PRACTICAL GUIDELINES *for* COMMUNICATING RESPONSIBLE TRANSITIONS

PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE

This resource offers practical guidelines for effectively communicating responsible transitions[1] in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding (HDP) sectors. It aims to equip practitioners across the HDP sectors with strategies to navigate the communication challenges that arise during periods of significant change. The guidelines provided help to ensure transparency, maintain stakeholder trust, and facilitate responsible transitions and shared ownership across various organizational levels and contexts. It was developed as part of the Stopping As Success: Locally Led Transitions in Development (SAS+) activity, implemented by a consortium consisting of CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, Peace Direct, and Search for Common Ground, with support and funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It draws from 19 case studies of transitions involving international[2] and local actors,[3] as well as through experiences accompanying and learning alongside 10+ SAS+ partnerships with transitions taking place in nearly 30 contexts.[4]

Communicating transparently builds trust and inspires others to support a shared vision. During a transition process, it is crucial that all actors involved—including donors, local and international actors, and community members—are actively incorporated into decision-making. Being transparent about the knowns and unknowns associated with transition processes, revisiting the shared vision, and establishing feedback loops are key to countering power imbalances and ensuring that the transition process is communicated responsibly with all stakeholders involved. Responsibly communicating transitions consists of integrating local staff in planning, gradually shifting decision-making power, using inclusive language, maintaining transparency, and investing in mutual capacity strengthening[5] to ensure sustainable and culturally sensitive outcomes. This resource draws from our experiences to share best practices for anyone planning, implementing, or funding a transition process, whether at the proximate or international level. By improving communication throughout the transition, this tool complements and enhances the effectiveness of other SAS+ resources.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE

This resource is largely intended for international and proximate entities undergoing a transition; however, those using the guidelines may take liberty to tailor advice as appropriate. The guidelines are flexible and can be adapted to various contexts and needs. When the guidelines refer to "stakeholders", that includes internal (staff within transitioning entities, board members) and external (government, donors, partners, networks) actors who are connected to the transition. The core emphasis is on organizational relationships and processes while recognizing that each stakeholder group may have different needs, concerns, and roles in the transition process. This resource provides an in-depth series of practical guidelines and examples from our accompaniment partners in how they have communicated their transition, namely for engaging all stakeholders throughout the transition process, comprehensive strategy alignment, resource investment, ongoing listening, and adaptive management as contexts change. Adapt the guidelines to fit your specific situation and needs and extract relevant lessons for your context.

NAVIGATION KEY

Use the following visual guide to find information most relevant for specific actors:

Proximate organizations

International organizations

Donors

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

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

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

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

[5] SAS+ defines 'mutual capacity strengthening' as a process where all entities in a transition engage as equal partners to explore and strengthen relevant skills, knowledge, experience, and network contacts. See our mutual capacity strengthening resource for more.

What we mean by 'local' or 'proximate'

The term 'local' has different connotations in different contexts and is a contested term. In SAS+ documents, 'local entity' is used to refer to CSOs or NGOs that are undergoing a process of transition in their partnership with an INGO. This encompasses organizations that work at the local and national level. The broader term 'local actors' recognizes the diversity of this group, which can include staff, community members, and other stakeholders. Where appropriate, we use the term 'proximate' in place of 'local' to describe those who are most closely affected by the issues being discussed.

COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS

The Power of Communication

Transitions in the humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding sectors can elicit a sense of uncertainty, especially when dealing with complex challenges that require long-term solutions. Often driven by the end of funding, transitions require clear, strategic communication with all stakeholders, ideally from the inception of a partnership, or the early stages of a transition. The following recommendations are designed to ensure clarity among staff, and support the sustainability of the transitioning entity's[6] work through effective communication.

