# TOOL 20: Exit strategy guidance

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#### Purpose of this tool

This tool provides guidance on engaging communities in planning programme and response closures, ensuring they are well informed, can participate in decisions about what happens next, and have opportunities to provide feedback or ask questions. This tool focuses specifically on **exit planning with communities** and does not cover exit planning with local authorities or other organisations, or the administrative aspects of closing a programme or response.

Different types of programmes and responses will require different approaches to exit planning with communities. For example, a short-term emergency operation may have limited resources or activities to hand over, versus a long-term resilience programme, which has community capacity strengthening as its core aim. Regardless of the type of programme or response, it is critical communities are engaged, informed, and able to ask questions and provide feedback, when support is coming to an end. This tool provides ideas and suggestions on how to ensure this happens, and can be used in full or in part, depending on the needs and type of programme or response.

#### Why is it important to engage communities in exit strategies?

Closing a programme or response can be difficult for the National Society, for staff and volunteers, and the community. Engaging communities in decisions about the closure, and maintaining open two-way communication throughout the process, can help to limit some of the negative effects of a programme or response ending. For example:

* **Quality and sustainability of outcomes**: Engaging communities and planning a proper handover increases the chance that improvements implemented through the programme or response will be continued after it closes. For example, if a borehole has been installed in a community it is important to spend time planning how it will be maintained, by who, and what training or resources are needed to do this. Otherwise, there is a risk the borehole will not be maintained or repaired, meaning the initial aim to provide people with clean, safe water will not be met, and the resources and time invested will have been wasted.
* **Strengthening community resilience**: The process of planning programme and response closures with community members, strengthening their skills and capacities to take over, and handing control of resources and activities to them, empowers communities and supports long-term resilience.
* **Do no harm**: Packing up and leaving with limited warning can put people at risk as they will not have time to prepare how to cope without the support provided through the programme or response. For example, if cash grants are ending, people need to time to plan ahead and find alternative ways to meet their needs. There can also be risks to the wider community. For example, ending cash grants can impact the local economy, or handing over resources without proper consultation can cause tension in the community or increase existing power imbalances.
* **Reputation and trust**: Poorly planned and communicated programme and response closures damage the relationship and trust between the community and the National Society. This can limit people’s willingness to engage with the National Society in the future and reduce staff and volunteer acceptance and safe access. Overall, this negatively affects the National Society and Red Cross Red Crescent reputation.

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#### When to start planning the exit strategy?

* **During planning and design:** Ideally, programme and response exit strategies should be discussed with communities during the planning and design phase. This means the process for handing over to the community is considered from day one, included in workplans and timelines, and budgeted for.
* **Or as early as possible:** If an exit strategy was not considered during the programme or response planning phase (which is often the case) then start discussing this with the community as early as possible. The earlier this happens in the programme or response cycle, the greater the chance of a successful handover to the community.
* **More participation during a programme, supports a better handover at the end:** Meaningful community participation throughout the programme or response increases community ownership, which helps facilitate a successful, smoother handover. The more community-driven a programme or response is, the less need there will be for this tool.

#### How to plan an accountable exit strategy

An accountable exit strategy will:

* Ensure community members participate in decisions about how the programme or response should end, what should be handed over, and to whom.
* Communicate clearly, widely when the programme or response is ending and what happens next, as well as alternative sources of support.
* Provide opportunities for people to ask questions and share feedback.
* Ensure staff and volunteers are also kept informed and involved in the process.
* Continue to monitor the programme or response for a short time after it closes and provide ongoing contact details the community can use in case of issues.

### **Planning with the community**

**Step 1: Agree what should be handed over**

* With colleagues, go through the programme or response plan and identify which activities need to be continued after the programme or response closes. These are the activities, which if not continued, would mean the programme or response has failed to meet its objectives i.e., maintaining boreholes.
* The number of activities or resources to be handed over, will depend on the type of programme or response. For short, limited emergency response operations, there might be very little that the community would be expected to continue compared to a recovery or resilience programme, where success will depend on many of the interventions being maintained after the programme closes.
* For each activity, discuss the impact of not continuing it, how feasible it will be for the community to take it over, what support or resources they would need, or if another organization could take over. A table like this can help guide the discussion:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Activity** | **Impact of not continuing this activity**  *On the programme outcomes? On the community?* | **Can the community take on this activity?** | **What support / resources would be needed?** | **Is there another organisation that could take this over?**  *e.g., local authorities, another NGO* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

* Repeat this process with the community, including community volunteers, using participatory approaches such as meetings with the community committee or focus group discussions with different groups. It’s important to ensure all groups in the community can participate in this process, including men, women, boys, girls, older people, people with disabilities and any marginalized or at-risk groups. For example:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity** | **Do the community want to continue this activity?** | **Impact of not continuing this activity on the community** | **Can the community take on this activity?** | **What support / resources would they need?**  *e.g., training, materials, funding* | **Is there another organisation that should take this over?**  *e.g., local authorities, another NGO* |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

