This is due to the **strong leadership** needed (Slob & Jerve, 2008).
- **Operational shifts** have been used successfully by the World Food Programme (WFP, 2016) in Lao PDR (in a governmental coalition approach) and in conflict situations such as Côte d'Ivoire (with a single government partner).
- Both **donor and recipient capacities** are important factors (Slob & Jerve, 2008). Institutional capacity on the recipient side is a key factor determining the success of exit processes, however, donor capacity is a weak point in many exit processes.
- Ensuring the **financial sustainability** of local entities is a critical part of making transitions – and ultimately locally-led development - a success (Yamron, 2020). **Investment** of both staff time and financial resources are important in the exit process (Hayman et al., 2016).
- Attempting a hasty exit can result in **financial damage** on both sides (i.e. donor and recipient) (Morris, 2015). In Peru, as the process was rushed (3-month period) and underfinanced, the exit by NGO EveryChild ended up dragging on, and required additional money for legal fees and staff time.

In terms of evidence, the Stopping As Success (SAS) resources provide robust reviews, and ODI has resources that are more specific to donors. An evaluation should be conducted after a period of time has elapsed following the programme exit, to determine success. However, as funding is not usually programmed in this manner, exit strategies are rarely evaluated (Gardner et al., 2005: 12). Also, there is little evidence, and very few systematic cross-country comparative reviews, on the transition from low-income status for specific economies (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Any evidence that has been found is gender blind and does not focus on disability.

2. Strategy approaches

Since humanitarian projects are intended to be temporary interventions responding to the needs of populations affected by crises, project closure is an inescapable component of humanitarian aid (Pal et al., 2019). There are many reasons for the withdrawal of aid by international non-government organisations (INGOs) from partners, projects, programmes, regions and countries throughout the world.[2] These include funding cuts by donors, decisions to reduce support to middle-income countries, responding to difficult operating environments, and shifts in strategic direction at the organisational level. Because of the different terminologies used (see Appendix A for further details), the approaches (strategies) used for exits are also known by various names:

Exit strategy

Gross (2014: 1) states that although the term 'exit strategy' may capture the essence of the task at hand, it is "**somewhat misleading**" in that it covers only one component of overall action – and could be taken to imply a deadline (or even a pre-determined end) to investment in a particular country.

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[2] https://www.intrac.org/projects/aid-withdrawal-exit-strategies/

Transition strategy

This has been proposed as an alternative term, and also has an operational meaning, namely the change taking place between the end of a mission and the beginning of the activation phase of other instruments – i.e. how activities can be absorbed or taken over by other instruments, by donors or external partners – upon termination (Gross, 2014: 2).

Graduation strategy

C-SAFE used the term 'graduation strategy' to describe the graduation of beneficiaries (or communities) from a particular programme once they achieved the intended results (Gardner et al., 2005: 7). Thus, C-SAFE's 'graduation strategy' was the specific plan describing how the beneficiary would be discharged from Targeted Food Assistance, assuring that achievement of the programme's objective (with regard to that particular beneficiary) was not jeopardised, and that further progress toward that objective would be made.

3. Examples of exit strategies

Possible exit strategies

Following a Responsibility to Protect (R2P or RtoP) intervention, Edelstein (2017)[3] suggests that there are different types of exit strategies for international interveners. Most interventions involve a **protracted exit** that leaves behind some nominal force to enhance the security of the post-conflict state or maintain the legitimacy of the norm of humanitarian intervention.[4]

Possible exit strategies discussed in the literature are related to **measurable indicators**. For example, a report by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) evaluating the WFP leaving Mozambique included: i) strengthening school production; ii) phasing out food aid to a limited number of schools; iii) cash for food substitution, and iv) training of boarding school principals in food procurement (BMZ, 2005: 51). However, this type of **phasing out** is problematic when targeting poor and food-insecure people who may not be food secure after the intervention (BMZ, 2005: 50).

Slob and Jerve (2008: 14) have defined exit processes for three different contexts, reflecting different management challenges:

- exit from **force majeure** situations: exit as crisis management;
- exit from **aid-dependent countries**: exiting in a way that takes care to allow externally funded activities to continue sustainably, and
- aid transformation in **graduating countries**: exit in the context of transforming bilateral relations.

