Principles in Practice

Lessons from Civil Society and Operational NGOs on Strategic Country Transitions for U.S. Development Assistance

Introduction

To best facilitate the lasting impact of development efforts, operational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society regularly prioritize effective and sustainable transitions of programs to local actors and country governments. Through experience and practice, these organizations have learned to manage transitions by working within communities, planning for challenges, building capacity, and implementing programs across sectors in ways that institutionalize positive social change. As the US Agency for International Development (USAID) develops policies and practices to help build local self-reliance and establish metrics for strategic country transitions, InterAction has compiled operational lessons learned from development and civil society member organizations to highlight existing best practices and tools. InterAction members, many of which are USAID implementers, work in nearly every country in the world and boast a combined donor base of $15 billion per year. These lessons complement existing principles and guidance for strategic transitions by adding operational experience to the conversation.

The primary lesson is that effective transitions take time and must be coordinated inclusively well in advance. Experience shows that it takes at least 10 years to go from initial mobilization to full program self-reliance, and that transitions themselves can take anywhere from two to five years with post evaluations following drawdown. Another common thread is the need for development programs to consistently improve the social contract between citizens and their governments, with the ultimate goal of creating conditions where foreign assistance is no longer necessary.

In contrast, transitions not executed strategically are detrimental to US interests and investments and devastating to local developmental progress. Quick dismantling of assistance can leave people and regions worse off than before, dilute trust between local partners and government actors, and leave communities vulnerable to shocks. Regardless of any pressures to reduce foreign assistance, country transitions are only strategic when they uphold the primary principles of good development practices.
Overview of Operational Lessons Learned

1. Community mobilization and government capacity building requires effort from the start.

2. Within the continuum of US government foreign assistance, development actors and US agencies should play to their strengths.

3. Development gains should be institutionalized in local systems and across sectors to foster lasting impact.

4. Development actors should support host communities in generating political will and know when and how to “let go before they go.”

5. Focused solutions for regional inequality and vulnerable populations are necessary to advance countrywide successes.

6. Clearly articulated financing strategies focused on building local capacity and next steps are essential to protect programmatic investments and development progress.

7. Transition plans should both ensure that governments can provide basic services to their people and build local resilience to protect vulnerable citizens from shocks.

8. In the event of political crises and violence in middle-income states, avoid knee-jerk reactions to withdraw development assistance.

9. Celebrations of progress cultivate further successes and motivate local advocates.

10. Transitions must be supported by continuous learning, with ex-post evaluations built in from the start.

Lessons and Programmatic Examples

1. Community mobilization and government capacity building requires effort from the start.

Strategic transitions take time and work. Civil society, private sector, and local or national government – those that will eventually take over implementation – should be brought into the program development process from the beginning. USAID is uniquely positioned to convene different groups to learn from key influencers in all local sectors.

USAID may face barriers to this kind of initial community mobilization, but these challenges are worth surmounting. Sometimes gaps in civil society capacity and diversity can prevent civil society engagement from being inclusive. In other cases, space for civil society is actively threatened and restricted by different levels of government, creating
risk for civil society actors to engage. Such regimes can contradict efforts for local ownership and inclusive participation, and complicate a sustainable transition process. Community mobilization alone is not enough; efforts must also build the capacity of local and national government actors to productively engage with and respond to civil society and its concerns.

To effectively overcome these initial challenges, development actors must identify and meet with civil society, private sector, and local government regularly in their spaces to build buy-in from a diverse coalition of actors from the very beginning of a program. Program staff need to listen and learn from civil society, private sector, and government representatives about their needs, capacity, will, roles, and interests, and depend upon them for strategic guidance. Efforts must include engaging with actors that traditionally do not have seats at the table, such as women’s groups, faith based organizations, trade unions or workers organizations, and small- to medium-sized businesses. With effective engagement of a diverse coalition of civil society, projects can be legitimized by local communities, governments, and the international community. The legacy of USAID depends upon civil society engagement throughout the entire programmatic and transition process.3,4

Lesson 1 in Practice

Worldwide
CARE International’s programs start with community buy-in for positive results

CARE’s Village Savings and Loans (VSLA) programs are inherently community run. CARE works to provide tools that community members then adopt and take forward themselves. The groups are transparent, self-governed, and driven by social ties. Importantly, they provide low-risk opportunities for very poor households to improve their economic status and well-being. Because these groups are truly owned by the community, they tend to operate independently well after CARE’s support ends. For example, in a six-year longitudinal study only one of 25 CARE VSLAs in Zanzibar had stopped functioning.

