

Program Graduation and Exit Strategies: A Focus on Title II Food Aid Development Programs

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The goal of an exit strategy is to ensure sustainability of program impacts after the program has ended. “Exit” refers to the withdrawal of all externally provided program resources from the entire program area. “Graduation” refers to the withdrawal of resources from selected communities, program sites or program activities. This technical note provides an overview of different approaches to graduation and exit, describes the components of an exit strategy, and offers recommendations for designing and implementing effective exit strategies, with a particular focus on Title II development programs.

Different types of program activities and different conditions in the programming environment call for different approaches to graduation and exit strategies. Exit approaches include phasing over program activities to communities or other institutions for activities requiring continued inputs, and phasing out resources for activities that are permanent or self-sustaining. Generating alternative resources – from the community or from external sources – to continue activities is often a critical component of sustainable exit. Exit strategies for food-based programs require careful analysis of whether continuation of food is required, and if so, identification of the source of food.

A clearly defined exit strategy involves identifying:

1. exit approaches to be used;
2. criteria for exiting;
3. measurable benchmarks of progress in meeting the criteria;
4. a time line for the exit process;
5. action steps and responsible parties; and
6. mechanisms to assess progress.

Establishing and maintaining clear communication with communities about the exit process helps lead to successful exit and sustainable program impacts. Post-program evaluation is a valuable tool for understanding the sustainability of program outcomes and for improving the design and implementation of exit strategies.

Key Concepts and Terms

The term “**graduation**” refers to the withdrawal of program resources (food, other material resources, technical assistance) from specific program sites or activities.

“**Exit**” refers to the withdrawal of all externally provided program resources from an entire project area.

An **exit strategy** for a program is a plan describing how the program intends to withdraw its resources while assuring that the achievement of development goals is not jeopardized and that progress towards these goals continues. An exit strategy may use graduation from specific project areas as steps towards the eventual total withdrawal of resources, or exit may take place at one time across the entire program area. In both cases, the underlying goal of an exit strategy is to ensure sustainability of program impacts after a program ends.

List of Acronyms

BCC	Behavior Change Communication
CBO	Community Based Organization
CHW	Community Health Worker
CSR4	Cooperating Sponsor Results Report and Resource Request
DAP	Development Assistance Program
FANTA	Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MCHN	Maternal and Child Health and Nutrition
MOH	Ministry of Health
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PVO	Private Voluntary Organization
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WFP	World Food Program

An exit strategy includes the following elements:

1. Identification of approaches to be used for different program components;
2. Specific criteria for graduation (of communities) and exit (of the program from the region);
3. Measurable benchmarks for assessing progress toward meeting the criteria;
4. A time line, recognizing flexibility may be required;
5. Identification of action steps to reach the stated benchmarks and identification of parties responsible for taking these steps; and
6. Mechanisms for periodic assessment of progress toward exit and for possible modification of the exit plan.

Sustainability of impact or of progress toward development goals does not necessarily mean continuation of the same activities carried out by the PVO under the original program. In some cases communities, individuals, or other organizations sustain impacts through actions that are different from the program activities. In other cases, very few or no explicit activities are needed to sustain impact. Different types of program activities lend themselves to different approaches to assuring sustainability.

In their review of exit strategies, Levinger and McLeod (2002) identify three approaches to exit: **phase down**, **phase over** and **phase out**. They point out that **phase down**, the gradual reduction of program inputs, is the preliminary stage to both phase over and phase out.

Phase over refers to the transfer of responsibility for activities aimed at accomplishing program goals (current activities, or other activities aimed at achieving the same outcomes) to another entity. Many Title II development programs identify capacity building within communities as the main mechanism for ensuring sustainability. This approach is a type of phase over, with a transfer of respon-

sibility to community individuals or groups supported by the Title II program. Phase over may also involve the transfer of responsibility for achieving program outcomes to an existing organization (e.g., a branch of local, regional or national government, a local or indigenous national NGO, or another international PVO or donor).

Phase out refers to the withdrawal of program inputs (food, service provision, other resources, technical assistance) without making explicit arrangements for the inputs or activities to be continued by any other entity, because the program itself resulted in changes that are likely to be sustainable without these.