Each context requires different considerations for planning an exit strategy (Ahmed et al., 2018: 10). For example, the Centre for Global Development (CGD); the United States Agency for

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[3] Edelstein D (2017). *Exit strategies from R2P interventions.* HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION and the RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT (R2P): A conference sponsored by the John K. Castle Fund for Ethics and International Affairs, Yale University. 16-17 February 2017.
[4] Nomikos WG (2017). Humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect: Yale MacMillan Center. https://macmillan.yale.edu/news/humanitarian-intervention-and-responsibility-protect

International Development (USAID) note a typology of seven possible transition types,[5] and WFP has guidance for "Exit Strategies for School Feeding" and "Programme Options for Transition from Emergency Response."[6]

Exit evaluations

Research shows that exit is incredibly hard to do well (Hayman et al., 2016: 12). To determine the success of an exit strategy, an evaluation should be conducted after a period of time has elapsed following the programme exit. In fact, the WHO (2003) recommend that an evaluation and/or lessons-learned exercise should be undertaken in all cases. However, since funding is not usually programmed in this manner, research shows that exit strategies are rarely evaluated (Gardner et al., 2005: 12). Therefore, the following is a brief summary of lessons learned from unsuccessful and successful attempts by various agencies:

Unsuccessful exit examples

Phase out – no/inadequate exit strategy & low funding: WFP Ethiopia

Numerous discrete emergency operations (EMOPs) are implemented in the context of a longer-term development programme. When each emergency is over, EMOPs are phased out. EMOP resources represent over 80% of WFP's portfolio in Ethiopia (WFP, 2005: 37). However, in Ethiopia, exit strategies did not exist or were informal and not systematic. Therefore, support for some communities was phased out because of the reduction of funding (WFP, 2005: 26).

Graduation – no hierarchical organisation & poor timetable: Eritrea

As early as 1994, Eritrea outlined its vision for how to graduate from aid dependency. However, the disappointing conclusion from this research is that both recipient and donors failed to build on this by establishing a **predictable and time-bound platform for development cooperation** (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 159). This is a genuine general problem in aid, but in Eritrea, it was amplified by the **subordination** of aid to foreign policy strategies.

Handover – no time and underfinanced: EveryChild Peru

The closure of EveryChild's office in Peru in 2010-11 was a particularly painful experience, according to INTRAC. They attempted to close this office which had been operating for 15 years within the space of just three months, and to transfer the remaining project activities over to a local NGO instead. The main reason for the closure was financial.[7] Because the process was **rushed and underfinanced**, the exit ended up being prolonged and required additional money for legal fees and staff time (Morris, 2015: 3).

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[5] Boardman M (2008). *Exit Strategies: Approaches and Challenges in Development.* Conference paper, Southern Perspectives on Development: Dialogue or Division? The University of Otago, New Zealand.
[6] See Appendix B for more on Guidance.
[7] EveryChild needed to make substantial budget cuts following the financial crash. Peru was proving very hard to raise funds for in-country, as donors had shifted their funding away from the region (Morris, 2015: 3).

Successful exit examples

Operation shift – strong partnerships & long-term planning: WFP in Mozambique, Côte d'Ivoire, and Lao PDR

These three countries are examples in which WFP shifted from operations under an EMOP, to protracted relief and recovery operations (PRROs), using different partnership approaches (WFP, 2016):

In Mozambique, WFP partners with the government and NGOs. Emergency responses implemented over the past ten years have integrated training and institutional support for the national institute responsible for coordinating disaster response (Instituto Nacional de Gestão das Calamidades/ National Disaster Management Institute, INGC) and other government units. INGC has developed strong capacity and effective relief mechanisms **at the national and provincial levels**. WFP continues to support INGC preparedness and contingency planning. NGO partners have broader development goals: when emergencies occur, they mobilise resources for response and then return to their **longer-term objectives**, supporting populations who remain vulnerable as a result of emergency in the context of ongoing, longer-term programmes. NGOs provide credit and other non-food inputs as activities shift from relief to recovery.

In the Lao PDR, WFP recognised limited government capacity as a serious constraint to emergency response and achievement of national food security. To strengthen this capacity, WFP pursued a **coalition approach**, engaging the government at all levels through training and on-the-job support. **Building capacity** in all aspects of assessment and implementation is a core component of the most recent EMOP, and an effective departure from previous EMOPs that channelled resources through NGO or government implementing partners without long-term support.

WFP works with a variety of partners in Côte d'Ivoire, including local government, UN agencies, and INGOs. Limited capacity among partner agencies has been a major constraint affecting the EMOP strategy and **shift** to recovery programming. The context for capacity-building for the government has been limited to date by lack of clear structures; therefore, WFP has focused capacity-building efforts on **one engaged and responsive government partner**.