These VSLA groups go far beyond just monetary and economic support systems. They link established community groups to formal financial services, result in better school enrollment for children, confront unequal gender roles in the home, and even increase the number of meals eaten per day by the participants. This leads to major change that is community-owned, sustainable, and scalable. Results from a 2014 final evaluation show that VSLA programs more than tripled the number of women elected to public office, increased women’s ability to speak out, increased women’s control over assets by 75 percent, and reduced food insecurity.

Burkina Faso
Plan International transitions education program to local government and civil society

From 2005 to 2012, Plan International’s Burkina Bé Response to Improve Girls’ Chances to Succeed (BRIGHT) program improved the educational outcomes of more than 27,000 children in Burkina Faso. The program focused on 132 rural villages in the 10 provinces of the country where girls’ enrollment rates were lowest. BRIGHT constructed primary schools, mobilized communities to support girls’ education, and lowered barriers to girls’ education outside the classroom through Plan’s holistic approach to community mobilization and government capacity building. A consortium of NGOs implementing these programs, including Plan International and Catholic Relief Services, also worked to inform strategic decision making by the Burkina Bé Ministry of Education. By designing and relying on approaches that could be adopted by the permanent ministry for the sector in question, this program facilitated a sustainable transition to official systems after the program concluded.

Prior evaluations found that BRIGHT had raised girls’ primary school enrollment by 20 percent and improved math and French test scores for both girls and boys. Now, four years after project close-out, a new rigorous, independent impact evaluation has found impressive lasting effects. Schools previously part of the BRIGHT program continued to be more accessible, have better infrastructure and resources, employ more teachers, provide more grade levels, and sustain girl-friendly characteristics when compared to schools in unselected villages. Child marriage is also six percent lower in BRIGHT villages, translating to more than 1,500 early marriages prevented.
2. Within the continuum of US foreign assistance, development actors and US agencies should play to their strengths.

From the perspective of field-based civil society organizations, USAID does its best work when it steps in to scale up already-tested pilot programs or smaller, local non-governmental work. It is also very effective as an intermediary to link technical experts to systems in the field. Focusing USAID’s work in these essential areas can help to expand US government engagement across the continuum of foreign assistance and build sustainable partnerships that can help facilitate local self-reliance and future transitions. Once programs scale up and technical experts are in place, other US agencies or local development actors may represent more logical partners to continue the work.5,6,7

Lesson 2 in Practice

Rwanda
Global Communities works with USAID to transition child development program to local NGO

Ubaka Ejo, which means “Build the Future” in Kiryawannda, is an example of a successful handoff of a project to a local partner, made possible by Global Communities (then known as CHF). The project started in 2012 when USAID awarded $2.15 million over three years to a local NGO, African Evangelistic Enterprise (AEE), with funding from PEPFAR. The Ubaka Ejo project works to improve the economic well-being of orphans and vulnerable children and their families and the nutritional status of women and children through community-based nutrition interventions.

Over the course of this project, Global Communities assisted AEE to improve organizational governance, project management, proposal writing and fundraising and financial management. AEE staff credit Global Communities with nurturing their organization to the point where it could compete for direct funding from the US government. As a result, AEE became a full partner with USAID in designing Ubaka Ejo. AEE brought in a range of local stakeholders – both community members and civil society organizations. AEE’s grounding in the community was reflected in its practice of organizing communities into self-help groups that jointly identified needs to be addressed by the project. AEE brought local knowledge and leadership capacity to bear in a new way. Following a favorable evaluation of AEE’s project management, USAID provided a five-year extension.

Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean
Catholic Relief Services transition HIV AIDSRelief program to local stakeholders

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) worked in ten countries in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean between 2004 and 2013 on AIDSRelief, a project that scaled up HIV care and treatment to over 700,000 poor and vulnerable people. AIDSRelief established basic packages of HIV care and treatment that exceeded what many thought was possible in resource-constrained environments. The program helped broad cadres of health workers to identify and manage treatment failure or other adverse drug events; to diagnose, treat, and prevent opportunistic infections; and to provide patients with adherence counseling and support, empowering them to effectively manage their own treatment. The program also cultivated sustainable patient access to quality services provided and managed directly by local partners.