- **Involve all actors early:** Engage both proximate and international stakeholders to establish agency from the beginning. This involvement ensures they are not merely informed after decisions are made but are integral to the process, fostering ownership and independence.
- **Use respectful and inclusive language:** Choose words that recognize and value the contributions of proximate actors. Avoid terms that might diminish their role or prolong dependency.
- **Lead with transparency:** Maintain open and honest communication throughout the transition process to build trust and ensure that all stakeholders are aware of the plans, progress, and any challenges that arise.
- **Invest in learning:** Allocate resources for learning that support the transition vision and allow staff to acquire skills and knowledge necessary for the transition.
- **Integrate proximate staff in design and planning:** Include proximate staff at all levels of the planning process. Prioritizing their involvement shifts ownership, allows for a shared vision of transition, creates space for mutual capacity strengthening, and ensures that the transition aligns with proximate needs and perspectives.
- **Align messaging with what proximate actors value most:** Tailor communication to reflect the values and priorities of proximate staff and communities to build trust and ensure that the transition process is culturally sensitive and relevant in the systems it operates within.
- **Fund the unfamiliar:** Allocate resources to new or unfamiliar areas that are crucial for a transition, such as non-traditional indigenous systems and practices. Be willing to invest in novel approaches that align with organizational and programmatic transition goals.
- **Shift decision-making power:** Gradually transfer decision-making authority to proximate staff to prepare for their roles and responsibilities after the transition.

By following these recommendations, international entities can facilitate a responsible and sustainable transition, ensuring that proximate actors are positioned to continue the work effectively. Communication is not just a tool but a fundamental component in achieving successful transitions.
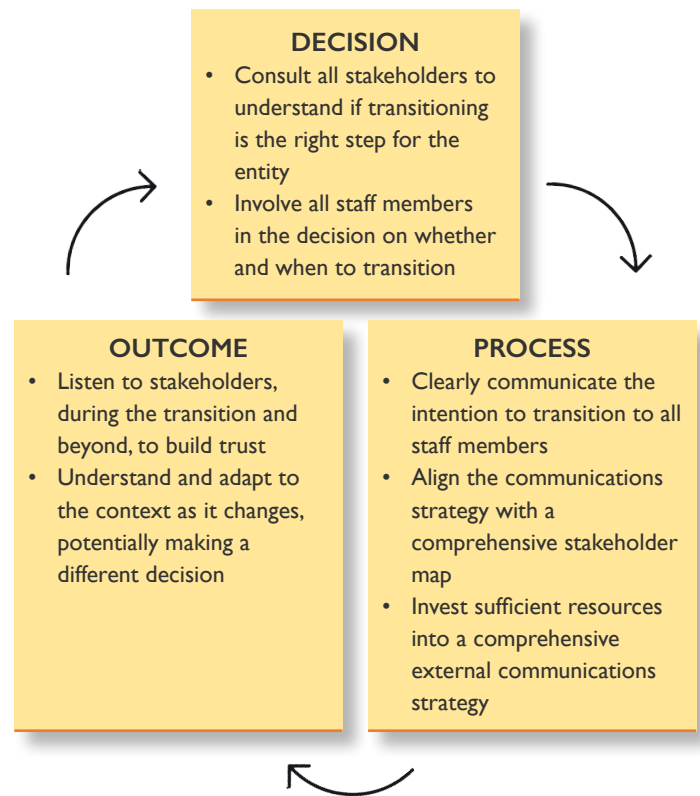
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[6] SAS+ uses the term 'entity' to refer to a range of organizations, social enterprises, networks, and other organizational structures that we have seen be a part of transition processes. 'Organizations' will be used throughout the document to refer to specific examples and for referring to organizations involved in SAS+ case studies.

Timeline and Process Points

Communicating transitions is an ongoing and iterative process that requires consistency throughout, potentially for years. The process involves simultaneous internal and external communication that should be aligned. While these milestones provide recommended check-in points, communication should not be limited to them, and the process could look entirely different depending on the needs of the transition process. **The activities outlined in this timeline are expanded upon in the next section.**

It is never too late to start communicating. Even if the transition is already underway, it is still imperative to begin communicating with all stakeholders as soon as possible.