Exit Approaches

Whether to use the phase over or the phase out approach depends largely on the nature of the program activities. Interventions that require specific activities to continue and an entity to take responsibility for implementing or overseeing the activities require a phase over approach. Interventions that create permanent changes in communities and do not require the ongoing provision of services or resources are suitable for phase out.

Other factors that affect the decision whether to use a phase over or phase out approach include the time frame for exit, available funding, and available human, institutional, financial and physical resources. The program's time frame should be planned to allow for implementation of a feasible exit plan. Program implementers should take responsibility for working with communities and other stakeholders to ensure that appropriate resources are available for activities that need to continue.

When programs have an exit strategy, exit often consists of abrupt withdrawal of program resources following termination of program funding. Deciding to phase out rather than phase over simply because there is no time left for appropriate capacity building, or because resources have not been identified for implementation of activities that need to continue

is unlikely to succeed in sustaining program impact. Appropriate exit strategy planning early in the design and implementation of a program can help to avoid this situation.

The types of program activities and conditions in the program environment can dictate exit approaches:

- 1) Some program changes are self-sustaining; once they are achieved, outside inputs can be discontinued, but the impact of the changes continues. Such program components suggest a phase out approach.
- 2) When the community is capable of taking over program activities, either through community groups and organizations or through key individuals, responsibility for activities can be transferred to the community. This is one type of phase over approach.
- 3) In some cases other institutions (e.g., local, municipal, state, or national government, indigenous NGOs, or possibly other NGOs or donors) are well-positioned and willing to take over activities aimed at achieving program goals. This is another type of phase over approach.

Permanent and self-sustaining changes: Phase out

A variety of types of program activities can yield changes that are self-sustaining. Examples of such changes include outcomes related to the construction of infrastructure, behavior change, improved production and marketing practices in agriculture, and microenterprise.

Infrastructure changes that are frequently the focus of development projects include the construction of roads, latrines, wells or piped water systems, water retention structures, watershed improvements and reforestation. The construction of infrastructure, while seemingly permanent, often requires maintenance over time, and planning for sustainability may involve the creation or strengthening of community groups to take responsibility for the maintenance of infrastructure. In these cases, the exit strategy includes both reliance

on the permanence of the change and the phase over of maintenance responsibilities to community organizations or individuals for maintenance of the infrastructure.

Behavior changes related to health, nutrition and child caring practices can become permanent without requiring continued efforts or activities. These changes are likely to be self-sustaining among those who receive education and behavior change communication (BCC) if the benefits are perceptible and the changes feasible. If the goal of the program is to continue expansion of beneficial changes after program exit, systems for further dissemination may need to be put in place as part of the exit strategy. Such systems may depend on community health workers (CHWs) or health volunteers trained as part of the program, with support from the public health system, or they may depend on informal networks of mothers interacting with other mothers in their communities. In either case, some mechanism for maintaining motivation and for refresher training is likely to be needed.

Another type of intervention that can produce self-sustaining changes without the need for continued outside inputs or activities is the establishment of improved agricultural production and marketing practices or other economically profitable activities such as agricultural diversification. If practices are feasible and profitable or demonstrate other clear benefits to adopters, farmers are likely to continue the practices, and other farmers may emulate them. Examples include the introduction of new seeds or new crops, the establishment of new marketing relationships such as producer cooperatives, and the establishment of revolving credit funds. The experience of the gradual dissemination of high-yielding crop varieties over the decades following their introduction demonstrates that profitable innovations can be extended widely and do not always require explicit promotion.

Phase over to communities

The phasing over of a program to a community can mean handing over responsibility for activities to community-based organizations

(CBOs), informal groups or networks (such as mothers groups, farmers cooperatives or watershed associations), or key individuals.

One of the most widely cited plans for sustainability of Title II-supported development programs is to create or strengthen CBOs to take over responsibility for activities. The success of this approach depends on the CBOs' management capacity, mastery of the necessary technical skills, and ability to obtain the financial and other resources needed to continue activities. In some cases, such organizations require legal empowerment as well. Explicit benchmarks of these capacities – technical, management, and resource generation – can serve as exit criteria for programs that depend on CBOs for sustainability.