Phase out – using current agreements: Danida in Botswana

This was used by Denmark in Botswana as no overall long-term exit was planned. When the intention to exit was communicated in 1992, Botswana proposed a ministerial meeting, among other things, to discuss cooperation after the era of bilateral aid. The phasing-out plans that might have been agreed were, however, overtaken by events (i.e. disagreements over the transport project) that led to the Danish decision in 1994 not to make further funding available to Botswana for official bilateral assistance. Therefore, the exit was managed project by project, based on agreements still in force, in a way that did not damage ongoing work (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 129).

Phase over – support groups: C-SAFE World Vision Zambia

World Vision Zambia used Nutrition Support Groups (NSGs) as phase over approach to exiting (Gardner et al., 2005: 9). NSGs were identified as an exit approach for Home-Based Care programmes for Growth Monitoring & Promotion (GMP) and vegetable gardening activities. NSGs were trained to take over the activities and services that were provided under the C-SAFE World Vision programme.

Phase Out & Phase Over – transition combination & monitoring: C-SAFE Malawi

In June 2003, C-SAFE consortium members operating in Malawi proposed to transition out of the regional consortium one year early, with the goal of moving to a five-year country-specific Development Assistance Programme (DAP). Programmatic coverage went from 23 districts under C-SAFE to eight under the new DAP, entitled I-LIFE. In preparation for I-LIFE, the partners engaged in a detailed targeting exercise to prioritise the most appropriate geographic regions of the country for inclusion in I-LIFE. Five indicators were analysed across the 27 districts of the country and aggregated to create a holistic picture of vulnerability and food insecurity (Gardner et al., 2005: 9).

The **five indicators** included chronic malnutrition, HIV prevalence, the severity of poverty, food needs, and female literacy rates. The five indicators were consolidated into a vulnerability index, allowing consortium partners to initially prioritise 14 districts of the country for I-LIFE activities. Later, due to I-LIFE budget constraints, only the eight most vulnerable districts were selected. These eight districts (of the 23 original C-SAFE districts) currently receive services under the I-LIFE/DAP. In essence, C-SAFE was phased out of 15 districts, while in eight, there was a phase over to a DAP.

Sustainability - linkages with multiple agencies/leaders & monitoring: ADRA Zambia and CARE Zimbabwe

The NGO ADRA Zambia formed linkages with the Ministry of Agriculture to conduct monitoring on its programme impact after the closure of C-SAFE (Gardner et al., 2005: 12).

CARE Zimbabwe developed strong linkages with traditional leaders, AIDS Action Committees, and key government departments such as Agricultural Extension (AREX) services for continued technical advice on vegetable and fruit production, provision of seeds and basic tools (Gardner et al., 2005: 12).

4. Local impacts of exits

In their handover toolkit, the NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) notes that "[s]uccess is also measured by what you leave behind" (Gerstenhaber (2014). This is because the impact of an exit on local communities can be long-reaching. However, research from the non-profit organisation *Search for Common Ground* has found that the term 'local' has different connotations in different contexts, and is a contested term (Yamron, 2020: 3). In *Stopping as Success (SAS)*'s research[8],

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[8] SAS is a consortium consisting of Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from USAID. This three-year collaborative learning project looks beyond the

'local organisation' is used to refer to civil society organisations (CSOs) or NGOs in the global South that are undergoing a process of **transition** in their partnership with an INGO. This encompasses organisations that work at the local and national level. The broader term 'local actors' recognises the diversity of this group, which are outlined below:

Individuals

Staff: It is important for local staff to set the terms of the transition: INGOs may facilitate and fund the process, but **true ownership** is important for long-term sustainability (Yamron, 2020: 5). Local staff are often better positioned to identify potential directors (Yamron, 2020: 8).

In the closing down phase, WHO (2008: 120) advises that support activities are monitored, e.g. the numbers of purchase requests, travel authorisations, HR actions, etc. being dealt with each month – **and staffing levels be adjusted accordingly**. Staffing requirements for the final stages of the recovery programme and future regular programme activities must be determined, and an HR plan drawn up to progressively transfer required staff from the emergency operation to other activities and to terminate others. The debriefing of staff must occur before they leave, and the compilation and analysis of their views on lessons to be learned.

Experiences and reflections from British Red Cross, EveryChild, Oxfam GB, Sightsavers and WWF-UK conclude that developing exit principles, even near the end of a programme or project, is an opportunity to get **senior management** engaged in the daily realities of staff who are tasked with seeing through exits from projects, programmes, countries, regions, or partnerships (Hayman et al., 2016: 3). These managers must be supported, as they will be balancing staff changes as well as delivering on programmes that are coming to an end (Hayman et al., 2016: 9).

Assets: On completion of each emergency project, materials and equipment should normally be handed over as a donation to the Ministry of Health or another designated national entity, and not individuals or staff (WHO, 2008.; Hayman et al., 2016: 9). However, staff care during exit may require additional resources (Hayman et al., 2016: 10).