DECISION
- Consult all stakeholders to understand if transitioning is the right step for the entity
- Involve all staff members in the decision on whether and when to transition

PROCESS
- Clearly communicate the intention to transition to all staff members
- Align the communications strategy with a comprehensive stakeholder map
- Invest sufficient resources into a comprehensive external communications strategy

OUTCOME
- Listen to stakeholders, during the transition and beyond, to build trust
- Understand and adapt to the context as it changes, potentially making a different decision

PRACTICAL GUIDELINES ON INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

Communicating transitions effectively can have a meaning that varies across contexts. Nonetheless, throughout SAS+ research and partnerships, practitioners with transition experience have identified several good practices. The following points are not intended to be an exhaustive checklist, but rather guidelines for both internal and external communications by international and proximate entities. The guidelines and activities below will need to be tailored to individual contexts, but the intention is that they provide inspiration and a starting point.

1. Consult all stakeholders to understand if transitioning is the right step to support local leadership and ownership

"Local leadership and clear communication are essential for inspiring staff to support the transition. The transition would not have been possible without confident and competent leadership. Both CARE Morocco's board and director put in extensive work applying for membership and inspiring the staff to go along with the transition. This included garnering input from across the team on the advantages and disadvantages of membership, and how to go about becoming financially independent. The corollary of this is that **internal communications and the consultation of staff by local leadership is key to generating buy-in."** (CARE Morocco case study)

- Be coherent from the beginning, and have open channels of communication to create trust amongst staff and with community members. The frequency and mode of communication can be determined based on the pace of the transition.
- Ensure stakeholders are consulted, not just informed, by providing opportunities for them to have input in and respond to your communications.
- Develop a structured process for gathering and analyzing stakeholder input.
- Include proximate actors and aim to align around a shared vision for the outcome that accounts for both the preferences and limitations.
- Prioritize diverse representation in transition consultations. Including key community members, government officials, program participants of all genders and ages, proximate staff, and sectoral partners fosters accountability and drives sustainable outcomes. This inclusive approach ensures decisions reflect local realities, address genuine needs, and leverage community strengths. The process cultivates ownership, accountability, mutual support, and collective growth.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Hold a town hall meeting or virtual conference to allow for open discussion and Q&A about the potential transition with stakeholders. This could be within an organization, across organizations and partnerships, or with external stakeholders including but not limited to community members.
- Conduct a series of structured focus groups with different stakeholder categories to gather diverse perspectives.
- Use a standardized questionnaire to collect data and perspectives on stakeholders' views about the potential transition.
- Create a decision matrix that weighs the pros and cons of transitioning based on stakeholder input and organizational goals.
- Establish an anonymous feedback channel (e.g., suggestion box or online form) for stakeholders to share concerns or ideas freely. Ensure the established feedback mechanism closes the loop by sharing with stakeholders how their input was addressed and/or incorporated.

2. Involve all staff members in the decision on whether and when to transition

"...we saw minimal consensus as to when various actors believed the exit was going to happen. We also found that decision-making related to the exit occurred at the national level. However, despite gaps in communicating the exit process, **local actors were increasingly involved in the process,** and ultimately this influenced the sustainability of the program." (World Vision case study)

- Manage expectations by ensuring that both international and proximate staff members are clear on the extent to which they are genuinely able to influence the decision on whether to transition. To the extent possible, cultivate ownership and agency.
- Create a timeline for decision-making and communicate it clearly to both international and proximate staff. An additional consideration for transparency would be to share the timeline with communities to set expectations, invite feedback, and create ownership.
- Establish a feedback mechanism for both international and proximate staff to voice concerns or suggestions throughout the process.
- If the decision to transition comes from top leadership or is determined by high-level organizational processes, be transparent with both international and proximate staff members about the reasons behind the decision.
- Identify where there will and will not be continuity in management, funding, logistical support, etc.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Develop a clear decision-making framework that outlines how staff input will be incorporated into the final decision.
- Form a transition committee that includes representatives from different levels and departments within the entity, ensuring proximate staff are well-represented.
- Organize workshops or working groups where staff can actively participate in scenario planning for different transition timelines.
- Implement a regular "transition pulse check" survey to gauge staff sentiment and readiness throughout the decision-making process.