CBOs may be formed through the efforts of the PVO, or they may be groups already functioning in the community. Choosing whether to work with an existing CBO or to form a new one depends on the local situation. Where CBOs exist and are functioning well, there may be distinct advantages to working with them: they may already have established credibility and may be more likely to continue functioning after PVO exit. Possible disadvantages are that they may have their own agendas that compete with those of the program, and that they may already have political alliances that include or exclude certain groups.

Current and past program experience with working with CBOs to ensure the sustainability of program goals points to several “lessons learned” on assuring their success. Programs that work with CBOs should involve them from the very beginning of the program cycle. Transfer of responsibilities to the community organization should take place gradually, with the PVO reducing its role over time to an advisory role, and finally to no role at all.

Sustainability and effectiveness of CBOs or groups may be enhanced by the establishment of horizontal and vertical linkages to other groups. Horizontal linkages include networks of similar groups in neighboring communities. Regular contact among similar groups in various communities may be a source of mutual support and assistance; there may be possi-

Phase Over to Communities: Factors for Success

When phasing over activities to the community, sustaining desired outcomes depends on a number of factors:

- Recognition by community members of activities' proven value and their visible and valued outcomes.
- Ownership and commitment to continue on the part of the community or community group.
- Empowerment of individuals, communities and service providers to demand quality services.
- Extent of transfer to community members, groups and service providers of the skills and knowledge needed to generate desired outcomes.
- Institutional capacity of community-based organizations and health facilities, and capacity of key individuals in those organizations.
- Adaptability of community-based organizations and health facilities in the face of unpredictable political, environmental and social changes.
- Explicit plans for resource generation when consumable supplies (e.g. medicines and immunizations; seeds and agrochemicals; food) are needed to sustain impact.

bilities for economies of scale in some activities (e.g., purchasing of goods and services). Regular contact can also help maintain high levels of morale and motivation.

Vertical linkages involve having local CBOs partner with and receive assistance from the government or other organizations. Explicit formal arrangements for support, supervision, provision of resources, and training can be critical for the continuation of activities aimed at achieving program goals. This type of linkage with the Ministry of Health (MOH) at the central and local levels is particularly vital for MCHN programs that require provision

of consumable supplies as well as ongoing training and supervision. A study of CHWs found lack of adequate supervision and the inability to do their job due to lack of supplies were major factors leading to attrition among CHWs, whether paid or unpaid (Bhattacharyya et al., 2001).

Identifying and strengthening key individuals to serve as point persons within communities can also be useful. In MCHN programs, developing the skills and commitment of individual CHWs and assuring their effectiveness in their communities, increases the likelihood of long-term functioning. Establishing formal linkages to the public health system is also critical (Bhattacharyya et al., 2001). Support from community groups or government facilities helps to maintain these individuals' level of commitment and motivation, refresh their skills, and also serve as a mechanism to replace individuals who can no longer serve in this role within their communities.

The goal of an exit strategy is not only to maintain benefits achieved, but also to enable further progress toward the program's development goals. Ideally, an exit strategy sets in place a system whereby the benefits expand beyond the original beneficiaries and their communities. Community based promoters can be valuable vehicles for disseminating innovations. For example, in some programs, local farmers take responsibility for training new farmers in their communities in the production techniques they adopted.

Phase over to the government or other permanent organizations

A third approach to exit is for an institution that is present and active in the program area on a long-term basis to take over responsibility for program activities. Most often, this phase over approach aims to integrate program activities into existing public sector programs. In many ways, obtaining government commitment to maintain a program seems ideal, especially in the case where continued resource, staff, or infrastructure inputs are needed. Such integration may be particularly important where user fees or community contributions are not possible for legal, cultural, or economic reasons, and resources need to be provided by other means.