Assets used for this can be financial or non-financial (e.g. knowledge assets) (Yamron, 2020: 5-7):

- Asset transfer can also be through fixed assets, which in certain contexts can be even more useful in the long-term than money. In Georgia, Oxfam bought office space for BRIDGE, part of which could be rented out, giving the local organisation a huge head start in the expensive Tbilisi real estate market since they wouldn't have to find unrestricted funding to pay for rent. Along the same lines, World Vision Philippines brokered a free rent and utilities deal with a large local NGO so that the TB Federation could have a place to work. SAS has seen a wide variety of INGO actions that can fall under the umbrella of "asset transfer" (Yamron, 2020: 6).
- Non-financial support can include **transfers** of key financial management and business development resources. PADCO's financial management processes and advance planning systems, for example, were key to building the Ikibiri Coalition's reputation as a reliable grantee. Similarly, Interpeace's purchase of Quickbooks software has been

important for CEPAD's financial management. To address a key gap in business development capacity, Oxfam gave BRIDGE access to their proposal databases, saying that since the learning embedded in those proposals was originally collected from the Global South, it was only fair to give it back.

Communities

Local economy: Delayed closure can result in harm to the local economy. In their scoping review, Pal et al. (2019) found that several commentators reported that prolonged assistance may entrench reliance on outside assistance, thus jeopardising the goal of a progressive return to autonomy (Lee & Özerdem, 2015 in Pal et al., 2019; Solidarités International, 2016), as well as contributing to inflation (Lee & Özerdem 2015 in Pal et al., 2019). However, no specific time point for closure was provided.

Relationship expectations: Many cases found by SAS show the importance of keeping the relationship alive after transition. If formal arrangements are unrealistic, informal channels of advice, donor introductions, capacity development, and business development support can make the difference (Yamron, 2020: 7).

Communication: Security and telecommunications elements must be maintained until all field activities that require staff presence in the field are completed (WHO, n.d.). In their scoping review, Pal et al. (2019) found that the most frequently expressed concerns were that decision-making be conducted in ways that include and engage relevant stakeholders, that there is transparency in communication of the process, and that rationales for decisions are well justified and clearly articulated. In short phase outs – i.e. less than two years – hardly any attention was paid to participation and consultation of stakeholders (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 10).

Language also matters - it can help to refer to "sustainability" plans rather than "exit plans" to frame discussions in a positive way (Morris, 2015: 8). The way the exit decision was conveyed to the partner country influenced the handling and outcome of the exit process. The level (political or administrative) used to deliver the message mattered. In some cases, politicians took the responsibility to communicate exit decisions. Although the partner country did not welcome the decision, it welcomed this way of conveying the message – in contrast to the cases where it was left to civil servants of different ranks to convey the news. Early warnings of exit decisions were rare. Indeed, in several cases the exit decision came as a surprise to the recipients. Most exit decisions were communicated by the donor as a fait accompli and also perceived as such by the partner country (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 10).

CSOs/NGOs partnerships

In post-conflict settings, projects focusing on long-term development and prevention are evaluated as best. Successful strategies include working with CSOs, ideally with clear exit plans, though this is rare (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017: 4).

Post-exit support can also include a variety of **activities** aimed at making space for transitioning staff to think strategically about business models and organisational structures. For example, hiring an in-country lawyer to provide a complete analysis of the available models of association (e.g. NGO, community-based organisation, attached consulting or for-profit wing, social enterprise) can help teams think about different paths forward (Yamron, 2020: 4-5).

Involving stakeholders: The degree of participation of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of exit processes was found to be a good indicator for their success (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 10).

Involving communities: Unless 'exit' is done in an inclusive and contextually specific way, it will never be locally owned. Responsible exit requires 'responsible entry' of others. Local stakeholders will need to step up into new levels of **responsibility** (Hayman et al., 2016: 12). EveryChild decided not to just pass on their NGO partners to other international donors, but to actively encourage them to link-up more with local government and local fundraising. Consequently, many programmes and activities (such as Child Activity Centres) are at least partially funded by local communities.

NGOs devolved from international federations

CARE International began to consider exiting from countries in the early 1990s, based on changes in national economies and at country-level. Their **localised organisation model** is led by local CARE staff. In Sri Lanka, for example, national CARE staff founded Chrysalis, which registered as a social enterprise in 2017. Discussions about a continued partnership with CARE with an external "exit expert" led to an MOU endorsing Chrysalis as an independent affiliate (Ahmed et al., 2018: 12).