3. Clearly communicate the intention to transition to all staff members

"From the beginning, when Nuru International came to Kenya, there was that awareness. There was that information and communication to the staff and the community that we are expecting to exit… **One of the key things is that the staff already knew, and that the community knew also.** This was not going to be Nuru International: they were going to leave the local staff with the project." (Nuru Kenya case study)

- Ensure the messaging is consistent to limit confusion.
- Coordinate the timing of internal communication with staff to align with external communications, ensuring that both occur in a synchronized manner to avoid confusion and ensure consistency.

- Provide a clear point of contact for staff questions and concerns about the transition.
- Clarify what type of support the international entity is willing to offer to proximate staff both short- and long-term (e.g., support in finding new job opportunities, potential funding for new projects, follow-on initiatives). If there is a need for support in other areas that the international entity cannot provide, consider identifying other resources that staff could utilize.
- Share information about the entity's intention to transition as early as possible, and no later than when the official decision has been made, with all levels of the organization.
- Once the intention is shared, communicate the envisioned outcome of the transition—or the process by which this outcome will be determined—at the outset.
- Be realistic and authentic, presenting both the opportunities and challenges from the beginning. Transitions can be difficult periods of intense change, so it is important to acknowledge this and not minimize the experience, particularly of proximate staff members.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Develop a comprehensive FAQ document that addresses common concerns and questions about the transition, updating it regularly as new information becomes available.
- Create a dedicated intranet page or internal communication channel specifically for transition-related updates and resources.
- Schedule a series of "Transition Talk" sessions where leadership can provide updates and staff can ask questions in real-time. Ensure that these sessions are designated safe spaces for staff to share their concerns, ideas, and feedback without the fear of repercussions or judgment.

4. Align the communications strategy with a comprehensive stakeholder map

A stakeholder analysis can benefit a wider communications strategy, as well as distinct components of one, such as brand identity: "an NGO's brand identity is used in multiple ways, **depending on the audience.** For example, as a statement of credibility to donors, or as a statement to civil society groups that the organization is becoming a stakeholder in the future of the country it works in." (CARE Thailand case study)

- Create a comprehensive stakeholder map that includes all relevant parties: staff members, donor entities, partner organizations (proximate, national, international), and recipients of the activity's support (communities, civil society organizations, etc).
- Create bespoke messaging and identify appropriate channels and timing for different stakeholder groups based on the stakeholder map.
- Ensure that there is a system for tracking the departure of stakeholders and introduction of new contacts.
- Regularly review and update the stakeholder map or conduct additional stakeholder mapping exercises as the transition progresses.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Use a digital stakeholder mapping tool (e.g., Mindmeister, Lucidchart) to create a visual, easily updatable stakeholder map.
- Develop personas to better understand and address the unique needs and concerns of different groups.
- Create a communication matrix that outlines the specific messages, channels, and frequency of communication for each stakeholder group.
- Implement a stakeholder engagement scoring system to prioritize and track the level of engagement with different stakeholders throughout the transition.

5. Invest sufficient resources into a comprehensive external communications strategy

"When we started this transition process, and actually it was two years before we got registration as a local organization, we had **established a transition team comprised of various people, functions, representatives – and one of them was a Communication Specialist.** We were very lucky to have a Communication Specialist who had very good knowledge and was also very experienced." (Oxfam BRIDGE Georgia case study)

- Allocate budget and personnel specifically for communication activities.
- Combine formal and informal communication approaches. Use face-to-face meetings for sensitive discussions, followed by written documentation of key decisions or feedback. This ensures clarity and creates an official record.
- Proactively manage communication risks by jointly mapping potential reputational issues and rumors, preparing tailored responses for different audiences, communicating the transition process clearly to create buy-in, and countering misperceptions with accurate information.
- Proximate staff should determine the best way to communicate changes and implications to communities in an open, inclusive, and culturally-sensitive manner.
- Once agreed upon internally, share the vision and intention of the transition with external stakeholders (i.e., donors, partners) to gain buy-in.
- Create an external communications plan that includes: a) metrics for measuring effective communication throughout the transition process, b) clear benchmarks for how and when to communicate with key stakeholders, and c) targeted and transparent messaging around the transition for relevant stakeholders.
- Ensure there is clarity around roles, level of effort, and budget for the persons responsible for each communication activity.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Create templates for different types of communication (e.g., press releases, donor updates, community announcements) to ensure consistency and save time.
- Conduct regular communication team meetings to review progress, address challenges, and adjust strategies as needed.