Linking CHWs to Government Health Facilities

The strategy of transferring responsibility for program support to the government is common in the case of MCHN programs that depend on volunteer CHWs. Benefits of explicit linkages between CHWs and the public health system include:

- Most program areas have a functioning public health system present, which can serve as an important support to CHWs and other health activities after exit.
- CHWs trained by a PVO represent a resource that the Ministry of Health (MOH) can use to expand coverage of its health system. This may serve as a motivation for the MOH to take responsibility for CHWs.
- If functioning properly, the government offers a reliable system of supply provisioning. Medications, vitamin/mineral supplements and immunizations may be supplied through government health services.
- Volunteer CHWs generally require periodic training to refresh their skills, which the government can often provide.
- The government health system may be able to identify new CHWs and a mechanism for training and provisioning them, to replace health volunteers who leave their positions.
- Government commitment may offer a level of legitimacy to CHWs as well that strengthens their work within communities.

This approach implicitly assumes that the government will be able to support activities aimed at accomplishing and expanding program goals. But some governments find it difficult to provide the level of resources required or lack the technical capacity needed to take over activities sustainably. An exit strategy that involves phase over to the government must be based on a realistic assessment of government capacity, commitment and resources. The PVO should develop a partnership with the relevant government agencies early in the program cycle to build both commitment and technical capacity prior to exit.

In developing an exit strategy that will rely on phase over to a government entity, an important question is which level of government is appropriate to partner with. A number of countries are pursuing governance policies of decentralization, devolving responsibility for local programs to the municipal or area level. For example, in Peru, Area Health Agencies are being established, with community members trained in needs assessment and program planning as well as contracting procedures, program monitoring and management of budgets. Where decentralized government entities are functioning effectively and have some resources, engaging these entities in program exit plans may achieve the dual purpose of sustaining program outcomes and strengthening the local government.

The decision about which entities and levels of government are appropriate for partnership as part of an exit strategy should be based on careful analysis of the authority, resources and technical and management capacity of the different levels — an analysis that will likely vary widely among countries. In many cases, multiple levels of government will need to be involved; for example, the central government may provide legal authorization and, possibly, funding, while the local government unit may be responsible for implementation.

It is important to develop partnerships and linkages with the appropriate government entities early in the program cycle and to transfer responsibility gradually, with formal agreements when appropriate.

Generation of Alternative Resources

For many development activities, a key to sustainability is the ability to generate resources when needed. While some activities (e.g., community-based health and nutrition education by CHWs) depend primarily on community and individual initiative, others (e.g., provision of curative care and immunizations, school feeding, provision of agricultural inputs) may require continued resource inputs. Four major approaches that have been used to assure adequate resources are discussed below.

Establish the organization or service as a business, using a revolving credit or business model

Advantages of the business model are that it creates community self-reliance, generates revenue that can be used to advance program goals, and may lead to establishment of a permanent entity that requires no new donor inputs of money, material goods, training, or technical assistance. Such business models are, of course, subject to the perils of any business, including economic recessions that lead to business failures or lead beneficiaries to default on their loans. One problem with the revolving credit model is that especially needy individuals may not access loans due to their inability to make repayment. This business model has been used most often for, and is probably most appropriate for, interventions that involve livelihood promotion: micro-credit and micro-enterprise development, agricultural and marketing innovations. The strength of this model is that activities have the potential to continue and expand, as economic opportunities permit.

Seek community contributions

In addition to generating resources to sustain program activities, seeking community contributions can also create feelings of community solidarity and can attract increased participation if households feel they are getting something of value for their contributions. Community contributions are only feasible if the community supports and values the activities and possesses resources to donate. The strategy may not be applicable in the poorest settings, where households feel

too constrained to make contributions, but we are aware of no data explicitly addressing this question.

Seeking community contributions seems to have been used particularly to continue school feeding after program exit, possibly because school feeding is such a visible program, with concrete benefits for children. Seeking local support in cash or kind from parents and the community from early in the program cycle can make this approach more successful because the shift to relying on local contribution should not be abrupt.

