



STOPPING AS SUCCESS: TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

RESPONSIBLE INGO TRANSITIONS AND LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT

FINDINGS FROM A GLOBAL ONLINE CONSULTATION

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DISCLAIMER

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ABBREVIATIONS

CSO – Civil Society Organization

INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization

INTRAC – The International NGO Training and Research Centre

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

P4D – Platform 4 Dialogue

RINGO – Re-imagining the INGO

SAS – Stopping As Success

USAID – United States Agency for International Development

DEFINITIONS

The definitions below of key terms used in this report are informed by SAS research and findings from the consultation.

- **Local:** The use of this term varies amongst actors and contexts, but for the purpose of this report, local refers to CSOs and NGOs in the global South who are in a partnership transition with an INGO. This encompasses organizations that work at the local and national level.
- **Local actors:** This refers to a diverse group, which can include individuals, communities and community-based groups, newly created NGOs or CSOs, NGOs that have devolved from an international federation, or local and national governments.
- **Transition:** A withdrawal of an international organization from a context following a close-down of a program; or a transfer of responsibility, capacity, and ownership from an international to a local organization/ community whilst maintaining some form of relationship. Transitions are “responsible” when planned, jointly led, and gradual in order to best support local leadership.
- **Exit:** The complete withdrawal of an international organization from a context without a transfer of ownership or a relationship maintained with local entities.

WHAT IS SAS AND SAS+

The overarching goal of “[Stopping As Success: Locally Led Transitions in Development](#)” (SAS+) is 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 (such as local organizations, international partners, and USAID) and networks to be more responsive to the communities in which they work. SAS+ is a four-year collaborative learning project (2021-2025) led by a consortium of CDA Collaborative Learning, Search for Common Ground and Peace Direct. SAS+ is funded by the USAID Local Faith and Transformative Partnerships (LFT) Hub.

SAS+ builds on learning outcomes collaboratively developed through the original Stopping As Success (SAS) program’s (2017-2020) evidence base of [19 case studies](#), and corresponding [tools and resources](#) to foster responsible transitions and partnerships that promote local ownership and leadership. SAS+ will apply these tools and learning through an accompaniment approach model to assist existing partnerships in transition and to generate new learning to enable future responsible transitions to local leadership. If you have any transition needs, and think we could assist, [we would love to hear from you](#).

EVIDENCE GENERATED BY THE SAS PROJECT

19 CASE STUDIES FROM 13 COUNTRIES

Bangladesh, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Georgia, Guatemala, India, Kenya, Morocco, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste

6 THEMATIC PAPERS

Financial sustainability, communication, capacity development, leaders and champions, power and legitimacy, and partnerships

25+ TOOLS AND RESOURCES

Aimed at supporting INGOs, NGOs/CSOs and donors going through or planning for a transition processes

I EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A key component of working towards locally led development is to enable responsible partnership transition processes.¹ This is especially crucial in the aid sector where donor priorities regularly shift, and contexts are ever-changing, which has led to a greater need to sustain impact and ensure local actors' sustainability. However, a significant gap that has emerged to support international actors to effectively leave contexts, end programs, or transform organizational structures is the lack of knowledge around best practices and practical examples of responsible partnership transitions.²

Stopping as Success (SAS) recognized this need and from 2017-2020, conducted research to build evidence and create tools and resources to support responsible partnership transitions. Under the current phase of the project, SAS+ seeks to apply these learnings and accompany organizations currently going through partnership transitions. In order to continue learning how partnership transitions happen in different contexts and what factors support or hinder such processes, SAS+ held a 2-day online consultation to examine recent shifts in the aid sector related to partnership transitions. As phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts such as the #ShiftThePower movement and decolonizing aid conversations have forced international actors to reimagine their relationships with local actors and vice versa, this consultation sought to understand how partnership transitions are impacted and influenced by these dynamics.

KEY INSIGHT 1

The use of particular forms of language and terms when discussing partnership transitions can infer power imbalances that are unfavorable to local actors. Such language might be disempowering, not grounded in local realities, or hold varied meanings for people in different contexts.

“The terminology around transitions is not very appropriate as it may actually reflect a level of power; not a partnership of mutual consideration of each other’s level. It sounds like there is a dominant and a dominated, one dependent on the other.”

- Yvette Mushigo

KEY INSIGHT 2

Local resource mobilization not only leads to more responsible partnership transitions and local ownership, but also contributes to the local partner's sustainability, meaning they can continue to contribute to positive impact even after a program ends. Ideally, this mobilization can take place in tandem with international organizations changing their systems to fund transition processes and collaboration from the project planning stage.