**Step 2: Agree roles and responsibilities**

* Identify and agree the individuals, groups, or organisations who will be responsible for continuing activities or maintaining resources and discuss and agree with them their roles and responsibilities. For example, community water committees might take on responsibility for collecting contributions from residents for the upkeep of boreholes. Or a community committee may take responsibility for organising drainage clearing before every rainy season.
* Supporting these individuals or groups to develop a work plan for the year after the programme or response ends, outlining what activities they need to carry out, when, and who will be involved, may help them feel clearer about their role.
* Use the context analysis to identify appropriate individuals, groups, and organisations to take over activities and resources and understand the capacities, skills, resources, and strengths in the community.
* Consider the impact handing over activities and resources to these individuals, groups or organisations will have on the wider community and the National Society’s neutrality. Check that resources are being distributed fairly and that any vulnerable or marginalized groups will still have access to resources and be included in activities, once the National Society has left.

**Step 3: What support will be needed?**

* Discuss with those responsible for taking over activities, what support and resources they will need to carry out their role and plan together how this can be provided before the programme or response ends. For example:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Activity: Maintaining boreholes** | | | |
| **Resources required** | **Who can provide it?** | **How?** | **When?** |
| Community water committee | Community | Find people willing to be on a water committee, with equal representation of different groups | XX months before close |
| Training to maintain boreholes | National Society | Provide training and mentoring to the water committee | X months before close |
| Funding for parts | Community | Monthly contribution scheme managed by the water committee | X months before close |
| Engineers for specialist repairs | Local authority | National Society and community leaders get agreement from the local authority to provide this | X months before close |

### **Communication and feedback**

Communicating clearly and widely with the community throughout the programme or response handover and closure process is critical to ensure people are prepared and ready for any changes, to prevent rumours spreading, and protect the relationship between the community and the National Society.

**What to communicate**

* Why the programme or response is closing.
* What has been achieved (it may also be necessary to explain why certain commitments were not met).
* When the programme or response will close.
* Which services or activities will stop, and which will continue.
* Who resources, activities, or services are being handed over to.
* How people can continue to access these.
* What will happen at each stage of the handover or closure.
* How these decisions were made and who was involved.
* How people can ask questions, share their concerns, or provide feedback at each stage of the process.
* Sources of support available from other organisations and hoe to access this.
* How people can get in touch with the National Society after they leave in case of issues.

**How to communicate**

* Use the communication channels and approaches that have worked well during implementation and are preferred and trusted by the community. As always, use a mix of different channels and approaches to ensure all groups are reached. Use Tool 19: Communication channel matrix to help you.
* Communicate changes and stoppages as early as possible to give people time to prepare. More time is needed if people are reliant on the support provided, have limited other alternatives, and it has been being provided for a long time.
* Allow plenty of time for people to ask questions and feed into decisions, so plan the exit well in advance and phase it over at least a couple of months.
* It is critical that all staff and volunteers are kept informed of exit plans and processes so they can communicate these clearly and accurately to communities and address any rumours or misinformation quickly.
* Be honest with people – while people may not be happy that a programme or response is ending, they would much prefer to know in advance so they can plan for the change.
* Holding a closing ceremony to say goodbye and formally handover control of the activities and resources to key groups and members in the community can help to legitimise their role and make them accountable to the wider community. It can also help ensure everyone understands the National Society has handed over responsibility to the community.

### **Follow up and monitoring**

Although the National Society is no longer responsible for the programme or response activities and resources, it is important to monitor ongoing progress. This helps to:

* Identify if the community can maintain resources or activities after the National Society leaves, or if further support is needed
* Provides valuable information to the National Society on the long-term impact of programmes and responses
* Provides valuable information to the National Society on its exit planning processes, including improvements that need to be made for current or future programmes and responses.

This can be done with minimal resources by holding regular check-ins with volunteers living in the community, having the branch visit the community every three to six months to check how things are going, or carrying out focus group discussions six to twelve months after the programme or response closes. If the National Society has a permanent feedback mechanism this can also be used to capture any challenges.

#### Case study – Stopping water trucking in Haiti

### This case study outlines how communities were kept informed and able to ask questions and provide feedback when water trucking was ending as part of the Haiti Earthquake response in 2011.

**The issue**

* Free water has been trucked to 66 water points across the capital of Port au Prince for 18 months.
* This was expensive and had continued much longer than anticipated due a cholera outbreak six months after the earthquake in 2010.
* IFRC and Haitian Red Cross planned to hand back responsibility for water provision to the Haitian authorities, private vendors, and community water committees, which was in line with how people accessed water pre-earthquake.
* Communities needed to be engaged in choosing, establishing, and managing new water provisions processes and informed of changes throughout the handover.

**CEA objective**

To communicate to those reliant on IFRC trucked water that this service will be stopping by October 2011 and that IFRC will be working with them during this time to find alternative, sustainable solutions that meet the needs of their community.