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) used a **devolved programme model** for exit. This 9-month preparation started in 2008, for Asia, Central and South America and the Caribbean. This included assessments of local challenges and the development of hand-over plans, vetted through consultations with leadership from community-based organisations (CBOs). For example, devolved organisations in Haiti can continue to use AFSC branding post 2008 (Ahmed et al, 2018: 12). Using the brand supported continuity and effectiveness, as it symbolises trust in local leadership and ongoing relationship.

Local/national governments

According to interviews with government officials and development partners, factors such as poor planning and institutional weaknesses have hampered the institution of strong sustainability mechanisms for exit strategies in Nigeria (Engen & Prizzon, 2019: 61).

Vested interests: Alonso & Brugha (2006) found that different actors had different interests around allowing NGOs to continue playing a major role as health service providers. NGOs, often with limited strategic vision, are reluctant to leave this role in the hands of the government, arguing lack of capacity in their local counterparts. Some bilateral donors directly funding NGOs had an interest in their continuation, as this often constituted an excellent means for political visibility and increased accountability.

Conflict dynamics: Power dynamics play an important role in shaping relationships between different aid actors, as well as the narratives and practices around exits and transitions (Ahmed et al, 2018: 7). Despite deep societal divides following a 25-year guerilla war and a political crisis in 2006, aid flows to Timor-Leste changed focus from peacebuilding to development. This pressured Belun to adapt its focus. Belun was, therefore, able to successfully branch out into related humanitarian and gender programming (Yamron, 2020: 4).

Underlying humanitarian and conflict challenges: Gerstenhaber (2014) reports that the inclusion of other actors promotes ownership of the project as project activities are shifted to those who

will be responsible once the NGO leaves, even if doing so is "potentially frustrating and complicated". Research from Pal et al. (2019) focuses on situations of humanitarian crisis arising from armed conflict, political instability, or natural disaster. They found that plans for project closure require **adaptability** in the face of the dynamic and evolving contexts of humanitarian crises, including responding to social contexts and ongoing conflicts.

5. Conclusion: Key issues to prioritise

Successful exits typically involve a mix of realistic timeframes, careful and mutual planning, consultation, and flexibility to set up arrangements for handing over or find alternative ways of financing (Gross, 2014: 2). However, this success will not be sustainable unless challenges are addressed. Based on the literature, the following is a list of key issues to focus on for donor agencies, UN organisations, or NGOs for closing humanitarian or public health programmes:

In their evaluation, Slob and Jerve (2008: 14) recommend **developing guidelines sensitive to exit processes in different contexts**, and reflecting different management challenges (e.g. force majeure, aid-dependent countries, or graduating countries):

Exits from aid-dependent countries are less successful in terms of sustainability (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 13). However, in graduated countries where aid is less important, some positive consequences were reported when the national authorities took over or even expanded the activities started by the donors. This was especially the case in the Danish-supported Madhya Pradesh Women in Agriculture Project (MAPWA) in India. These phase-out strategies had a focus on sustainability: the extension approach towards female farmers was taken over, as was the community approach developed in the water sector (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 67).

Countries often lack a plan for transitioning from aid.[9] **Developing principles can help to focus thinking and guide decision-making in responsible exits** (Morris, 2015: 8). Since 2012, INTRAC has been developing a programme to offer practical support on exit strategies in response to an increasing number of withdrawals of aid programmes by INGOs around the world (Ahmed et al., 2018: 9). The three principles[10] for their *full closure* responsible exit used by EveryChild were simple and flexible enough to be applied in different contexts, and provided an extremely effective framework for decision making (Morris, 2015: 5-6).

Exit principles can provide reassurance and inspiration for partners as well as staff, and can help to smooth the "sharp end" of development work (Morris, 2015: 8). A systematic lack of exit

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[9] The ODI report *Exit from aid: an analysis of country experiences* (Engen & Prizzon, 2019: 12) notes that evidence and very few systematic cross-country comparative reviews of how volumes of development finance and terms and conditions evolve during the transition from low-income status for specific economies. In their in-depth study of eight countries, some countries plan to implement a strategy (Ghana, with its 'Ghana Beyond Aid' strategy, and Nigeria, to a certain extent) or indirectly reflect some principles of the transition from LIC in other documents (e.g. Lao PDR). Other governments manage their financing options through a debt management strategy (even though the objective here is to minimise costs and financial risk, rather than act as a planning tool).

[10] "1. As far as possible, ensure the work we have done is sustainable – this could be continuation of services or lasting changes in children's lives; 2. Ensure that exit does not have a detrimental effect on the children and communities where we work, and 3. As far as possible, ensure that expertise and momentum for change in the country is not lost" (Morris, 2015: 3).

strategies was noted in WFP-supported interventions, which affected the overall effectiveness and relevance (BMZ, 2005: 24).