Establish user fees or charges for cost recovery

To be effective, user fees must be collected fairly and systematically and there must be agreed upon mechanisms to enforce payment and proper use of funds. For example, school feeding programs in which many parents do not pay the required fee or in which the management of the revenue is poor are much less likely to continue after program exit. One risk in imposing user fees is that the neediest households may lose the ability to benefit from the program activities. Options to help prevent this situation include setting fees on a sliding scale based on household income, introducing fees gradually, or informing families well in advance about the fees. There have been cases, though, in which instituting user fees actually increased the use of health services, because the fees were used to obtain medicines and supplies by health centers, improving the quality of the service (McSweeney, 1979).

Seek alternative institutional (external) support from government or private donors

Some Title II development programs aim to position CBOs to be able to seek external funds themselves. This can be a reasonable strategy, but its effectiveness depends on the capacity of the CBO to fill this role effectively. It also depends on the availability of sufficient funds with the government or donors in question. Replacing program resources with funds from other donors does not address the issue of long-term sustainability; when the new donor exits at some point, resource generation needs may emerge again.

Special Exit Considerations for Direct Food Distribution Programs

Direct food distribution is a central element in many Title II development programs. The use of food in development programs raises special considerations planning program exit. Food, like medicines or vitamin/mineral supplements, is a consumable good; if the effectiveness of an activity depends on the continued provision of food, some means of funding procurement of the food needs to be identified as part of an exit strategy. In planning for exit, it is important to evaluate critically the need to continue food provision as a means of accomplishing the priority development goals after exit, since provision of food may be difficult to maintain after graduation or exit.

Exit strategies for food aid programs do not need to include continuation of direct food distribution in all cases, but the planning process should involve an analysis of whether continuation of food is required and if so, how this will occur. In some cases, program outcomes can be sustained without continuing food provision. For example, if adoption of behavior change from an MCHN program is sufficiently established within communities, the adoption of healthier practices may continue and even expand without additional food resources.

In some programs, other resources can be used to substitute for the role that food played in the program. For example, if food served as an incentive for participation in health education or other services, other resources such as credit could be provided in place of food. Or if beneficiaries have come to value the services strongly enough, no incentive may be necessary. If the role of food is to prevent malnutrition among beneficiaries, complementary interventions to increase food security may reduce the necessity of continued direct provision of food. Such interventions may include promotion of home food production, improvements in infant/child feeding and care, improvements in food preparation, and income generation.

For programs in which the continuation of food provision is necessary to achieve program outcomes – such as in some school feeding programs – alternative sources of food can be explored, such as the private sector, local food sources, the government, or other donors. For such programs, identifying and planning a system for food provision is an important part of an exit strategy. Cultural factors can also affect plans to withdraw or replace food assistance, such as the extent to which food is considered an entitlement.

When continuation of food beyond program exit is necessary to sustain outcomes but alternative sources of food are not available, targets for program outcomes may be reduced, and programs should explore other (non-food) interventions that can contribute to sustaining outcomes.

Exit Criteria

Criteria used to determine when to exit vary by program. These criteria can be grouped in three categories: time limits, achievement of program impacts, and progress toward the identified graduation process. Many program situations call for using a combination of criteria from each of the three groups.

A time limit

One type of criterion for when to exit is how long the program has been operating. All development programs have time limits dictated by the program funding cycle, and at the end of the cycle many programs either exit or continue in the same geographic areas in essentially the same form over multiple cycles. An explicit exit strategy that is built into program design from the beginning should include a specified time line for the exit process, making it less likely that programs either withdraw without proper preparation or simply roll over from cycle to cycle. For example, a program that has a time limit may increase its focus on establishing systems for sustainability, using the time frame to guide the process.

Achievement of specific program impact targets

Program impact can be used as a criterion for exit and to focus graduation efforts on those program components that have been effective. However, the use of impact indicators as criteria for exit does pose risks. First, the targeted level of impact may not be achievable in the desired time frame for exit. A second concern is the possibility of creating perverse incentives: if communities know that reaching a given level of impact will trigger the withdrawal of program benefits, their motivation to achieve that impact may be reduced.