**CEA aims**

Affected communities will:

* Be part of the decision-making process to establish new sources of water.
* Know how they can ask questions and make their concerns felt at each stage of the process.
* Be kept informed throughout the process, including that IFRC water trucking will end in September 2011.
* Know how and where to get water when IFRC trucking stops and are informed of the scale-down process.

**Key messages**

* Following the reduction in cholera cases, Red Cross emergency water trucking will end by September 2011, but we will work with communities to find and set up alternative sources of water.
* All communities affected by this will have a chance to ask questions and play a role in choosing alternative sources of water.
* Trucking water is very expensive so the Red Cross can’t do it forever and the money used on this could be better spent on reconstruction water projects.
* In many cases, water will be provided by the authorities or private vendors, the same as it was before the earthquake.
* We will keep you informed each step of the way and make sure you know how and where to get water when Red Cross trucking stops.

**Activities**

**Phase 1 – Mass communication and closing of underused water points (MARCH/APRIL 2011)**

**Inform communities that water trucking will end by September, explaining why and how the process will work.**

* Red Cross radio show on 30 March 2011 with guests from WATSAN. The show will discuss why water trucking can’t continue and introduce the process from now until September, stressing the key messages above. Live calls from the audience will help gauge public reaction to this.
* Generic posters will be designed and printed that can be used at all 66 water points and throughout camps affected to explain that IFRC water trucking can’t continue and explaining the collaborative process.

**Communicate the immediate closure of 4-5 under-used water points to those affected.**

* Community mobilisation to explain the closures in the affected areas.
* Posters communicating the closure will be put up at each water point. These posters will give the next nearest water location.
* An SMS will be sent to everyone within 1KM of the water points to tell them when the point will be closing and the next nearest available source of water.
* The SMS and the poster will provide a telephone number people can call if they have any questions.
* The closure of these points is advertised on the Red Cross radio show.

**Phase 2 – Community involvement (APRIL ONWARDS AND THROUGHOUT)**

**Communities feed into the process of finding and establishing alternative water solutions and can raise complaints and ask questions about the process.**

* Posters produced highlighting different options open to each individual camp.
* The SMS system used to send information to each camp/community – advertising how they can get involved or asking them to vote on different options.
* A Red Cross complaints and questions line will be advertised in camps, where people can call and raise their concerns. Information gathered through this line will be shared with WATSAN.
* An interactive voice recognition (IVR) free-call line used to upload recorded information specific to each camp/community and advertised in the camp. The IVR can also be used to run detailed surveys, where participants press buttons to indicate their answers, so tackling any literacy and size constraints of the SMS.
* Sound trucks used to spread messages around camps and will operate in tandem with community mobilisation teams – for example, a sound truck will play recorded information and then community teams hold a Q&A with people.

**Phase 3 – Project handover & communicating new water processes**

**Communities know the date IFRC water trucking will stop in their camp, how they can access water after this point and how they can ask questions and raise any concerns about the new process.**

* Posters giving details of the new process and the date water trucking will stop.
* Information distributed by SMS.
* IVR used to provide recorded information on new processes.
* Red Cross complaints and questions line takes residents calls.
* Sound trucks visit each camp to explain new water processes.
* Social mobilisation.

**Phase 4 – Monitoring and evaluating the new process**

**To gather feedback on the new water process and make sure any outstanding issues can be raised and communicated to IFRC.**

* Red Cross complaints and questions line continues to take calls.
* IVR and/or SMS used for survey purposed to gauge people’s satisfaction with the new processes.

**Impact**

The Red Cross beneficiary communications evaluation, carried out in June 2011, found that people in communities affected by the end of water trucking felt well informed about the new processes and appreciated receiving the information. They were not angry over the stopping of the service and ‘just wanted to know’ what was happening. Around 40 calls were received by the feedback hotline, around 10 of which were thanking the Red Cross for providing water for the previous 18 months.

#### Additional resources and reading

* Groupe URD’s [‘Participation Handbook for Humanitarian Field Workers’](https://www.urd.org/en/publication/participation-handbook-for-humanitarian-field-workers/) (2009) see page 215
* Humanitarian Health Ethics [‘Ethics and the closure of humanitarian healthcare projects’](https://humanitarianhealthethics.net/ethics-and-the-closure-of-humanitarian-healthcare-projects/) (2019) which includes a short [guidance note on the ethics of closing humanitarian projects](https://humethnet.files.wordpress.com/2019/09/ethics-of-closing-humn-projects_aug-2019_condensed.pdf)
* IFRC’s [‘Roadmap to Resilience’](https://oldmedia.ifrc.org/ifrc/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/1310403-Road-Map-to-Community-Resilience-Final-Version_EN-08.pdf) provides in-depth guidance on strengthening community capacity
* The [‘Stopping as Success: Locally Led Transitions in Development’](https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/) project has case studies, guides and tools on transitions to local actors and organizations in its [resource library](https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/resources/).