“On the conversation about transitions; there is no way we can talk about transition without “Sustainability”. But again, how can we talk about sustainability without exploring “local resource generation” or “domestic resourcing”. Local actors MUST

1 Throughout this report, a responsible partnership transition refers to a process that is planned, jointly led by both local actors and their international partners, and gradual, in order to best support local leadership.

2 Hayman (2015)

come alive to the fact that donors are increasingly moving to co-ownership or co-funding because this is one of the aspects that “could” guarantee sustainability.”

- Aweno Norman

KEY INSIGHT 3

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that local actors are not only able, but also best placed to lead work in their own contexts, which supports the argument for local actors to lead on partnership transition processes. With the flexibility to design interventions that have not been imposed by INGO partners, local actors were also able to bypass arduous bureaucratic procedures which are often resource and time intensive.

“We have experienced a partnership transition because of COVID-19. This transition was because the international actor needed a grounded response, and we were better placed for this considering our local language and context. On the ground here locally, we were able to design our own interventions and did not need to work on what the partner dictated. The pandemic has changed how organizations engage in partnerships. For example, bureaucratic processes involving several documentations were suspended because of the lack of physical contact.”

- Tah Kennette Konsum

KEY INSIGHT 4

Partnership transitions can be a form of transformation for local and international organizations if power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed. Efforts such as the #ShiftThePower movement and conversations on decolonizing aid continue to question the power imbalances inherent within the international development system, as well as the structures that help perpetuate harmful practices and continue to occur in partnership transitions.

“...I believe a power shift is possible, but it’s vital that international organizations first shift their perspective in relation to local organizations. Many times, the most critical sources of support for vulnerable communities are organizations that are more informal and embedded in local social networks. These organizations however face many barriers in obtaining funding, including being seen as less trustworthy, involving more risk, and having less resources to fill out the complicated bureaucracy and thorough paperwork required by international organizations. Decolonization requires valuing other ways of existing in this world, that are not rooted in Western modernism. Therefore, international organizations have to shift their funding practices in a way that values the ways that local communities form organizations, rather than simply expecting them to abide by the standard set by Western NGOs.”

- Chelsea Barrera

RECOMMENDATIONS

Below are recommendations that emerged from the consultation on ways for INGOs to work towards responsible partnership transitions:

- **Enter partnerships with an initial transition plan already in place.**
Responsible and successful transitions are often planned from the start. This can ensure at the earliest stage that the expectations of all partners involved are managed, and that local actors are able to help shape and take ownership following the transition.
- **Collaborate directly with local partners throughout every stage of the partnership transition process.**
This includes organizing transparent and open conversations from the initial design phase of a joint program or collaborative effort to the implementation and evaluation stages, as well as during the transition itself. It is equally important to consult with local communities impacted by the project throughout the process to ensure their buy-in, taking their contributions to the joint program or initiative into full account at each stage.
- **Tailor capacity strengthening efforts according to existing local capacities.**
Partnership transitions are best carried out when local partners can determine and frame the types of capacity strengthening support that they need to ensure the sustainability of their work following the transition.
- **Recognize and address inherent power imbalances in the international development system and how these undermine the agency of local actors.**
This includes fully recognizing and taking into account the agency of local actors and acknowledging their insights, perspectives, and experiences. INGOs need to properly value and invest in local knowledge systems and practices, reform their systems so they can be more courageous with their funding, and re-assess their relationships with local actors to create and sustain more equitable partnerships that in turn lead to more responsible partnership transitions.³

3 Paige (2021a)

2 INTRODUCTION

Many international aid actors continue to find ways to work towards locally led development, however serious gaps in ensuring true local leadership remain. When concluding programs and partnerships, aid transitions between international entities and local actors in the past have been swift and poorly planned, often carried out without local input.⁴ In some cases where these unplanned transitions have occurred, programmatic impact has been jeopardized, undermining local leadership and sustainability.

However, there has recently been a shift in conversations on locally led work and partnership transitions. Phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and efforts to address power imbalances in the aid sector such as the #ShiftThePower⁵ movement have added nuance to the way we view and approach partnership transitions.⁶ Additionally, there is growing recognition that the aid sector is plagued by colonial systems and beliefs which inherently favor Western knowledge and beliefs over that of the Global South. Consequently, INGOs have begun to examine their relationships with local actors and find ways to address this power imbalance.⁷

To this end, the Stopping As Success (SAS+) consortium has been working over the past five years to fill that gap by examining responsible partnership transition processes from international to local entities and working with organizations to highlight and apply good practice. Recognizing the importance of recent shifts in the sector and the need to investigate these issues further, SAS+ held a two-day global online consultation in November 2021 to update its understanding and approach to responsible partnership transitions. This report is a synthesis of this online consultation.

This report is part of a 4-year collaborative learning project (2021-2025) “Stopping As Success: Locally Led Transitions in Development”,⁸ led by CDA Collaborative Learning, Peace Direct and Search for Common Ground. The project, funded by USAID/DDI/LFT Hub, seeks to generate learning on how to facilitate development transitions from international to local actors at the organizational, project, and activity level.

2.1 METHODOLOGY

The findings and analysis in this report are based on discussions that were held during an online consultation that took place on [Platform4Dialogue \(P4D\)](#) from 10-11 November 2021.

Nearly 150 participants from 41 countries joined the consultation to discuss the topic of partnership transitions, what constitutes effective partnership transition processes, and the effects of phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the global #ShiftThePower movement on partnership transitions.

Participants were selected and invited to take part in the consultation based on their expression of interest and by submitting an application via an online Google form, which was available in both English and French. By registering for the consultation, participants were given access to a number of discussion threads hosted on P4D, which remained open during the consultation and for an additional three days to allow ample time for participants to read and respond to each other’s comments. Throughout the consultation, framing texts included questions which served as a starting point to prompt conversations on specific themes for participants to discuss. Participants also responded to points raised by each other during the consultation. All consultation content was

4 Hayman (2015)

5 McQueen (2021)

6 Boone and Allen (2020)

7 Paige (2021b)

8 <https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/>

available in both French and English, and participants could also post anonymously if they did not wish to be identified.

All discussions were held in a password protected area of the P4D platform. Quotes from participants that are included in this report are illustrative of the viewpoints raised during the consultation, and a small number of quotes were subject to minor edits for clarity and readability. All participant quotes within this report were given explicit consent to be publicly quoted.

Although a light-touch literature review was conducted, the issues discussed in this report are not a representative or exhaustive illustration of all relevant issues on the subject of partnership transitions. Instead, the main focus of the report reflects the viewpoints of participants and the issues that they raised during the consultation.

2.2 OUTLINE OF THE REPORT

Following the introduction and methodology, Section 3 highlights key insights that emerged from the online consultation, including participants' discussion on the terminology around transitions and the success factors that contribute to responsible partnership transitions. Section 4 then focuses on the impacts of recent phenomena in the international development sector, such as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on partnership transitions and efforts to address power imbalances. Finally, the conclusion in Section 5 provides a short summary and recommendations from the consultation.

3 EXAMINING PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS

“Transitions in development are the change-over or switch-over of the steering control, responsibility and management of project/activities from an internationally driven action to a locally driven action (towards a local entity).”

- Charles Mwangi

Approaches to partnership transitions in international development can vary considerably across organizations, with the process being described in different ways, including: “handing over, phasing out, transition, winding down, wrapping up, moving on, spin-offs”.⁹ All these terms illustrate a form of transition but not how this relationship transformation takes place. SAS+ highlights that a partnership transition strategy consists of international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) terminating or modifying a relationship with local partners, whether planned or unplanned, and typically involves the withdrawal of financial support or the closing of a program or office in a local context.¹⁰ This is different to an exit, which is the complete withdrawal of an international organization from a context without any ownership transfer, or a relationship maintained with local entities.¹¹ However, among different actors, there seems to be a lack of consensus regarding what partnership transitions actually mean, both in theory and practice. To this end, the consultation began with a discussion on participants’ understanding of what partnership transitions are and how they should be described and characterized.

3.1 UNPACKING THE TERMINOLOGY ON PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS

At the start of the consultation, participants were asked to define and unpack the term ‘responsible partnership transitions’. Although participants might characterize the term differently, they agreed that responsible partnership transitions entails a transfer of actions, skills and responsibility to local actors. Ibrahim Tangara provided the following definition:

“Development transitions is a strategy for designing, developing, implementing and transferring development actions and skills to the beneficiary community in order to make it self-sustaining.”



Most participants highlighted that partnership transitions should be focused primarily on how they impact the local communities and who leads that transition process. They further championed local actors’ leadership as a necessary condition to enable effective partnership transitions. Not only does this mean that the right actors are involved in the partnership process for sustainable impact, but it also allows local ownership. This argument was posited by Alassane Niamebe who highlighted that:

“A partnership transition is and must be first and foremost be focused on local cultural values and put communities at the forefront through national civil society organizations (CSOs). This allows for better ownership and identification of sustainable endogenous solutions to identified difficulties.”

9 INTRAC

10 Martins et al. (2020)

11 Ibid

However, participants claimed that the terminology used to describe partnership transitions is limiting, especially when it comes to acknowledging the contributions of local practitioners and communities. Tah Kennette Konsum argued that:

“...The terminology is limiting as it seeks to create an impression that the community seems to look like beneficiaries and does not contribute to or support the project. Communities provide lots of resources during the intervention...”

In place of partnership transitions, participants suggested terms such as “bridging partnerships for development” and “implementation partnership”, with the emphasis placed on local actors as the best placed stakeholders to integrate the needs of the community. Participants noted that a transition is not an end to a partnership but entails a transformation in the relationship between partners where sustainability of the work is ensured. The goal is for international and local actors to maintain a long-term relationship that is not interrupted by the end of a project, and partners remain in contact with the intention to support one another in the long-term, even if not formally.

Nonetheless, participants highlighted that the terminology may hold different meanings to different actors, therefore it is important to clarify the specific terms used to ensure that there is a shared understanding of concepts to ensure clear communication and expectations. Sia Nowrojee observed this issue when defining partnership transitions:

“The terminology is fine – it is a useful tool that we need to increase understanding and communication around these issues. However, we should recognize that there is now a lot of terminology out there – ‘transitions in development,’ ‘decolonization,’ ‘localization,’ ‘unlearning,’ etc. that is understood differently by different stakeholders. We may be using the same terminology but mean different things. As we all participate in these (and other) discussions, we should clarify what we mean when we use certain terms.”

This conversation around language continued with an anonymous participant observing that,

“the use of the term transition can be value-neutral, there is no indication that the transition is a positive or negative one.”

It is worth noting that the manner in which a partnership transition is characterized or communicated affects the process being positive or negative. The use of language matters, using phrases such as ‘sustainability plans’ rather than ‘exit plans’ can help foster productive and positive discussions.¹²All in all, a key observation to highlight is that although definitions can help us communicate a phenomenon, we need to acknowledge that these can be limiting and will be interpreted differently across actors. This also applies to the way the transition is communicated throughout the process.

12 Tull (2020)

3.2 SUCCESSFUL TRANSITIONS ARE INCLUSIVE AND LOCALLY OWNED



According to research on transitions by both SAS and The International NGO Training and Research Centre ([INTRAC](#)), projects that involve community participation and ownership are more likely to endure, even after such projects end.¹³ When ownership and buy-in is ensured, with communities included in the planning and implementation of projects, communities can even choose to continue working on projects at no cost.¹⁴

Local communities can help provide funding¹⁵ through small donations or contribute by helping local organizations raise funds¹⁶ and provide non-financial support. For local organizations, social capital such as support from their local community can be crucial to financial sustainability. In some cases, local organizations can find ways to sustain themselves following transitions using local volunteers.¹⁷ This relationship between social capital can prove especially useful in supporting NGOs working towards financial sustainability by exploring alternative financing models such as for-profit consulting wings or social enterprises.¹⁸

When prompted on what constitutes successful partnership transitions, participants largely agreed that successful transitions are, first and foremost, inclusive. They highlighted that local communities themselves should be actively involved in project activities instead of simply being considered as “beneficiaries”. According to Ada Ichoja Ohaba:

“To successfully discuss transition and partnership, we as national and international actors should include the local actors at every phase of the implementation, from the needs assessment to stakeholders’ identification to implementation. By doing so, they are grounded in the overall goals of the project and the transition comes easier. To discuss transitions is also to mean sustainability.”

An anonymous participant added that:

“If the programme is genuinely asset-based, and not dependent on project inputs from international funding agencies, it has a much higher likelihood of being a successful transition. If the communities are not genuinely owning, driving and ALSO resourcing the initiative (at least significantly), then any partnership transition will be much tougher. Partnership transition is much more than simply finding another funder.”

Alichu Ogbu further expanded on the point of local actors resourcing themselves by observing that:

“For me, it’s the use of grassroots resources at every stage, from mobilization to project implementation. This gives the local community/beneficiaries a sense of ownership of the initiative.”

13 Hayman et al. (2016), Martins (2020)
14 Renoir and Guttentag (2018)
15 Tull (2020)
16 Peace Direct (2020)
17 Renoir and Guttentag (2018)
18 Yamron (2020)

As noted by the comments above, it is crucial to understand that partnership transitions encompass much more than a funding relationship. It is also important for INGOs to understand ways to support their local partners to find sustainable alternatives post partnership transition. Research by SAS highlighted several ways INGOs can work with local actors for the latter’s financial sustainability following transitions.¹⁹ Several ways of offering this support includes providing seed funding, maintaining relationships following the partnership transition whilst facilitating relationships between local actors and key stakeholders such donors. INGOs can invest in capacity development of their local partners towards financial sustainability in identified areas such as financial and grants management, and transfer knowledge procedures such as proposal databases.²⁰

To ensure true inclusivity in partnership transitions, there needs to be transparent processes in place that promote information-sharing and foster decision-making by local stakeholders. In order to facilitate these processes, it is necessary to build open and flexible relationships between partners. International and local actors should have a space to establish transparent lines of communication before the start of the partnership and/or transition process. This allows the opportunity for partners to understand each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Creating such spaces also allows partners to be honest with each other and gives them a chance to create a shared vision of the change they want to see, as well as find ways to establish mitigation measures and minimize risks. The essence of this point is capture by Michael Hughes who explained that:

“Far too many partnerships are extractive, and when the project and the learning leaves communities are still left in a position where something else has to be built. For me, part of partnership building requires local communities to be given the space and the legitimacy to ask, “why do you want to partner with us” and a very selfish question, “what is in it for us”. If communities don’t get a sense that the other partners are there to help and are committed to doing only that then a transitional process will be difficult if not impossible. Communities need to set parameters and non-negotiables for a working partnership and there should be explicit details of what a transitional process looks like, a timeframe set against it and also some dedicated funding and support.”

3.3 THE BEST TRANSITION PROCESSES ARE PLANNED AT THE BEGINNING

Entering a partnership with a transition in mind from the outset increases the likelihood of a successful transition. This includes “setting achievable objectives, formulating realistic mandates, and ensuring a degree of flexibility when it comes to planning timelines so that other actors can take over.”²¹ It also allows partners to have a clear understanding of roles and responsibilities. Investing in the design phase of partnership transitions can have a big effect on enabling local leadership. Thus, INGOs should examine how they enter local contexts in a responsible way which supports local capacity and leadership from the beginning. Additionally, planning transitions from the beginning supports greater accountability to the local communities while also ensuring that work is tailor-made and relevant to the local context.²²



19 Yamron (2020)
20 Ibid
21 Gross (2014)
22 Martins (2020)

Although collaboratively working on partnership transitions from the beginning of a program can be time consuming, this can prove vital when the transition takes place.²³ The importance of this was stressed by most participants, with Ziad Al Achkar arguing that:

“Successful transitions really have to begin at the initial stage of a partnership. If you aren’t discussing it at the initial stages of partnership development, you will inevitably end up having to create a mechanism at a later stage that may be rushed or not suitable. I think there is also a great need to work on trust development and exchanging knowledge. Transitions shouldn’t just be a one-way transaction.”

However, it is important to ensure that such transition plans allow flexibility to respond to changing contexts and mitigate against issues that can arise throughout the transition process. A key point to highlight is that a common vision of the transition from the beginning allows for accountability as it encourages both international and local actors to be held responsible to each other.²⁴ This goes together with communicating about the transition process as soon as possible and maintaining that communication throughout the programmatic work. Poorly planned transitions can further add to concerns and mistrust between partners, especially if local entities think they lack the capacity to continue work.²⁵ Such communication on partnership transition is multi-directional and involves regular interactions under several configurations.²⁶

However, due to funding restrictions, insufficient staff capacity and time restraints, it can often be difficult to collaboratively create transition plans at the outset. Jerry McCann presented a way to work around this problem:

“If donors broker a process into two funded components: (i) co-design; and (ii) implementation, there would be a much more committed, collaboratively designed process. So, the first call for proposals could be for the process of co-design, which would be awarded to multiple partnerships (let’s say the three to five best co-designed process proposals), and then the actual implementation proposal would be selected from the co-designs that were submitted. If you do not provide resources for co-design, the co-design process will always be compromised.”

Finally, it is important to emphasize that plans for transition that are co-created at the outset do not need to be comprehensive; the goal is to “capture shared intention about the goal of local leadership, and be flexible and adaptable, with ways to jointly assess context changes.”²⁷

23 Lewis (2016)

24 Martins et al. (2020)

25 Martins (2020)

26 Ibid

27 Boone and Renoir (2020)

3.4 PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS WITHOUT CAPACITY STRENGTHENING ARE INEFFECTIVE



Transitions are not only about transferring work but also capacity – the phasing out of the program/aid should go hand-in-hand with working towards the sustainability of local actors. Nevertheless, this capacity strengthening should be based on the existing capabilities of local actors, while recognizing that they themselves are sources of knowledge and skills which are vital for INGOs. In terms of the process, placing open feedback mechanisms can ensure that capacity support processes are continually informed by local realities and needs.²⁸

Participants noted that before partnership transitions take place, it is paramount to strengthen the existing capacity of local actors. This can build their resilience and support their ability to carry out work following the transition. John Ede emphasized that: “Partnership transitions should happen when the improved institutional and individual capacity of local leaders has been developed to manage technical capabilities. Most local organizations lack the capacity in terms of technical capabilities, namely knowledge of technology and the technical reporting required to meet the quality and global standards, as the majority of donors and INGOs tend to engage foreigners to manage these responsibilities.”

To that end, participants noted the importance of earmarking funding and resources in programs to support local organizations’ capacity during transition processes. Ada Ichoja Ohaba suggested that

“we could have budgets for building the capacities of local actors in accounting/finance management and by that even after transitioning, local actors can source for funds to carry out activities and plan sustainability better. Donors can also support them with small funds in the process of transitioning to enable them to demonstrate in the process how well they can account for funds spent.”

Pife Muliro further added that in addition to financial resources, knowledge sharing is also important:

“When ending a development programme, international actors should provide practical guidelines and resources to support local leadership, especially facilitating financial sustainability that often local actors lack. They should foster responsible transitions and partnerships that promote local ownership and leadership.”

However, participants highlighted that capacity strengthening needs to be guided by local realities and demands. Aveno Norman explained:

“I think it is time to talk about more meaningful and purposeful technical capacity building. There is a need for capacity assessments that are followed up with capacity development plans [to systematically address the gaps identified]. But also, we have to address the high local organization staff turn-over. Local organizations cannot tie down staff because they cannot offer them comfortable contracts and so local experts end up being taken by INGOs.”

28 Boone, Barnard-Webster and Jean (2020)

The conversation highlighted that to ensure sustainability, there is a need to strengthen local partners' capability to continue work post-transition. It is especially important to talk about issues that affect the financial sustainability of local organizations and the harmful practices by INGOs that affect them. As viewed in the quote above, international organizations poaching skilled staff is a phenomenon that continues to exist, which not only hinders financial sustainability, but also the ability of local organizations to continue work post-transition. In response, to work better towards more effective partnership transitions, INGOs can collaborate with local actors towards capacity strengthening. SAS identified several ways of strengthening local actors' capacity that are conducive to effective transitions.²⁹ These include technical capacity in areas such as resource mapping, data management, and governance. Local actors' operational capacity can be reinforced in numerous ways which include but are not limited to relationship building and operational management. In terms of systemic capacity, this supports local entities to work towards long-term sustainability by making shifts in financial, organizational, and programmatic work to maintain structures that allow them to continue effectively operating in a post-transition system.³⁰

29 Boone, Barnard-Webster and Jean (2020)

30 Ibid

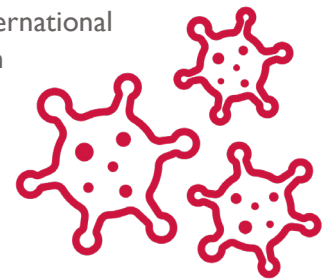
4 RECENT SHIFTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS

To fully work towards locally led development, international actors need to acknowledge and address the power imbalances inherent in the aid sector more broadly, but also in the ways these are manifested during partnership transitions. This allows actors to move away from a dependency model to a more transformative approach. In partnership transitions, this transformation can take many forms which include valuing indigenous intellect, recognizing local actors' agency to lead partnership transitions and ensuring local actors are involved in decision-making processes.

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the discussion around the need to address power imbalances.³¹ A number of international organizations in the Global North have begun re-examining and reforming their relationships with their partners in the Global South, in an attempt to create more genuine and equitable partnerships.³² Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to new models of working where INGOs have adapted to remotely working with local actors who are leading the work in their own contexts.³³ As a result, actors have been able to pilot new standard working procedures.

4.1 THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PARTNERSHIPS AND TRANSITIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has had widespread and far-reaching effects on the international development sector, including notable cuts to bilateral aid budgets, the disruption and closure of programs and activities as well as serious financial sustainability issues for civil society actors, including local and international NGOs. In some contexts, partnerships were prematurely terminated with devastating consequences. Participants in the consultation were no strangers to these harmful effects. Kurutsi Shimfe recounted that:



“During the COVID-19 pandemic, I experienced a partnership transition in my former job. There were a lot of difficulties due to the halt and break in engagement and the normal and usual ways of doing businesses, leading to some of us being disengaged and so the transition was tough and haphazard for the local leadership.”

Despite the difficulties that ensued from the COVID-19 pandemic, it has forced actors to challenge the status quo and adapt in new, innovative ways. This includes a renewed focus on flexible funding approaches, shifts towards co-designing programs and activities with local actors, and greater trust and recognition in local actors' ability to deliver effective outcomes.³⁴ In fact, the pandemic opened up new spaces for local leadership to develop, and actors to connect across sectors.³⁵ In the absence of international aid personnel, local actors have had greater control on programmatic decision-making which has led to a greater sense of empowerment.