In many ways, getting the 'entry' of a mission right means getting also its 'exit' right – or at least determines the impact and success of its performance vis-à-vis an envisioned end-state for it. This requires **setting achievable objectives and formulating realistic mandates early** (Gross, 2014: 2).

Although agencies understand in general terms what constitutes an emergency situation, there is no definition of the moment *when* an emergency is over (WFP, 2005: 7). Triggers can be *Programmatic* (e.g. progress towards objective); *Contextual* (e.g. improvement in the overall humanitarian situation); *Systemic* (e.g. government capacity to meet needs and for emergency response), or *External* (e.g. donor funding) (WFP, 2005: 8). However clearly indicators are defined, it is sometimes difficult to know for certain that an exit is appropriate. **Triggers must be part of an exit strategy that is flexible** and allows discussion, qualitative appraisal and informed judgments by INGO and partner staff.

NGOs have not been good at designing or implementing exit strategies, and they have been notoriously weak at sharing their experiences with others. A year-long INTRAC Action Learning Set (ALS) was formed in March 2014 in response to this problem (Hayman et al., 2016: 14).

The aim should be to **plan for sustainability/exit from the beginning of a new partnership** - even if it is only a top-line conversation initially (Morris, 2015: 8). It is also important to **'drip-feed' information about exit regularly**, and build-in face-to-face meetings where possible (James et al., 2015: 6).

WFP (2005: 11-15) recommends planning for the worst (including when budgeting) but hoping for the best (Morris, 2015: 8). The Danish exit from Malawi with a six-month notice, for example, created a 40% shortfall in the agriculture sector budget, a major setback in agriculture sector programme development, which affected long-term agricultural research negatively (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 12).

Flexibility on the side of the donor to adapt the budget for supported activities was shown to be another important factor in good exit management. This implies going beyond the 'natural phase out' approach to identify needs for adjustments in current agreements with a view to sustainability concerns. As the example of Denmark's exit from India shows, the consequence may be a temporary increase in the volume of aid. There are examples of donors taking proactive steps to assist the recipient in securing alternative funding, but in most circumstances, other donors did not easily come forward (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 11).

Mission planning has to consider a realistic lifespan for operations – which regularly exceed one year (Gross, 2014: 3). For example, the EU's anti-piracy Operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta had a planning cycle of twelve months but ended up entering its sixth year of operation. This reinforces the sense that the planning cycle does not match operational realities as to the likely duration of a mission (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 10).

Successful exits were reported in Botswana, which is no longer dependent on aid. At the time when donors exited, activities were already managed by the government, though with some use of technical assistance. However, at the time of exit and in retrospect, the Government of Botswana argued that **more time should have been allowed for phasing out of technical assistance** (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 12).

Research shows that when a realistic timeframe was set and the exit was allowed to take time, attention was given to sustainability and mitigation of adverse consequences. This involves long-term planning, careful consultation of all stakeholders, and good monitoring of results (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 11).

Adopting a longer-term view would help to align the very different planning and operational cycles among actors and avoid 'gaps' (Gross, 2014: 3; Morris, 2015: 8; WFP, 2005: 11-15). The positive impacts of humanitarian aid will be undermined by a short-term mindset since abrupt exits leave local communities without access to services on which they have come to depend for survival (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006 in Pal et al., 2019). If exiting quickly for financial reasons, then a very different outcome is more likely than if a managed exit over time is adopted (Morris, 2015: 8). For monitoring, vulnerability analysis and mapping (VAM) should be prioritised (i.e. use to signal when food assistance should be phased out).

Aid exits should be based mainly on development merits (of continuing a programme or not) and not on political ones (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 159). However, Slob and Jerve (2008: 9) state that exit decisions are always political. The decision to exit is usually made by the donor unilaterally.

Incomplete knowledge of a host country and/or programmes already in place and undertaken by others may lead to the duplication of efforts or the setting of unrealistic goals – potentially causing the need to adjust mandate and tasks once the mission has already started, as happened in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and Afghanistan (Gross, 2014: 3). Therefore, these **planning documents can then also be used to define a tentative end-state for the mission**. For example, the adoption of a Political Framework for Crisis Approach (PFCA) entails combining political and operational elements – but also civilian and military expertise and input – to define common objectives.