The experiences of transitioning grant management, clinical oversight, and strategic information management from a consortium made of international organizations to wide-ranging local partners varied tremendously. In capturing lessons, common themes appeared: cultivating a shared vision, bringing partners “to the table” in a meaningful way, encouraging staff continuity, and balancing flexibility with prescription. A shared vision and commitment to transitioning, improving local partner’s systems, and building trust and confidence among stakeholders facilitated the process toward local ownership.

CRS’ analysis also made clear that sustainability is a process and there are degrees of organizational maturity. For a successful transition, the receiver or local partner needs to have adequate organizational and technical capacity. Many local partners already have substantial capacity and most have the potential to strengthen their capacity. They are best positioned to address local problems because of their situational knowledge and existing networks and relationships.
3. **Development gains should be institutionalized in local systems and across sectors to foster lasting impact.**

Effective programming capable of sustaining impacts after a transition relies on examining the entire system within which the program exists, and utilizes key levers of change (i.e. Systems Thinking). Such approaches focus on the interconnection of sectors – such as governance, health, supply chains, and infrastructure – that precede any intervention, and develop and strengthen systems that will remain after that program draws down. A systems approach also considers whether the government can or is willing to respond to civil society demands as they arise as a key indicator of sustainability.

For a transition to be most effective, programs must not create parallel delivery channels for goods and services – most notably in healthcare, agriculture production, and education sectors – that are not attached to sustainable institutions after the project is completed. Instead, system strengthening work should be prioritized. Programs in different sectors in the same area should also coordinate to avoid redundant efforts. To address these risks, development actors must prioritize the technical capacity strengthening of national and local service delivery systems and personnel, even if they are inefficient systems at the onset. Investments directly connected to state or local government and civil society can provide the most sustainable results. Moreover, during a transition, USAID can help facilitate channels through which local civil society can be funded directly by their own governments, or by outsider funders.  

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**Lesson 3 in Practice**

**South East Asia and Central Africa**

**Plan International applies a systems approach to sanitation**

Community-led total sanitation (CLTS) is a demand-led behavior change approach, which aims to create open-defecation free (ODF) communities. CLTS attempts to trigger collective change through facilitators who encourage and motivate people to analyze the impact of open defecation in their communities and take action on their own. Since its inception in Bangladesh in 2000, CLTS has been incorporated into the national policies of many governments. Plan International was one of the first international non-governmental organization (INGOs) to test this approach, and currently implements CLTS in more than 30 countries.

Plan International’s implementation arrangements for CLTS vary by country depending largely on government support for CLTS and sanitation, as well as the capacity of different actors – including local government and village volunteers – to participate in the process. A University of North Carolina study funded by the Gates Foundation found that where national government support for CLTS was strong, local government played a more important role in facilitating CLTS activities in Cambodia, Nepal, Indonesia, and Uganda. These governments directly invested in CLTS activities to train staff and support local government, thereby scaling up and sustaining their health and sanitation gains.

**Bangladesh**

**Save the Children works within government structures to improve newborn health system**

Over the past two years, Save the Children has supported the piloting in one district of a set of new interventions aimed at saving newborn lives. The work was carried out by existing government staff and systems with the aim of incorporating the program into Bangladesh’s Health Population and Nutrition Sector Development Plan (HPNSDP) for 2016-2021. Save the Children provided technical support and documented the implementation learning. As a result, the Ministry of Health has now adopted the Save the Children supported pilot and has a budget for national expansion within the new sector development plan. Because this is now the national standard of care, scale-up is also receiving support from various development partners who provide funding and technical support to the HPNSDP, in addition to the national resources budgeted for scaling up this National Newborn Health program nationwide.
4. Development actors should support host communities in generating political will and know when and how to “let go before they go.”

Within the arc of effective development programming, national and local stakeholders move along a spectrum of interventions and capacity development: beginning with a close partnership with an INGO or USAID where outside experts provide technical expertise, management, financing, and implementation, they then move to a mentorship with the external actor “accompanying” and “leading from behind.” Finally, in-country stakeholders take over full responsibility as the INGO or USAID gradually decreases its resources to test the transition.

In practical terms, this means that the original program implementers will decrease their levels of influence and investments as time passes and as local stakeholders step in. Transitions are appropriate when the government-citizen compact is fulfilled independently of outside intervention. When done right, the transition should be viewed by local, in-country stakeholders as a positive shift, motivating them to gradually take over responsibilities.

