

Exit Strategy

An exit strategy is not the end of a program, it is the foundation of it. Too many programs end without lasting change, not because the work wasn't meaningful, but because integration into existing local systems and government structures was not built in from the beginning. An exit strategy matters because it:

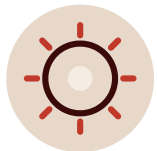
- **Ensures change becomes part of existing local systems and structures:** embedded in the community's own institutions, relationships and leadership, not dependent on external funding or presence.
- **Creates space for local leaders to take ownership where it truly belongs:** not handed over at the end, but built from the start.
- **Reflects a clear position:** external NGO's or foundations support temporarily, as a catalyst. Not a permanent actor, but an ally whose support is driven by the local organization and/or community's own request.

What is an exit strategy?

An exit strategy is an approach in which support is designed from the outset to strengthen existing local systems so that communities can continue, independently, after an external partner transitions out. The role of the implementing organisation is not to carry out activities itself, but to work alongside local leaders and institutions, building on what is already there rather than creating something parallel to it.

Local ownership is not the end goal, it is the starting point. The community holds the key from day one. An exit is not a deadline imposed without dialogue. It is not a transfer to another donor, or a withdrawal because funding ran out. It is an intentional, gradual stepping back - by a partner who was never meant to stay.

Key principles



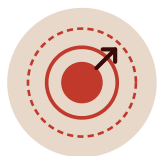
Strengthen what exists: Strengthen existing structures, systems, government and community - do not create parallel structures and involve different stakeholders from the community.



Invest in people: The engine of sustainability lies in the drive of people, stakeholders, and organizations present in the local community.



Design a framework for local ownership from the start: Clarify responsibilities and the endpoint, and be realistic in planning and goals. Make cost-sharing part of the design from the start, not because of the size of the contribution, but because shared ownership is the point.



Stay long enough, but not too long: Phasing out too quickly risks quality; staying too long risks dependency. Be flexible, contexts are continuously changing, adapt plans based on local realities.



Be honest and stay in dialogue: Open communication matters more than control. Make clear that moral and technical support can continue after financial support ends.

Roles and responsibilities

A successful exit strategy requires all parties (funding organisation and the local partner) to share the same mission and vision from the start, with a common understanding of where the collaboration is heading and when it will end. Roles are clearly defined, communication is open, and the goal is the same: change that continues without external support.

As funder or supporting organisation:

Provide resources, technical support, and facilitation where needed. Monitor and support without driving the agenda. The hardest part is often letting go; be aware of the 'doing-good addiction' trap: staying too long because it feels good, not because it is needed.

As a local organisation:

Strengthen systems, coordinate with government and community, and invest in capacity strengthening of knowledge, people, and skills. Priorities are defined by local stakeholders within the community, within the context. Government leads and implements; local organisation convenes, connects, and strengthens capacity.

After the exit

A sustainable exit means the program is **fully embedded in the local community and government structures**. This is made possible by temporary external funding, capacity strengthening of local actors and authorities, community awareness, and simple but targeted data systems.

After the exit, the formal relationship becomes informal. **Stay available as an ally**, but communicate openly about what that looks like. Because leadership and ownership lies fully with the local community and government, the program continues within the contexts' own priorities and resources. It might not be exactly as designed, and that is okay. **This is what ownership looks like.**

The first years after an exit are often crucial: as partners together, monitor this phase carefully and pay attention to both continuity and new developments.

In practice: ADED & AJEPAD, DR Congo

In the DRC, the work with TUNAFASI's partners ADED and AJEPAD offers a clear illustration on how to work towards a sustainable exit in a fragile context. The government pays the salaries of community-based health facilitators and physiotherapists, parents contribute user fees, and self-help groups remain active with limited resources. Not everything continues exactly as designed, but the resilience of communities grows and behaviour change towards persons with a disability is a fact. Local actors make decisions based on their own reality. The measure of success is continuation of the activities after the external support ends and sustainable improvement in the lives of persons with a disability and their families.



Photo: Inclusive Games Day with children with and without disabilities in Uvira, Eastern DR Congo ©ADED 2025.

What does your exit look like?

A good exit strategy requires foresight, humility, and the courage to let go - from all parties involved. It demands that sustainability is built in from the very first day, that leadership and ownership is genuinely placed with local actors - grounded in national policies - rather than just spoken about. This is not a decision made by the external partner alone; it is a mutual strategy, developed together with the grassroots organisation, which will itself also step back. The goal is a community and system that stands on its own, and truly carries the work as its own.

Questions worth to reflect on - as an invitation to pause and evaluate on what exit strategy means in your own work:

1. **When you start or support a new program or partnership, how explicitly do you discuss what the end looks like - and who decides when it has arrived?** Is exit part of the design, or figured out later? And, who is leading that discussion?
2. **In your current work: who truly holds decision-making power?** Is that a conscious choice? And what does it mean for the work?
3. **What does the word 'exit' bring up for you - relief, loss, failure, success, something else?** What does that reaction tell about how you see your own role?
4. **What needs to change in your organisation for an exit strategy to be genuinely built in from the start?** What would an ideal exit look like?
5. **What are the key elements of an exit strategy?** And how does it support the sustainability?

Want to explore this topic further?: We would love to bring these ideas to life in conversation with you. TUNAFASI offers workshops on one, several, or all of the modules in this series.

Contact us: info@tunafasi.com