Too often, projects in settings of conflict and disaster fail to address the root problems of these crises, such as weak governance/institutions and vulnerability of communities. Another reason for the **unsustainability of projects is the fact that they continue to be externally driven and run by foreigners rather than locals** and that clear, implemented exit plans remain scarce. This points to a major issue that hinders effective aid in today's world: the assumption that external actors have the capacity to identify the appropriate entry points and engineer reforms in the right direction, simultaneously solving both the technical policy problem and that of adapting it to political constraints (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017: 30).

Institutional capacity on the recipient side is a key factor determining the success of exit processes. Lack of capacity poses challenges to both the partner country and the donor. It appears that donors tend to underestimate the capacities of the recipient, and, in most cases, did not carry out **institutional assessments** to identify needs for building capacities that would enable the partner country institutions to cope with the exit (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 11).

The Slob and Jerve evaluation also identified **donor capacity** as a weak point in many exit processes. This has three aspects: there has been scant attention to institutional learning on how to manage aid exit and transformation; aid exit is often perceived as a negative process in which there are few rewards for good management, and exit decisions are often accompanied by immediate downsizing of embassies or, in some instances, even closure.

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Acknowledgements

We thank the following experts who voluntarily provided suggestions for relevant literature or other advice to the author to support the preparation of this report. The content of the report does not necessarily reflect the opinions of any of the experts consulted.

Willemijn de Bruin, INTRAC

Key websites

- INTRAC Aid withdrawal and exit strategies: https://www.intrac.org/projects/aid-withdrawal-exit-strategies/

Suggested citation

About this report

Appendix A: Definitions of exit terms used in the literature

Exit approaches vary across organisations.[11] The following is a list of the multiple ways used in the literature (with some overlap) to describe these processes:

Graduation

Graduation implies **withdrawing support** – a 'one-way door' out of the programme (Devereux et al., 2016). 'Responsible graduation,' therefore, means implementing graduation in such a way that the livelihoods are strengthened and supported. However, local organisations in some countries (e.g. Bangladesh and Columbia) have taken issue with these arguments, seeing graduation as an excuse to cut needed development funding, rather than a reflection of real progress (Yamron, 2020: 4).

Handing over

Projects can be handed over (i.e. **transferred** to) a local partner at the end of a response (Gardner et al. 2005; Lee and Özerdem 2015 in Pal et al., 2019). This often means that the response acts in a 'bridging' capacity (explicit from the beginning), with partners then eventually taking over or absorbing these activities (Gross, 2014: 4). Beyond the UN, other potential handover partners include NATO, the African Union (AU), or EU member states who may wish to 'Europeanise' previously bilateral activities (as occurred in Afghanistan when Italy and Germany transferred respective efforts in the fields of justice and police reform). **Prior coordination** is crucial for both the handover process itself and for the smooth functioning of any follow-on mission.

Phasing down/over/out or Operational shifts

Projects can phase down (reducing services gradually but maintaining a small presence), phase out (tapering services before closing), or phase over (also termed 'hand over') (Gardner et al. 2005; Lee and Özerdem 2015 in Pal et al., 2019). The Danish donor (Danida) exit plan from India is a good example of a comprehensive exit plan: '**natural phasing out**' was the most common model used, which means that ongoing commitments are respected, and donor-supported activities are '**faded out**' at the end of the agreement period (Slob & Jerve, 2008: 10).

The NGO C-SAFE[12] used all three of the basic approaches to exit strategies (i.e. phasing down, phasing out, and phasing over). The NGO Peace Direct understands the term "exit strategy" to describe **complete 'phasing down'** of programming and organisational presence (leaving the space completely) or '**phasing over**' to a local entity (Ahmed et al., 2018: 9). For the INGO World Food Programme (WFP), an exit from an emergency response (EMRO) means either (i) a **phase-out** – that is, **withdrawal** of WFP assistance from an emergency operation or a country, or (ii) a **shift to longer-term programmes** to protect and improve livelihoods and resilience (WFP, 2005: 4).

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[11] Other terms include winding down, wrapping up, moving on, and spin offs (INTRAC, n.d.).
[12] The Consortium for Southern Africa Food Emergency (C-SAFE) was established in 2002. It comprised of World Vision, CARE, and Catholic Relief Services. It led the way in implementing a monitoring and evaluation tool in Zimbabwe that monitored targeting, registration, and food distribution to beneficiaries (World Vision, 2003).

Presence

The INGO CARE International uses the term 'presence' to denote a broader conception of their role. This invites a more explicit acknowledgement of entrance and existence of INGOs, and, by extension, exits (Ahmed et al., 2018: 9).

Ramping down/transfer

In the 'ramp-down' stage, agencies are focusing on their exit strategy, including the **transfer** of operations to local actors (Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009: 557). Therefore, collaboration is important.