Nevertheless, impact should be a consideration in planning for graduation or exit. The level of impact achieved can guide the time frame for exit and may also suggest which program goals should be the focus of efforts to achieve sustainability and which, due to lack of impact, should be given less attention. But a policy of committing to stay in a community or a region until impact targets are met is not recommended. Rather than set inflexible impact targets as graduation or exit criteria, it makes more sense to establish an explicit time frame, though one with some flexibility built in, and to link the timeframe to the achievement of process-related benchmarks (Levinger and McLeod, 2002; Rogers, 2002).

Achievement of benchmarks indicating progress toward feasible exit

Benchmarks for progress toward exit are simply the operationalized, measurable indicators of identified steps in the graduation process. Benchmarks should be clearly linked to the graduation process and to the specific elements of the program that are to be phased out or phased over. For example, if links between CHWs and the local government health facility constitute a key component of the exit strategy, then benchmarks might include: “At least 50% of CHWs have received a supervisory visit from the government health facility in the past six months,” or “CHWs have reported no stock-out in availability of supplies for the past year,” or “A functioning agreement is in place between the CHWs and the health facility.”

Where the exit strategy involves phase over to CBOs, benchmarks should include measures of the organizations’ institutional capacity, such as making contracts, keeping adequate records, enforcing their own rules, continuing activities started under the program and undertaking new activities or expanding to new project sites independently of PVO input.

For programs using a phased graduation approach, reaching a critical number of communities that have successfully graduated can serve as a useful benchmark for exit. The process of benchmark identification should include program managers, field staff and, if possible, community members because they are most aware of the situations in the communities.

Timeframes for Program Exit

Developing and following appropriate timeframes are important parts of a successful exit strategy. General principles and recommendations for planning timeframes are discussed below.

Establish a clear but flexible timeline, linked to the program funding cycle

Along with specific process-related benchmarks, there should be a stated time line for exit, so that program staff and communities know they are working toward a deadline. Flexibility is important, but time lines should not be extended indefinitely, lest the motivation to make progress toward exit be reduced due to skepticism about the intention of the donor to withdraw. Such skepticism may be a particular risk for long standing programs.

Funding constraints may prevent extensions of exit timeframes. It is useful to link the time line for exit with the program’s funding cycle. In a typical five year activity, the first two or three years may be spent identifying priorities, implementing and monitoring activities, identifying the approaches and mechanisms to be used for sustainable graduation, and defining specific benchmarks. This process should be completed by the time of the midterm evaluation, when more explicit measures should be undertaken to move toward meeting the

criteria for exit. In the case of a program that has been in existence for some time, it may be possible to complete this process more quickly, because the activities that form the program are already determined and their relative effectiveness has been demonstrated over time.

The graduation or exit process can then be completed over the final two years of a five year cycle. If it is possible to graduate some communities while the PVO is still able to observe and assess the phase over or phase out process, this may provide valuable insights about sustainability for future graduation efforts.

Incorporate exit plans from the beginning of program implementation

It is recommended that exit strategies be built into the design of programs from the beginning. Many programs, however, find it necessary to wait until midway through the program cycle to finalize specific exit criteria. For example, if one of the program objectives is to improve livelihoods, the exit strategy may depend on whether the most effective livelihood focus turns out to be improved livestock production, organization of a marketing cooperative, or the introduction of new varieties of seed. Similarly, if there are several potential community groups that might take responsibility for project activities in a phase over, time may be required to identify which group is most promising for long-term sustainability. For these reasons, the specific action plan for exit may need to be developed gradually over the first couple of years of the program's operation, but including exit plans from the beginning of the program helps ensure enough time for this process.

Implement exit plans in a gradual, phased manner

Exit should involve the gradual disengagement of PVO staff and resources from the development activities initiated by the program and the gradual transfer of responsibility to the organizations, groups, or individuals that will take over activities following graduation. The process should be phased, so that local institutions or individuals gain increasing technical capacity and management expertise to be able to continue activities on their own. Not all

program activities need to be phased out or phased over at the same time. PVOs should have the opportunity to observe whether the systems that have been put into place are capable of functioning independently. For example, the phase out of supplementary food in an MCHN program may occur before the phase over of CHW training and supervision is complete. An exit strategy may involve the PVO departing from the community, but maintaining contact and availability through presence in nearby communities. By the time complete exit occurs, systems should be functioning independently, and any necessary institutional linkages and agreements should be formalized. Gradual exit also enables monitoring of the exit process that can generate lessons about what works and help identify and resolve problems.