As mentioned previously, this process of local ownership does not happen on its own; rather, it requires fostering community buy-in and government political will. While political will does fluctuate over time and across administrations and often involves decisions that are outside the influence of the development community, if a program has successfully engaged a diverse and inclusive group of actors from all levels of government (national, sub-national, local), political will for the initiative is more likely to continue through transitions and election cycles. Cultivating sustainable political will also requires the building of relationships and a social contract between citizen and government so that governments are motivated to respond to citizen’s needs.9,10

Lesson 4 in Practice

Philippines
Plan International stimulates the social contract between citizens and government

Based on a 2013 ex-post evaluation of ten programs that Plan International implemented between 2000 and 2008 in the Philippines, evaluators highlighted that Plan International made significant contributions to the lives of children and their families in the areas of health, education, water and sanitation, and in response to the abuse and exploitation of women and children. They cited a key reason for this lasting impact: Plan International’s ability to build partnerships between community and governmental institutions at all levels. Stimulating this social compact improved the sustainability of the interventions once Plan International left the area. The evaluators concluded that interventions were sustained thanks to their responsiveness to community needs, the proven added value of building local capacity to implement services for children and their families, and due to the high degree of community engagement and transition support employed by Plan International.

West, Central, and Southern Africa
The Hunger Project plans for transitions based on goals for sustainable self-reliance

In a variety of countries across the African continent, The Hunger Project employs eight Goals for Sustainable Self-Reliance and 57 indicators within which stakeholders set their own targets to determine when is an appropriate time for them to completely transition the implementation of programs over to local counterparts. Local counterparts are expected to set their own goals, then Hunger Projects holds them accountable to those personal goals, and plans for transition when a certain number of self-set goals have been reached. These goals and indicators are applicable across a variety of development sectors and are often posted on Transparency Boards in communities to show progress.
5. **Focused solutions for regional inequality and vulnerable populations are necessary to advance countrywide successes.**

Sustainable programs address changing and deepening inequality at the regional, national, and sub-national levels to ensure development gains. In some contexts, sub-national areas or vulnerable populations within middle- or high-income countries experience levels of poverty and unrest consistent with low-income nations. Poverty may be isolated within marginalized populations and differ across ethnicities, sexes, genders, ages, proximity to urban areas, or physical abilities. For example, women will have different needs and level of access to information during transitions in comparison to men. Because relative economic deprivation can trigger conflict, this should not be ignored when planning for transition. It is essential to go beyond the national economic statistics of a country to understand the political economic context of where the work takes place to see which groups are not being reached by development initiatives. Programming or resources may need to continue to support vulnerable populations even after broader national-level transitions have begun.

Cross-border challenges also impact the possibility of successful transitions. Currently, 65.6 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced – the highest number in history – among them are 22 million refugees. When migration occurs, sometimes middle-income countries that have transitioned from development assistance host large refugee and migrant populations. This can create pockets of inequality between migrants and host nation citizens that may not be reflected in national-level data on inequality. The needs of these vulnerable groups often fall to civil society actors. Just as transitions are meant to shift the US relationship with such countries, they also need to factor in different types of long-term support that a country’s government and NGO community may need to protect refugees and migrants outside of traditional development assistance.

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**Lesson 5 in Practice**

**Colombia, Dominican Republic, Nigeria, and Cote d’Ivoire**

Heartland Alliance International works with vulnerable populations in middle-income countries

Heartland Alliance International (HAI) has programs in countries that may otherwise be considered for transition based on their level of socioeconomic development with the aim of improving the livelihoods of marginalized demographics. As examples, in Nigeria and Cote d’Ivoire, HAI provides stigma-free health care services to HIV/AIDS patients among key populations, including men who have sex with men, transgender individuals, sex workers, and people who inject drugs. HAI also works with the stateless community in the Dominican Republic, and ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq. In terms of resilience, nearly all of HAI projects incorporate a mental health and psychosocial support component. One notable example is our work on the Pacific Coast of Colombia, where HAI trains internally displaced survivors of the armed conflict – most of whom are Afro-Colombian women – to be community psychosocial support workers.