Sustainability

Some organisations (e.g. the non-profit Project Concern International) prefer the word 'sustainability', as the term 'exit' can create a barrier to maintaining a positive relationship with their local partners, or because they see **exiting as a process** rather than an event (Gardner et al., 2005: 4; Ahmed et al., 2018: 9).

Transition

A programme transition is defined as the change from one type of assistance programme to another (Gardner et al., 2005: 7). In the C-SAFE context, it often connotes the change from programme emphasis on one type of food assistance to another (i.e. General Food Distribution [GFD] to Targeted Food Assistance [TFA]) and usually indicates the scaling-down of resources. Conversely, a programme transition could also refer to the change from a food assistance programme to another type of programming (i.e. non-food).

This term is used by World Vision, Project Concern, and UNESCO, rather than 'exit'. However, World Vision acknowledges that these terms could be used interchangeably (Ahmed et al., 2018: 10). Nevertheless, the ODI found little evidence and very few systematic cross-country comparative reviews of how development finance and terms and conditions evolve during the transition from low-income status for specific economies – even though 35 low-income countries have transitioned to middle-income country status over the past 15 years (Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

Withdrawal/ Closure

The UK-based non-profit organisation INTRAC, based on research from the British Red Cross, EveryChild[13], Oxfam GB, Sightsavers, and WWF-UK, uses the following definition: "[A] tool used by INGOs and their southern partners to plan and structure the implementation of an exit –

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[13] EveryChild was a UK international development charity, which closed in September 2016. In 2012, the organisation took the decision to close all of its international programmes, and to transfer income and assets to a new global alliance of national organisations (Family for Every Child). INTRAC is conducting a three-part evaluation of EveryChild's Responsible Exit Process in four countries - Cambodia, India, Malawi, and Nepal - to see which partners and programmes remained up to 15 months after EveryChild's exit. The evaluation was specifically asked to focus on the more complex exits from longer partnerships (INTRAC, n.d.).

typically the **withdrawal of financial resources or closure of an office** – in a specific project, programme, country or region" (Lewis, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2018: 9).

Appendix B: Guidance on strategies

Responsible exits are not easy (INTRAC, n.d.). In the aid effectiveness agenda, very little is mentioned on how aid exits and phase-outs should take place (Ahmed et al., 2018: 5). Many organisations involved in humanitarian responses, as well as the individuals within them, are looking for ideas on best practice (INTRAC, n.d.). Guidance is available from different agencies and organisations. Different approaches are used, and various roles for specific staff/governments etc. are listed – however, these are not prioritised:

Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC): exit strategy

- "The exit strategy is primarily a process of moving from emergency to rehabilitation and development addressing a **change in the roles** of the UN agencies and other humanitarian organisations in the country, thus affecting the functions their respective staff may play in the country."

- "The exit strategy from a relief operation will be better guaranteed where and when the **Governments capacity is in place to take over** the care of the victims of complex or major emergencies. This capacity should not be limited to the provision of humanitarian assistance but must include the protection of the victims."

- "The **Resident/Humanitarian Coordinator** should be charged with determining, in consultation with the in-country team and the Government, whether the conditions are met to proceed with **total or partial exit strategy**" (IASC, 1997: 1, 3).

Sphere Association: exit strategy

The Sphere Handbook underlines the importance of careful planning and implementation of closures, directing humanitarian organisations to "plan a transition or exit strategy in the early stages of the humanitarian programme that ensures longer-term positive effects and reduces the risk of dependency" (Sphere Association, 2018: 60).

World Food Programme (WFP): exit strategy

WFP exit strategies should contain: **criteria** for exit; **measurable benchmarks** for assessing progress toward meeting the criteria; **steps** for reaching the benchmarks, and **identification** of those responsible for taking these steps; periodic measures for the **assessment of progress** towards criteria and possible modifications based on analysis of potential risks**,** and a **flexible timeline** specifying when these benchmarks will be reached and when the assessments will be conducted (WFP, 2005: 6).

World Health Organization (WHO): phase down/out strategy

In principle, emergency humanitarian activities should be **phased out** when the exceptional needs arising from the emergency no longer exists and normal health and related services, together with ongoing development activities, can meet the needs of the population. Ideally, there would be a smooth transition from relief through recovery and into normal and development

activities. In practice, humanitarian assistance sometimes has to be **phased down**, and perhaps even out, earlier because of a lack of resources (WHO, 2003). The guiding principle from WHO (2003) is that the phasing out of emergency assistance and activities must be envisaged **from an early stage of the operation** – preferably at the time when projects are planned. The phasing out of individual activities and the whole emergency programme and operational set-up (including any field sub-offices) must be **carefully planned and managed**.