6. Listen to stakeholders, during the transition and beyond, to build trust

"**Feedback from all stakeholders** during a transition process can enhance perceptions of local ownership." (ActionAid case study)

- Create time and spaces for internal reflection on the transition process as it unfolds, including opportunities to communicate failures, challenges, and concerns.
- Establish a formal process for receiving, documenting, and responding to feedback, including criticism. Create an open feedback loop with accountability mechanisms, ensuring stakeholders are informed of how their input was addressed or why it wasn't incorporated.
- Allow time for critical reflection and implement regular check-ins, including in-person meetings when possible, to ensure consistent and transparent communication.
- Focus on building trust and strengthening relationships before discussing technicalities. This should include seeking to understand the opportunities that the transition could provide for all partners to both utilize their strengths and address their needs, which will foster mutual capacity strengthening.
- Where possible, invite senior management from HQ to visit the relevant country or region to meet with proximate actors to listen and share.
- Proximate staff should communicate transparently with the community so there are not any surprises.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Conduct a capacity assessment with all stakeholders to explore how they can support each other to strengthen capacities, and ensure that capacity strengthening is tailored to the needs and the context. This can include exploring ways to share capacities beyond trainings, such as accompaniment and working alongside, sharing network contacts, facilitating learning exchanges, etc.
- Schedule monthly team meetings dedicated to discussing the transition process where stakeholders can openly share challenges, concerns, and lessons learned.
- Distribute short, anonymous surveys to all stakeholders every quarter to gauge sentiment and gather structured feedback on the transition process.
- Publish monthly or quarterly reports summarizing the feedback received, actions taken in response, and explanations for suggestions not implemented.

7. Understand and adapt to the context as it changes

"The true success of PARTNER rests on its ability to strengthen and sustain local capacities and ownership amongst partners and communities. Maintaining a robust communication flow has been particularly crucial with state partners and established community structures, ensuring clarity, alignment with project objectives, and active engagement at every implementation phase. **Anticipating the impact of the Nigeria presidential elections in 2023 on program activities, the PARTNER consortium (partners) suspended direct program implementation,** leveraging local capacities enhanced to sustain community-driven initiatives during the period, allowing for a seamless transition back to full-scale implementation post-election."

- Ensure full understanding of the legal framework of the country (e.g., regarding employment law) and any relevant national labor regulations and adjust the communications strategy accordingly.
- Assess which communication channels are effective and make adjustments as needed to ensure stakeholders are receiving messages clearly.
- Develop key messages about the transition process, but be ready to adjust the communications strategy as the context changes and be responsive to emerging needs. Take the lead from proximate staff, rather than following a blueprint from HQ.
- Leadership should conduct active listening to acknowledge the emotional impact of the transition and its associated uncertainty, providing empathy and support regarding how the organization will respond to difficulties.