**Yemen**

Adventist Development and Relief Agency International provides targeted support to refugees and internally displaced

Although Yemen is not a middle-income country, Adventist Development and Relief Agency International’s (ADRA) work provides a good example of effective programming to support refugee and IDP populations. ADRA has been active in Yemen in support of conflict-affected internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnee households in Abyan and Lahj since 2012 through continuous emergency response. When the conflict escalated in March 2015, ADRA was implementing the OFDA-funded YALLA Project, with a focus on resuming livelihoods of returnees, many of whom were displaced by conflict multiple times. ADRA refocused the YALLA Project to address emergency water trucking, hygiene promotion, and WASH-related needs through February 2016. In 2017, ADRA conducted a rapid assessment of the livelihood activities implemented before the escalation of the conflict, which helped ADRA understand which livelihood activities were still functional and contributing to the resilience of the households and communities. The majority of respondents reported that ADRA’s agriculture activities have produced sustainable food sources for their households. These findings served as the basis to resume OFDA funded livelihoods activities, focusing on the interventions that where implemented before the escalation of the conflict and that remained operational increasing the resilience of the beneficiaries.
6. Clearly articulated financing strategies focused on building local capacity and next steps are essential to protect investments and progress.

Programs must be developed and implemented with the country’s financial context and post-transition payment capacities in mind. To this end, programs should not invest more than what can be reasonably be sustained by domestic or private sector resources by the time that an international development actor transitions out. To maximize self-reliance, it is necessary to determine whether the cost and quality of a program can be sustained without their input. Projects should minimize the need for financial inputs and, when appropriate, help promote income generation from the start. This requires work from all involved to strengthen the capacity of national budgets and finance ministries, and to promote domestic resource mobilization.

Financial planning should also account for the realities of where a community or country fits into the broader economic system. First, because external actors often serve as watchdogs for corruption, when they leave mechanisms should be established to protect civil society implementers from corrupt behaviors. Second, transitions should be coordinated with other funders who may be drawing down at the same time. When possible, these withdrawals of funding should be staggered, as simultaneous transitions pose risks to countries, even if they have passed the middle-income threshold for development. Third, staff responsible for the transitions should also clearly communicate with local and national stakeholders about the sources of future financing, whether mobilizing domestic revenue for development, catalyzing private sector funds, or connecting programs with multilateral donors or foundations.14

Lesson 6 in Practice

Worldwide

Gavi and Global Fund financing shows flexibility and predictability are not mutually exclusive

According to a report by RESULTS, Gavi Vaccine Alliance and Global Fund both use a timeline for transition based on the disease burden and the proportion of co-financing that the host government can afford. These tools are used to indicate when Gavi and Global Fund should be transitioning their activities and their funding. In addition, these models balance flexibility and predictability into their transition plans. If a country meets all the criteria for transition, they will remain eligible for funding for at least one additional year. If a country’s numbers dip below the threshold for transition readiness, they once again become eligible for Global Fund or Gavi funding. Countries can access the data sources used to determine their eligibility both on health and economic indicators online. These transparent, flexible, yet predictable multilateral donor approaches are different than most bilateral donors that do not share their rationale for transitioning funding.

7. Transition plans should both ensure that governments can provide basic services to their people, and build local resilience to protect vulnerable citizens from shocks.

Transitions are sometimes punctuated by small shocks that present opportunities for testing sustainability and adjusting the US government role, while still providing life-saving humanitarian assistance. Development assistance that builds resilience in local communities to adapt to and recover from shocks is essential to breaking the cycle of entrenched poverty. Such assistance can help transform communities’ capabilities to respond to future events and reduce the demand for humanitarian and emergency assistance.
With transitions in mind, development actors should invest in health and environmental preparedness infrastructures and sustainable recovery procedures designed for an uncertain and dangerous future that might bring famine, epidemics, economic recession, and environmental disaster. Engagement with local governments and private partners, including through insurance schemes, can help reduce and mitigate risk for local populations. Extra consideration should be made for women and other marginalized groups that might have different needs or lack access to resilience efforts. Resilience programming should be flexible to accommodate all levels of intervention and work to overcome inequalities of marginalized communities.\textsuperscript{15, 16}

**Lesson 7 in Practice**

**Nepal and India**

*Lutheran World Relief builds resilience across borders to prevent flood damage*

Through the Nepal-India Transboundary Flood Resilience (TBR) project, Lutheran World Relief (LWR) is collaborating with local partners to assist communities located along the India-Nepal border in strengthening their resilience to the devastating effects of flooding. The project aims to do this through implementing integrated strategies to improve early warning systems, strengthening government and community capacities in disaster risk reduction, and building resilient livelihoods through cross-border community-based structures. The project reaches nearly 52,000 people living in the Koshi/Gandak river basin and has promoted cross-border flood risk reduction practices in 136 villages situated along the India-Nepal border.