31 Afadzinu (2020)

32 Bond (2021)

33 Paige (2021b)

34 Human Advisory Group (2020)

35 Ibid

This finding was affirmed by Ziad Al Ackhar who noted:

“The pandemic has certainly highlighted that many groups and local CSOs do have a tremendous capacity to be able to take charge and lead in responding to the challenging times their communities face. I hope that the lessons we’ve learned during the pandemic will be long-lasting and not simply return to the previous model of operating.”

This observation was echoed by other participants in the consultation who noted that travel restrictions have led to INGOs leaning more on local actors to lead and carry out necessary work in their contexts.

Michael Hughes observed that COVID-19 led to increased collaboration between local actors in Northern Ireland:

“COVID-19 opened possibilities for new partnerships inter and intra post conflict societies. Many new connections were made as local groups and individuals across sectarian boundaries [worked] to provide for those most vulnerable. Their ability and willingness to do this was an example for the local government in how to change, pivot and adapt, and the government began to be more flexible with support and its own engagement with communities.”

The pandemic further triggered a switch to online engagement and made the use of digital tools a necessary part of partnership transitions. However, adaptations to remote working have posed major challenges, the digital divide has required sustained technical and financial support for partnerships as well as innovative solutions to program implementation.³⁶ John Ede articulated that:

“Regrettably, most of the local organizations lacked capacity to transition into technology and digitized methods of working. This reinforces the need to further straighten capacity in managing technology and digital systems.”

However, as noted earlier in this report, this capacity strengthening should be tailored to the local partners, as needs on digital support varies across actors and contexts.

Although the COVID-19 pandemic has led to devastation across the world and has caused INGOs to prematurely transition in partnerships, it has also provided the opportunity for local actors to showcase their ability to lead work. This evidences the need to trust local actors to lead the partnership transition process and be engaged at all levels.

4.2 ADDRESSING POWER IMBALANCES IN PARTNERSHIP TRANSITIONS



The development sector is currently set up with international actors such as donors and INGOs holding more financial and decision-making power than local actors. This has led to power imbalances where relationships and knowledge sharing tend to be unidirectional where INGOs ‘teach’ local actors how to undertake development work and hold all the power in terms of strategic decisions around funding and program design. Consequently, such development partnerships and their transitions are predisposed to

power imbalances. A survey conducted by the [Reimagining the INGO \(RINGO\) Project](#) on partnerships found that local actors are often labeled the ‘weaker’ partner and their recommendations are usually overlooked especially regarding decisions on budget allocation. Their report states: “funding usually comes with a pre-set agenda, and the global South CSOs will most times bend over to fit into the funding.”³⁷

Participants confirmed this issue of power imbalances in partnerships, especially when it concerns strategic decision-making on how funds should be spent. Aweno Norman asserted that such power imbalances are tied to financial control:

“Partnership without ‘Power’ is meaningless for the local partners. Unfortunately, in terms of budget allocation, partners don’t have the money [which is often tied to weight in decision making or influencing]. Until the word ‘Partnership’ is unpacked we may not see the effective and meaningful local participation we desire.”

The power imbalances inherent in the aid system are further exacerbated by the way local communities are presented to donors to justify funding a program: “another way aid distorts contexts is the necessity for recipients to portray communities as in great need in order to justify donor funding.”³⁸ This is also linked to the media’s portrayal of lower income countries which further discourages putting trust in local stakeholders. This misrepresentation of reality can dissuade international actors putting trust in local actors to lead the partnership transition process.

Participants provided examples of this distortion of reality to justify aid. Tah Kennette Konsum highlighted that:

“In as much as global inequalities still exist, responsible partnership transitions will just be a myth. International organizations and the media specifically describe worst-case scenarios about Africa in particular and paint a picture of a continent riddled with poverty and disease, bad leadership, etc. This is not the reality. Local communities have the potential to lead transitions. Most of the instability in Africa is exogenous, mostly caused by global power struggles for resources.”

This distortion of reality is manifested in bureaucratic processes that work against local partners, by either being too demanding or measuring local capacities according to Western standards. The international community can address power imbalances by giving local partners a greater say in how programs and transitions are implemented. During the partnership transition process, it is important to focus on power disparities at every step, from ensuring resource transfer, ownership, decision-making power and responsibility to local actors.³⁹

Sia Nowrojee highlighted that work towards equitable partnerships should include processes that ensure that:

“while partners in the Global North typically bring and control financial resources, local partners cannot simply be involved in implementation because that establishes a caste system which distinguishes who leads the intellectual and financial aspects of the project and who does the work of implementation. It is essential that local partners are involved in strategic decision-making from the beginning about how to allocate, reallocate and

37 RINGO (2021)

38 Leach (2018)

39 Boone and Allen (2020)

utilize resources throughout the lifespan of the program and into the transition.”

Consequently, “shared decision-making and power-sharing in institutional partnership arrangements are critical to rebalancing these relationships and addressing the sense of powerlessness on the part of local actors.”⁴⁰ On this topic, participants emphasized the need for an exchange of practices, learnings and more open communication from both sides to ensure transitions are effective. Ada Ichoja Ohaba provided an example:

“I was thinking...of maybe having more learning from other local actors who have successfully had plans for sustainability. Like an exchange programme to learn from others about what worked well and what could be done differently. This can be done while the implementation is ongoing to help them better plan towards sustainability.”

Participants argued that there is a need to move away from thinking that the Western ways of standard procedures are the only standard to uphold. Equal partnerships promote fairness, transparency, accountability, mutual respect and cognizance of every partner’s contribution to the partnership. There should be space to build relationships before the beginning of the partnership and transition. Most crucial to the relationship building process is trust and belief that local partners are capable agents of carrying out the work.

Constantine Loum expressed this sentiment:

“Shifting power in partnership transitions is possible; but it requires trust and the belief that local NGOs are up to speed to get the work done...a frank discussion is required between the entities to ensure that what is shifted is well done and achieves set goals.”

CONCLUSION

As the international development sector continues to explore practical ways to work towards locally led approaches, responsible partnership transitions remain a key part of this process. Poor partnership transitions obstruct the road to sustainable development. In these instances, not only are local actors left to pick up the pieces without the necessary tools and resources to continue the work, but any progress from previous work may be lost. International actors need to effectively plan their partnership transitions, and also make sure that these processes are locally led. However, challenges remain in achieving fully locally led partnership transitions, including how they are defined and communicated, as well as what approach is taken and how they are implemented. Other challenges include the abrupt withdrawal of INGOs and funding from partnerships, the exclusion of key stakeholders in transition planning and processes, wider power imbalances in the international development sector and a lack of support for local actors' capacity and sustainability.

Key insights that emerged from this consultation include:

- The use of particular forms of language and terminology when discussing partnership transitions can infer power imbalances that are unfavorable to local actors. Such language might be disempowering, not grounded in local realities, or hold different meanings for different people and in different contexts.
- Local resource mobilization not only leads to more responsible partnership transitions and local ownership, but also contributes to the local partner's sustainability, meaning they can continue to contribute to positive impact even after a program ends. In an ideal world, this mobilization can take place in tandem with international organizations changing their systems to fund transition processes and collaboration from the project planning stage.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that local actors are not only able, but also best placed to lead work in their own contexts, which supports the argument for local actors to lead on partnership transition processes. With the flexibility to design interventions that have not been imposed by INGO partners, local actors were also able to bypass arduous bureaucratic procedures which are often resource and time intensive.
- Partnership transitions can be a form of transformation for local and international organizations if power imbalances are acknowledged and addressed. Efforts such as the #ShiftThePower movement and conversations on decolonizing aid continue to question the power imbalances inherent within the international development system, as well as the structures that help perpetuate harmful practices and continue to occur in partnership transitions.

Based on these consultation findings, we recommend that INGO leaders, managers and program staff take immediate steps to:

- **Enter partnerships with an initial transition plan already in place.** Responsible and successful transitions are often planned from the start. This can ensure at the earliest stage that the expectations of all partners involved are managed, and that local actors are able to help shape and take ownership following the transition.

- **Collaborate directly with local partners throughout every stage of the partnership transition process.**

This includes organizing transparent and open conversations from the initial design phase of a joint program or collaborative effort, through to the implementation and evaluation stages, as well as during the transition itself. It is equally important to consult with local communities impacted by the project throughout the process to ensure their buy-in, taking their contributions to the joint program or initiative into full account at each stage.

- **Tailor capacity strengthening efforts according to existing local capacities.** Partnership transitions are best carried out when local partners can determine and frame the types of capacity strengthening support that they need to ensure the sustainability of their work following the transition.

- **Recognize and address inherent power imbalances in the international development system and how these undermine the agency of local actors.**

This includes fully recognizing and taking into account the agency of local actors and acknowledging their insights, perspectives, and experiences. INGOs need to properly value and invest in local knowledge systems and practices, reform their systems so they can be more courageous with their funding, and re-assess their relationships with local actors to create and sustain more equitable partnerships that in turn lead to more responsible partnership transitions.

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Stopping As Success: Locally-Led Transitions in Development (SAS+)
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