Suggested Approaches for Implementation

- Create a living document or guide summarizing key legal considerations that is regularly updated as regulations change or new information emerges.
- Conduct regular environmental scans to identify emerging issues or changes in the operational context.
- Train staff on adaptive management techniques to handle unexpected changes effectively.
- Create contingency plans for various scenarios to ensure quick adaptation if needed.
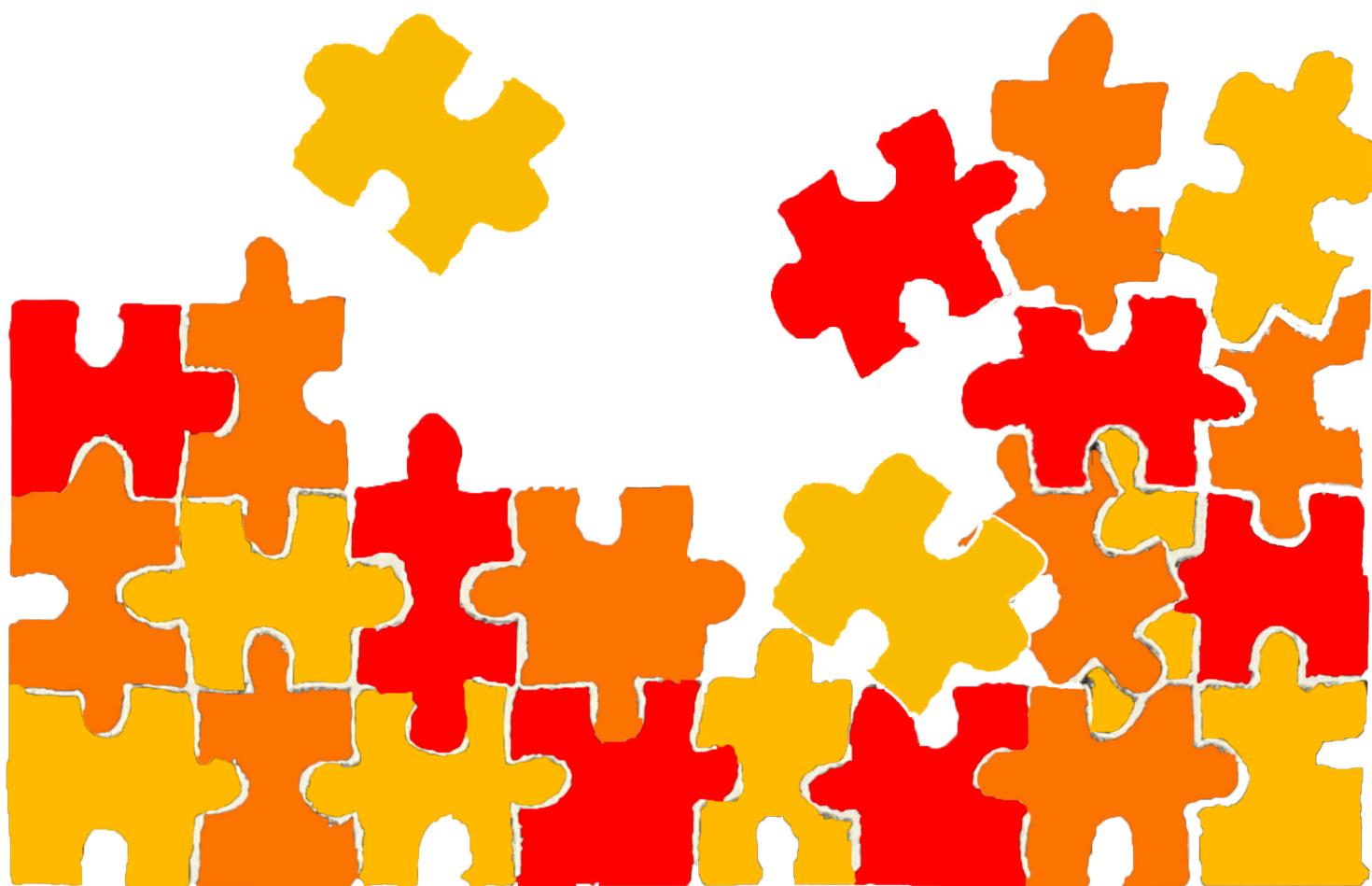
ABOUT STOPPING AS SUCCESS (SAS+)

SAS+ is a four-year cooperative agreement (2021-2025) funded under the Local Works Program of the Bureau for Inclusive Growth, Partnerships, and Innovation (IPI) in the Local, Faith, and Transformative Partnerships Hub (USAID/IPI/LFT Hub). SAS+ generates learning about how to facilitate development transitions from international to local actors at the organizational, project, and activity level. The SAS+ goals are:

- To enable development partnerships to be more locally led;
- For transitions to be more effective and sustainable for the local actors involved; and
- For systems of development actors to be more responsive to the communities in which they work, especially the dynamics of conflict affected contexts.

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