Through the TBR project, LWR and their partners organized community members into transboundary citizen forums and community disaster risk management committees or strengthened groups that already existed to prepare and provide early warning, first aid, search and rescue, and rehabilitation services to their communities. Members of these groups are trained in disaster risk reduction and early warning systems, were provided with lifesaving tools, and received facilitated collaboration of project participants, local governments and community based organizations across the Nepal and India border. This resulted in the development of practical processes for communicating real-time flooding information from upstream to downstream, cutting the information sharing time in half from 48 hours to 24 hours.

**Guatemala**

*Project Concern International upgrades infrastructure and WASH in low-income areas*

With rapid urbanization, an increasing number of people are living in high-risk and informal settlements prone to natural disasters, outbreaks of disease, high rates of crime, gender-based violence, and limited access to basic services and livelihood opportunities. With its 2.1 million inhabitants, including the more than 800 informal settlements, Guatemala City mirrors many of these challenges. The Barrio Mio Project, implemented by Project Concern International and their partners, demonstrated the Neighborhood Approach methodologies for upgrading high-risk informal settlements, and built the capacity of communities – as well as government, municipalities, local CSOs, private sector, and universities – to work together to implement and scale up urban water and sanitation infrastructure, reinforced housing construction, improved urban health, empowerment of women’s social and economic status, improved urban planning and zoning, and developing plans to extend lower cost loans to families.

**8. In the event of political crises or violence in middle-income states, avoid knee-jerk reactions to withdraw development assistance.**

Transitions do not occur in a vacuum. While a country may demonstrate advances in certain aspects of development, fragility creates conditions under which a shock can become “development in reverse,” thereby threatening the gains of a prospective transition. Political crises, violent conflict, and high levels of violent crime can stunt or reverse a country’s progress toward a transition, thus requiring humanitarian assistance in addition to long-term development assistance. Before a crisis hits, development actors should engage with all levels of government, civil
society, and the private sector to help identify risks, such as domestic political upheaval or the impact of displacement or other humanitarian crises in neighboring countries.

In cases of regime change, development actors must push for greater coherence between internal policy and development aims and relax rigid program conditions to prevent a “feast-to-famine” change in US assistance. Such changes punish the most vulnerable, rather than the ruling elite. When the demand for humanitarian assistance suddenly spikes, foreign assistance actors should work to quickly adjust aid instruments while conflict mitigation experts respond to the situation in-country. Provisions must be made for an adaptive, multi-pronged approach, so that development programs, funding, and actors can be re-tooled to respond to the changing situation. If development assistance must be cut off for political reasons, development actors should work to responsibly transition to a humanitarian response to reduce the impacts on civilian populations and create interim solutions to mitigate the damage to longer-term development.¹⁷

Lesson 8 in Practice

**Egypt**

*Save the Children amplifies program outcomes during Arab uprising*

Save the Children’s USAID-funded Maternal and Child Health Integrated Program (MCHIP) implemented the SMART project in Egypt from October 2011 to June 2014. SMART’s goal was to improve newborn health and child nutrition outcomes, with a strategic objective to increase key maternal, neonatal, child health and nutrition behaviors, and the use of community-based MNCH-FP-Nutrition services in six governorates of Egypt.

For much of the duration of the project – December 2011 through December 2013 – Egypt was in a state of political upheaval that directly affected some SMART implementation areas. In this environment, SMART sought to build on past experience working with local civil society organizations to provide implementation support to address malnutrition and newborn health with program activities that complemented services provided in the public health system. Building on previous success working with community development associations (CDAs), SMART partnered with 12 local organizations. Each oversaw an additional five to 10 local CDAs, reaching over 2 million people. Thirty-two of these CDAs raised a total of $4.74 million from donors such as the Japanese Embassy and the Social Fund for Development to scale up the SMART model for community-based activities. Fifteen of those 32 CDAs received an additional $2.42 million from non-USAID sources to continue the programs. This totaled to $7 million in additional funding from other sources following the end of USAID’s investment.