Consider an exit timetable that allows sequential graduation of communities and/or components

The systematic, sequential graduation of project sites has several advantages. If a development program plans to leave one area while continuing activities in nearby areas, PVO staff may be available to provide guidance and technical assistance to "graduated" communities, on a reduced basis. Community volunteers and community groups in "graduated" communities may become involved in providing training and assistance to newly entering communities in the same or nearby areas, giving them recognition for their accomplishments as well as a mechanism for maintaining their skills and commitment (Rogers 2002). Monitoring of graduated areas can also provide timely "lessons learned" for graduation in other areas and for graduation processes in general. As discussed above, there are also advantages to sequentially phasing out different program components. When possible, exit timetables should be planned to allow time for such sequential graduation of communities or components.

Role of Program Monitoring and Evaluation

Program impact evaluation also plays a role in the design of an exit strategy. While impact targets should not be the sole triggers for graduation or exit, measures of impact can

guide which elements of a program should be the focus of an exit strategy and associated sustainability efforts. Impact measures can also suggest levels of overall program progress that may indicate that it is appropriate to start the process of graduation or exit.

Ongoing monitoring of the processes not only of program implementation, but also of graduation progress is key to successful implementation of an exit strategy. Monitoring of benchmark indicators should be incorporated into the normal systems for program monitoring.

If graduation of some communities takes place prior to complete program exit, the graduated communities should be maintained within the program's monitoring and evaluation system in order to obtain information about the effectiveness of graduation strategies. This allows for continued measurement of benchmarks, outcomes and impacts. This will help identify program elements and exit approaches that appear sustainable. If different communities use different graduation approaches (e.g., phase over to community organizations in some areas and to informal networks of individuals in others), comparative analysis of alternative graduation approaches could be performed and inform subsequent decisions regarding graduation and exit. The information can then be used to modify the design of graduation in communities graduating later.

Communication with Stakeholders

Establishing clear communication with the community — beneficiaries, community-based providers of services, local authorities and other stakeholders — about the program's eventual departure is a central element in a graduation or exit strategy. Clear and consistent communication from the beginning of the program helps prepare the community for graduation, which may eliminate a sense of dependence on the program and encourage communities to become self-reliant through the creation or strengthening of community groups or other mechanisms. Communication can reduce risk of resentment of the withdrawal of resources and can help generate greater ownership of the sustainability components by involving community members in planning at an early stage.

Evaluation of Exit Strategies

The primary measure of an exit strategy's success is that after the PVO has ceased working in an area, program impacts have been maintained or, better still, have improved and expanded to other beneficiaries and communities. Secondary measures of an exit strategy's success are that relevant activities continue (possibly modified as a result of changing circumstances, but still in the service of development goals), and that systems developed and organizations and individuals trained or empowered by the program continue to function effectively.

The only way to rigorously evaluate the success of an exit strategy is to return to the program area some fixed time after exit and determine whether sustainability was achieved. An assessment one or two years after the program exits would provide some information, but longer-term evaluations should also be implemented for some proportion of programs. While comparing the relative sustainability of different exit approaches may be instructive, programs and their contexts vary so widely that it would be difficult to disentangle the success of the exit strategy itself from other factors related to sustainability.

Nevertheless, post-program evaluations are valuable in their own right, providing information about programmatic and contextual factors leading to sustainability, and about the role of the exit strategy in that process. Most evaluations of Title II and other development programs take place at the end of the program's funding cycle, and post-program evaluations are rare. Therefore, few evaluations are able to address whether impacts and processes are maintained, or whether new areas not originally covered by the program benefit from later expansion of the program or from emulation of practices originally promoted by the program.

By providing information about the long-term sustainability of program outcomes, post-program evaluations help develop more effective and sustainable graduation approaches and exit strategies, and thereby help ensure that programs benefit targeted populations beyond the limited duration of the program itself.

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