9. **Celebrations of progress cultivate further successes and motivate local advocates.**

For transitions to be successful, all involved need to see the process and the final transition as positive. Celebrations, active communications, and media strategies that emphasize best practices in the press locally and globally go a long way in establishing broad positivity. Coupled with efforts to set achievable goals and promote country ownership, transitions highlighted by local media and elected officials support genuine political will and promote local commitment to an evolving relationship with the US. Whenever possible, development actors should capitalize on opportunities to highlight successful programs and host government activity, such as by organizing a celebration with all those involved.¹⁸
Lesson 9 in Practice

Ghana
The Hunger Project amplifies community success with celebration and media events

In July 2017, The Hunger Project-Ghana celebrated the graduation of three clusters of rural communities that have achieved the targets they set for declaring their self-reliance, meaning they have demonstrated their capacity to take charge of their own development. This marked the first time that communities across 118 epicenters in Africa had graduated to self-reliance based on a comprehensive set of about 50 diverse targets—such as portion of households living below the poverty line or in moderate or severe hunger, to the presence of sanitary latrines and use of improved farming methods—that measure their progress and assess their path to sustainability. This accomplishment was marked by epicenter celebrations, a week-long donor trip to the epicenters and a press conference with key local press and organizational leadership including Åsa Skogström Feldt, President and CEO of The Hunger Project, and Samuel Afrane, Country Director of The Hunger Project-Ghana. This is just one example of the Hunger Project’s celebration efforts they have held 15 similar celebrations with local communities worldwide.

10. Transitions must support continuous learning, with ex-post evaluations be built in from the start.

To advance US understanding of how to successfully transition out of countries, such actions must be monitored and evaluated after responsibility has been relinquished. Gains of development can take years to manifest and can ebb and flow depending on a myriad of factors, like political commitment, access to resources, or external events. Experience shows that a short-term loss or gain in developmental progress might not signal long-term success or failure, and even after successful programming implementation and transition backsliding of developmental progress can occur. Without ex-post evaluations it is difficult to monitor these shifts and understand the long-term impacts of development efforts. Not only do ex-post evaluations examine the results while donor funds were invested, but also reveal outcomes two to 20 years later. Such evaluations sit at the core of sustainable, cost-effective development and ask questions like: Were the local government, NGOs, and communities able to maintain the progress that was made or is there little evidence that the program happened? What factors drive sustainability of results?

Ex-post evaluations should be built in to monitor “backsliding” and shocks, and assess the sustainability of programming gains. This is an essential part of monitoring, evaluation and learning and can help identify how and why certain programs delivered lasting benefits. This learning is key to making future programs more effective and efficient, and protecting development investments, and promoting communication and cooperation with countries even after transitions have occurred.19
Lesson 10 in Practice

Bolivia, Honduras, Kenya, and India

USAID evaluates its exit strategies years after drawdown

In collaboration with the Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University, USAID’s Office of Food for Peace published the results of 12 ex-post program evaluations across four countries. Those studies found a high number of program results had been sustained or even improved two to three years after close-out. At the same time, USAID’s ex-post evaluations also flagged some common practices that significantly decreased the prospects of sustainability. This is a very laudable effort to test, learn from, and improve program impact.

“This report challenges us to take a fresh look at our program approaches: it calls for a much greater focus on the issues of exit and sustainability at the time of project design…and states that some actions that drive big results during the life of the project may actually undermine sustainability in the long run. We are challenged to ask if we are willing to accept more modest results in the near term if they can be delivered in a way that will yield more sustainable gains over time.”

Conclusion

Drawn from the experience of more than two dozen InterAction member organizations implementing programs in-country, these ten lessons learned show that programmatic transitions can be mutually beneficial for local communities and external development actors. When done effectively, transitions uphold good development practice, build local self-reliance, and help to make the world stronger and safer. Transitions represent critical opportunities to consolidate and amplify the successes of a program and to ensure the legacy of US engagement. Through the creation of strategic transition policies and practice, USAID is well-positioned to learn from past efforts by the NGO community to strategically transition out of programs and communities and build upon these lessons to create more effective and efficient programming.
2 The BRIGHT program was financed by $25 million from the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) with field support from USAID. The program was implemented by a consortium led by Plan, along with partner organizations Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Tin Tua, and the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE).