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# Working Towards Sustainable Transitions: Reviewing INGOs Handover of Public Health Interventions to Local Authorities

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## Disclaimer

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## Abbreviations

- **AAH** - Action Against Hunger
- **(I)NGO** - (International) Non-Governmental Organisation
- **KII** - Key Informant Interview
- **M&E** - Monitoring and Evaluation
- **MoH** - Ministry of Health
- **PRISMA** - Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

## Definitions of Concepts

- **Handover/Transition** - The planned transfer of responsibility for programme delivery from an international NGO to a local organisation, with the aim of ensuring continuity after external support ends.
- **Sustainability (in this study)** - The extent to which programme activities, systems, or outcomes continue to function effectively following the withdrawal of international support.
- **Localisation** - The process of shifting power, resources, and decision-making from international actors to national and community-based organisations within humanitarian systems.
- **Capacity Building** - The ongoing process of strengthening the skills, systems, and organisational structures required for local actors to manage and sustain programme activities independently.
- **Institutionalisation** - The integration of programme activities or practices into existing organisational or government systems, enabling continuity beyond externally funded projects.
- **Power Dynamics** - The distribution of decision-making authority and influence between donors, international organisations, and local actors involved in programme design and implementation.

## Executive Summary:

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a key role in humanitarian and public health delivery, particularly in fragile contexts where sustainable handovers are essential for long-term impact. Increasing emphasis on localisation and system resilience has meant handover processes are essential to ensuring continuity beyond external support. However, despite strong policy commitments, including the Grant Bargain and Charter for Change, sustainable transition remains difficult to operationalise in practice.

This study examines the enablers and barriers influencing the sustainability of handovers from international NGOs (INGOs) to local organisations. Evidence was synthesised from a structured literature review and semi-structured key informant interviews with practitioners directly involved in handover processes. A hybrid thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across both conceptual and practice-based evidence.

Findings show that sustainable handovers are shaped by a combination of interdependent factors rather than any single intervention. Across the literature and interviews, key enablers included early and embedded exit planning, long-term institutional capacity strengthening, flexible and sustained financing, equitable partnerships, and meaningful community engagement. Where these conditions were aligned, transitions were more likely to result in continued service delivery and local ownership.

However, the study also identifies persistent structural barriers. Short funding cycles, rigid donor requirements, and limited investment in transition phases frequently limited implementation. Power imbalances between INGOs, donors, and local organisations limited meaningful participation in decision-making, while limited post-exit monitoring restricted opportunities for learning. As a result, many handovers were described as reactive and compressed, rather than planned and adaptive processes.

A key finding is the gap between conceptual guidance and operational reality. While the literature promotes principles such as early planning and localisation, practitioner accounts note the constraints that prevent these from being consistently applied. This shows that sustainable handovers are not only technical processes, but are influenced by wider organisational and systemic conditions.

Overall, the findings show that sustainable handovers depend on how planning, capacity, financing, and partnerships work within broader structural conditions. Achieving this needs a shift from viewing handovers as an endpoint to understanding it as a continuous, system-wide

process from the start. Without addressing these structural limitations, commitments to localisation and sustainability risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

## Recommendations:

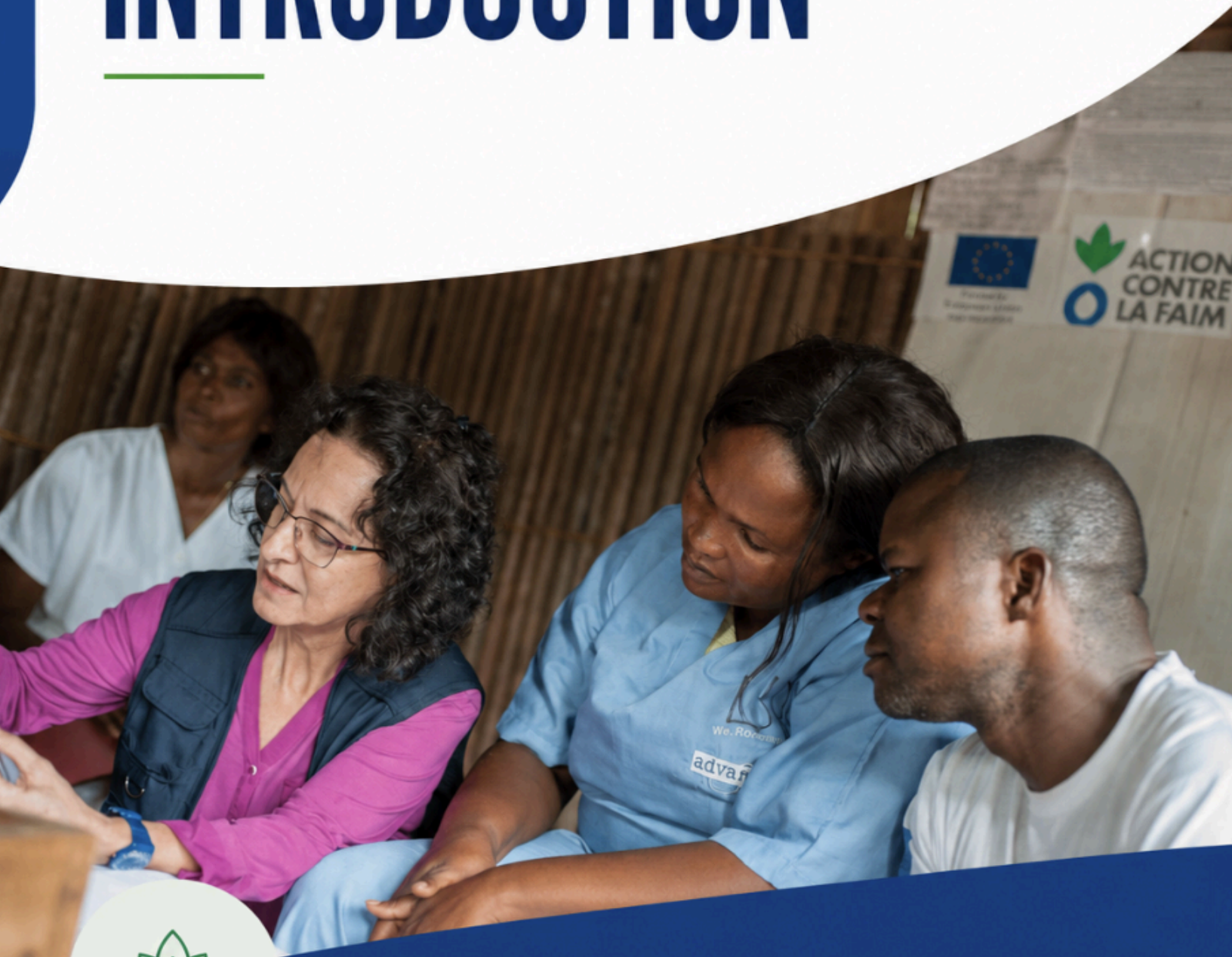
Based on these findings, six interdependent best practices are identified to support sustainable handovers:

1. **Embed exit planning from programme inception**, ensuring sustainability is integrated into design rather than addressed at closure.
2. **Adopt phased and flexible transition approaches**, allowing responsibilities to be transferred gradually in line with local readiness.
3. **Strengthen institutional capacity beyond technical delivery**, including governance, financial systems, and leadership.
4. **Prioritise equitable partnerships and local ownership**, with shared decision-making and transparent communication.
5. **Ensure flexible and sustainable financing**, including longer funding cycles and increased use of unrestricted funding.
6. **Plan for learning and post-exit evaluation**, allowing assessment of long-term outcomes and sector-wide learning.

To operationalise these principles:

- **INGOs** should integrate exit planning into programme design, invest in institutional capacity, and share decision-making with local partners.
- **Donors** should provide longer-term and more flexible funding, explicitly resource transition phases, and support post-exit evaluation.
- **Local organisations** should improve governance systems, diversify funding sources, and engage proactively in transition planning.

# INTRODUCTION



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# 1| Introduction

## 1.1 | Background & Context

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a central role in delivering humanitarian and public health interventions, particularly in fragile and resource-constrained settings. As the sector increasingly emphasises sustainability, localisation, and long-term system resilience, effective handovers have become critical to achieving these goals. A handover refers to the planned transfer of responsibility for a project, service, or set of activities from one actor to another, with the aim of ensuring continuity once the initial actor exits (Sitali *et al.*, 2022).

Importantly, handovers are not single events but phased processes needing early preparation and capacity strengthening throughout the programme lifecycle. There is a growing expectation that exit strategies should be embedded within programme design from the start to support long-term sustainability (Sitali *et al.*, 2022). This is reinforced by the *Sphere Handbook*, where Core Humanitarian Standard Three emphasises strengthening local capacity and reducing dependency, with Key Action 3.4 explicitly calling for early transition planning (Sphere Association, 2018).

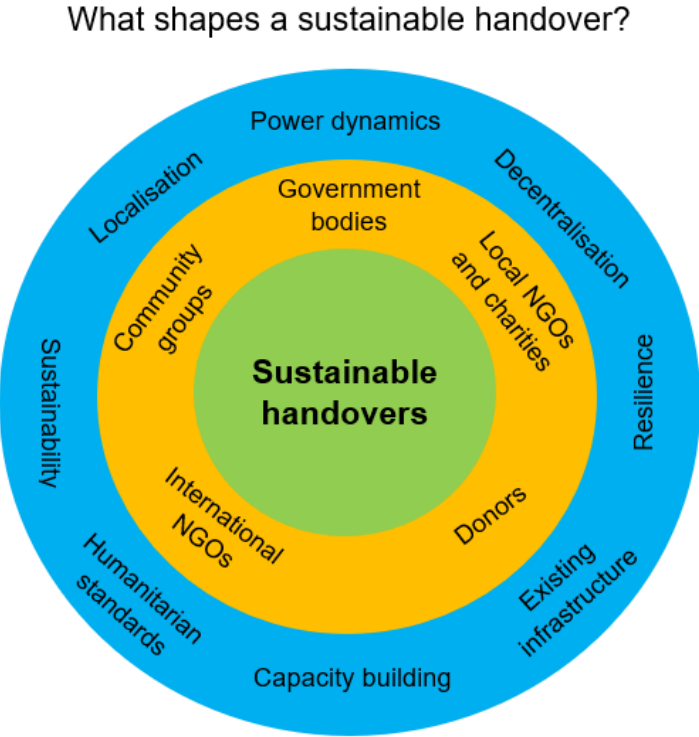
The push for localisation is closely linked to sustainable handovers. Localisation seeks to shift power and resources to national and community-based actors, recognising their role in sustaining responses. Initiatives such as the Charter for Change and the Grand Bargain show this shift, committing to increased direct funding and decision-making power for local organisations (IASC, 2024; CAFOD, 2015). However, various factors such as short funding cycles, limited decision-making authority continue to limit meaningful localisation. Evidence from contexts such as Sudan illustrates how insufficient engagement with local actors can undermine effectiveness and exacerbate vulnerabilities by not implementing aid routes that are locally led to be adaptive to ongoing conflict [Fadul, 2025]. These challenges show broader tensions between policy commitments and operational realities.

Decentralisation also supports sustainable handovers by distributing decision-making and operational responsibility to local systems, improving resilience and adaptability (Fadul, 2025).

When localisation and decentralisation are within programme design, transitions are more likely to result in sustained outcomes.

However, defining ‘handover success’ remains complex. Existing literature covers the absence of a consistent set of indicators, with different stakeholders prioritising different outcomes. While some frameworks focus on operational measures such as usability and training, others distinguish between outputs, outcomes, and long-term impacts (Fahri et al., 2020; Turner and Zolin, 2012). In humanitarian contexts, this often means that communities prioritise sustained impact, while implementing agencies focus on short-term delivery. These differences show the need for clearer definitions and a stronger evidence base to understand what constitutes a sustainable handover in practice. Figure one illustrates the concepts of a handover overall.

**Figure 1 - Conceptual Overview of Sustainable NGO Handovers**



*Figure 1. Sustainable handovers are shown at the centre, shaped by key actors and wider systems influences. Together, these layers show that handover success depends on both coordinated actors' roles and wider system dynamics.*

## 1.2 | Rationale of the Study

Despite strong commitments to localisation and sustainable transitions, the reality of NGO-local authority handovers often falls short of these aims. While global frameworks promote locally led systems, structural constraints such as funding cycles, power imbalances, and competing priorities continue to influence how transitions are implemented.

Existing literature remains fragmented, combining highly context-specific case studies with broad principles that offer limited practical guidance. In particular, there is limited research on the specific dynamics of NGO-to-local authority transitions, where differences in mandates and capacity can significantly affect outcomes (Rajabi *et al.*, 2021). Also, variation in organisational approaches and terminology further limits the transferability of existing guidance.

This study addresses these gaps by synthesising academic literature, grey literature, and practitioner perspectives to examine how handovers are conceptualised and implemented in practice. It aims to identify the factors that enable or constrain sustainability, while giving practical, evidence-informed insights to support more effective handover processes in humanitarian public health.

## 1.3 | Alignment with AAH Strategic Goals

Action Against Hunger's (AAH) commitment to "working side-by-side with local communities to design lasting solutions" [AAH, 2026] places sustainable, locally led impact at the centre of its programming. This report aligns with these priorities by examining handover processes that support long-term ownership by local actors. The findings are relevant across AAH's health, nutrition, and systems-strengthening work, where sustainability depends on strong local capacity and effective partnerships. The report is designed to give practice and evidence-informed insights to improve future handover strategies.

## 1.4 | Research Aim & Objectives

### Aim:

To critically evaluate the factors, challenges, and strategies influencing the sustainability of public health interventions following their transition from international NGOs to local organisations, and to develop evidence-informed best-practice recommendations for future handovers.

### Objectives:

7. **To identify the key determinants of handover sustainability** by examining the factors that enable or hinder the long-term continuation of public health interventions following transition from INGOs to local authorities.
8. **To analyse the challenges and barriers** encountered by INGOs throughout the handover process.
9. **To assess the effectiveness of existing handover models** by reviewing grey literature and academic sources and integrating insights from key informant interviews.
10. **To develop evidence-based practice guidance** and produce actionable recommendations to support INGOs in designing and implementing sustainable handover strategies that strengthen resilient, locally owned systems.

# METHODS

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## 2 | Methods

### 2.1 | Study Design & Approach

This study used a qualitative mixed-methods approach, combining a desk-based literature search with semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) to examine NGO handovers and exit processes. This approach allowed the study to draw on both documented evidence and practitioner experience, recognising that knowledge on NGO handovers is often found in grey literature and practice-based insight rather than peer-reviewed research alone.

Using both literature and interview data allowed for triangulation across sources, supporting a broader understanding of how handovers are carried out across different contexts (Carter *et al.*, 2014). Findings from both parts were analysed using thematic analysis to identify key enablers and barriers influencing handover sustainability (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Figure 2 represents a summary Gantt chart of project timeline showing key phases of the study and analytical process, with the full version provided in Appendix 1.

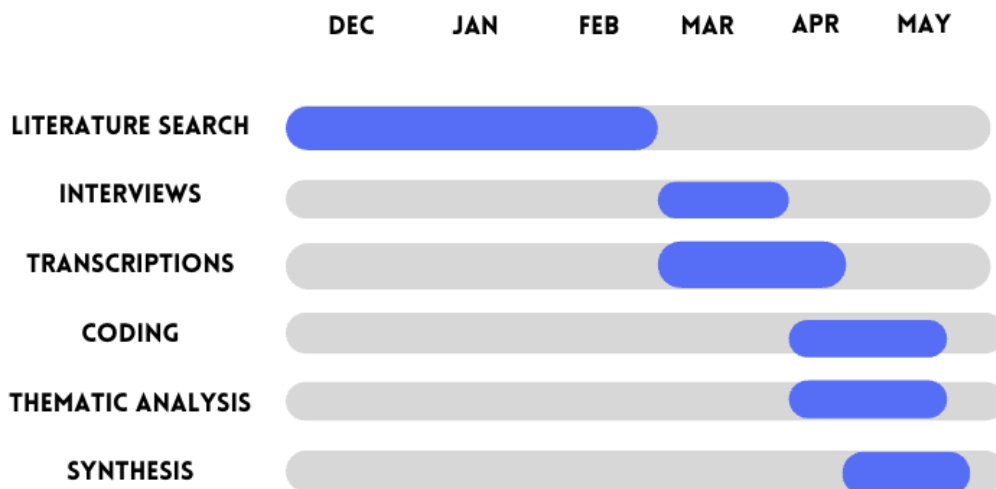


Figure 2. Summary Gantt chart

## 2.2 | Desk-based Literature Search

A structured desk-based literature search was used to identify existing evidence and guidance on NGO handovers and exit processes. Searches were carried out across three databases: Discover, Scopus, and Google Advanced Search (including grey literature). Boolean operators were used to combine keywords related to NGO handovers, transition processes, sustainability, and public health. Full search terms for each database are provided in Appendix 2.

Search results were refined using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria guided by a PICOSS framework (Population, Intervention, Context, Outcomes, Study Type, and Setting) (Amir-Behghadami and Janati, 2020). Criteria focused on documents addressing NGO handover or exit processes in humanitarian or development contexts, with relevance to sustainability and local ownership. A summary of inclusion and exclusion criteria is presented in Table 1, with a full PICOSS table in Appendix 3.

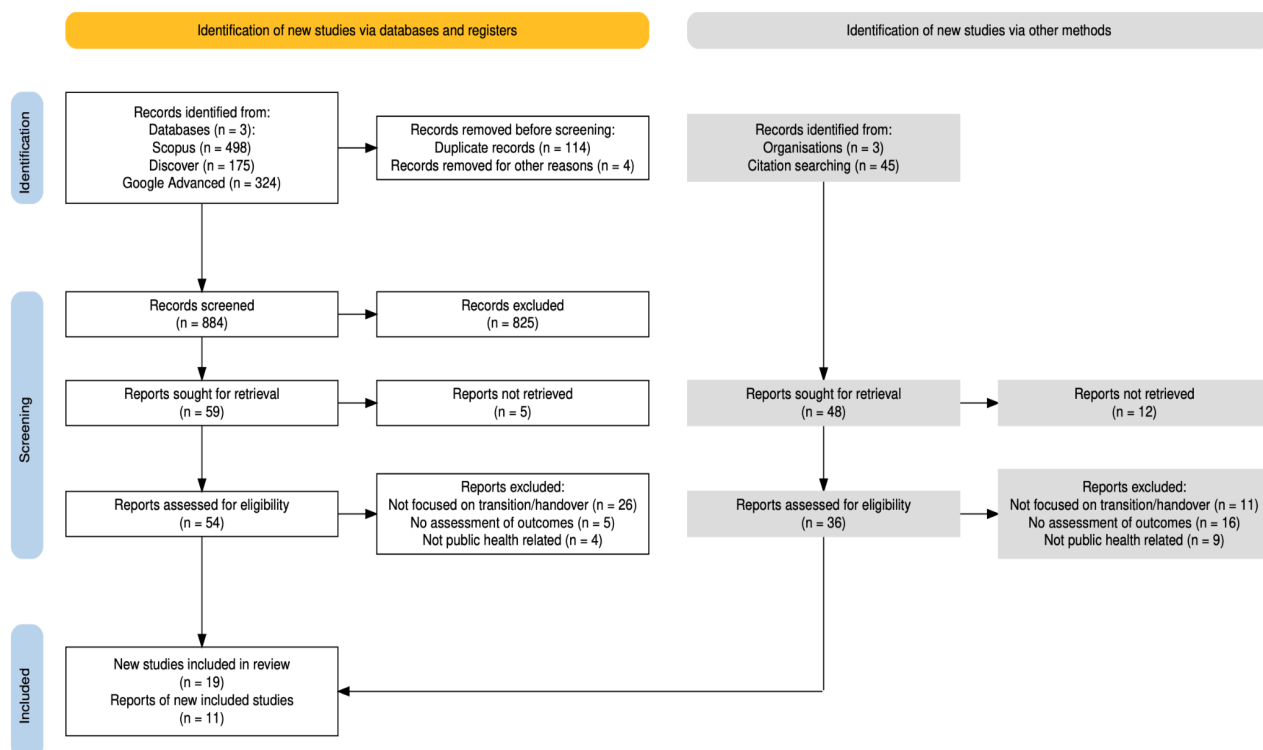
All identified documents were imported into EndNote for screening (Clarivate, 2023). Screening was conducted in two stages: titles and abstracts (or executive summaries) were first reviewed for relevance, followed by full-text screening of eligible documents. The selection process is summarised in a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 3), showing the number of documents identified, screened, excluded, reasons for exclusions, and those included for analysis (Page *et al.*, 2021).

The included documents were analysed thematically, using extraction tables, the format of which is seen in Appendix 4. Key concepts and findings were analysed to inform the development of the interview topic guide and were later integrated with interview findings during analysis.

**Table 1. Summary of Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria.**

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Focus	Documents addressing INGO handover to local organisations, transition, exit, or localisation processes	Documents unrelated to transition or post-handover sustainability, or not from INGO to local organisations
Sector	Public health, nutrition, health systems, or closely related sectors	Non-health sectors with no transferable systems learning
Organisation Type	INGOs, local NGOs, community-based organisations, public institutions	Private sectors handovers with no NGO involvement
Outcomes	Sustainability, continuity of services, local ownership, system resilience	Documents lacking discussion of post-handover outcomes
Study Types	Evaluations, learning reports, guidance, qualitative studies	Opinion pieces without empirical or experiential basis
Geography	Humanitarian and development contexts, primarily LMICs	High-income settings with limited relevance
Language & Date	English, 2005-2025	Non-English publications, before 2005

**Figure 3. PRISMA Flow Diagram**



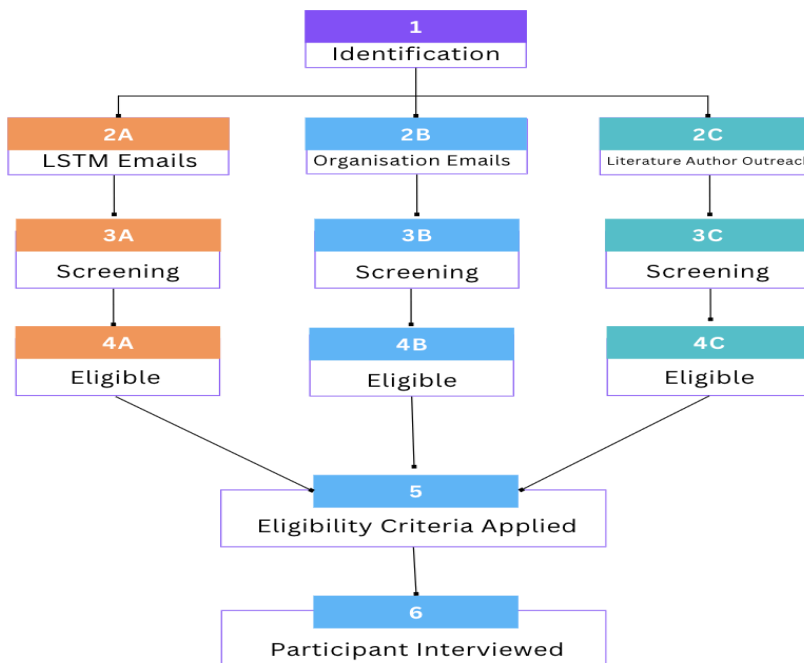
## 2.3 | Key Informant Interviews

Semi-structured key informant interviews were carried out to examine practitioner perspectives on NGO handovers and exit processes. This approach was selected to allow participants to reflect on complex and context-specific experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews.

An interview topic guide was developed based on preliminary literature findings and included themes related to exit planning, partnership dynamics, capacity building, financing, and sustainability. The full guide is provided in Appendix 5.

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants with direct experience of NGO handovers or exit processes. Participants were recruited through three pathways and respondents were screened for eligibility based on involvement in or evaluation of transitions from INGOs to local organisations before being invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The recruitment process is summarised in Figure 4.

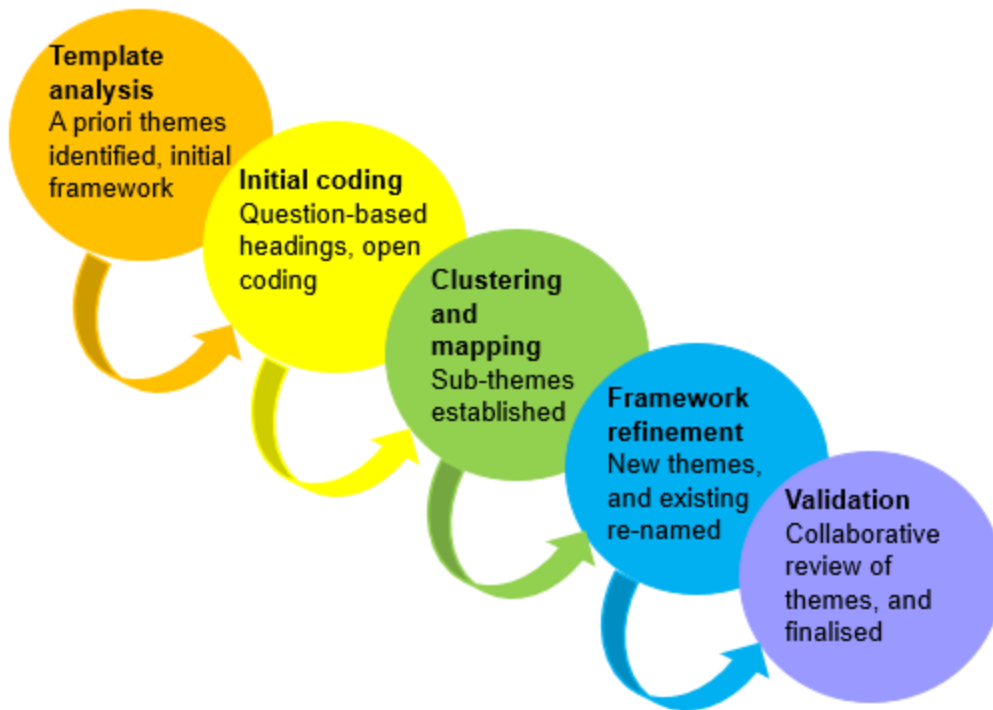
**Figure 4. Recruitment Flow Diagram.**



Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and recorded with consent. Transcriptions were generated using Microsoft 365 Copilot and reviewed for accuracy.

To ensure analytical rigour, data was analysed using a hybrid thematic approach, combining deductive (literature-informed) and inductive (data-driven) coding. Initial themes from the literature review were applied within NVivo (Lumivero, 2024), and subsequently refined through inductive coding of interview data (Appendix 6).

Codes were clustered and mapped against the initial framework, resulting in the refinement and expansion of themes to reflect practitioner perspectives. Final themes were agreed through group discussion to ensure consistency and rigour. This full process is shown in (Figure 5).



**Figure 5. Steps of the Hybrid Analysis.**

## 2.4 | Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained through the MRP2 process at LSTM. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about the topic of study (Appendix 7) and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Written and verbal informed consent were obtained before data collection (Appendix 8).

All data was anonymised, with identifying details removed from transcripts and reporting. Data was stored securely on a password-protected institutional system with dual authentication, in line with data protection.

## 2.5 | Trustworthiness

Several strategies were used to improve the trustworthiness of the study. Credibility was supported by triangulation of literature and interview data. A research logbook was maintained to document methodological decisions and reflections through the study.

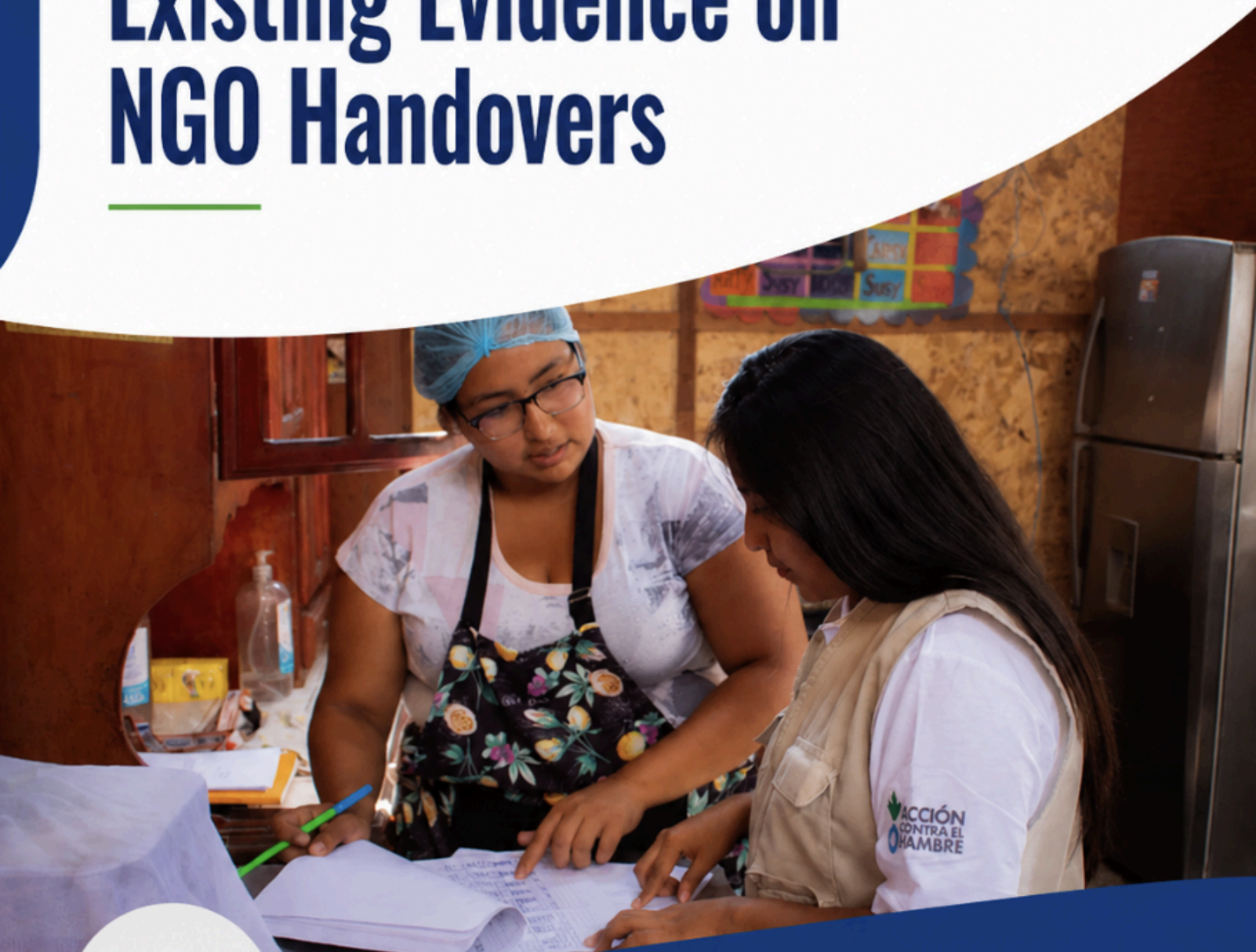
Coding and interpretation were discussed within the team to support reflexivity and rigour. The use of verbatim quotations in the findings improves transparency and confirmability. Ongoing liaison with the client organisation and academic supervisor supports the credibility and relevance of the analysis.

## 2.6 | Interview Participant Context

To provide contextual understanding of the interview findings, brief participant profiles were developed for each informant. Participants are anonymised and identified using unique codes to protect confidentiality. The full set of participant context cards is found in Appendix 9.



# Literature Review - Existing Evidence on NGO Handovers



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## 3 | Literature Review - Existing Evidence on NGO Handovers

### 3.1 | Exit Planning & Transition Design

Across the literature, early exit planning is consistently identified as a key factor influencing the success of NGO handovers. However, many organisations approach exit reactively, often initiating transitions only once funding cycles end or external pressures arise (Hayman, 2015; Hayman and Lewis, 2017). This late-stage planning limits the time available to prepare local partners and develop sustainable programme structures.

Authors emphasise the importance of embedding exit strategies within programme design from the outset (Gardner, Greenblott and Joubert, 2005; Hayman *et al.*, 2016). Early planning allows organisations to gradually reduce their operational role while strengthening local capacity and ownership. Phased transition approaches, implemented over extended periods, allow responsibilities to be transferred gradually and are associated with more sustainable handover outcomes (Khan and Khan, 2012; Hayman *et al.*, 2016).

Despite this, organisational priorities and donor funding cycles often limit the ability to implement long-term exit planning, meaning transitions are developed under limited time and resources (Hayman, 2015; Harake, 2024). Overall, the literature suggests that the timing and structure of exit planning are key to determining whether interventions remain sustainable following NGO withdrawal.

### 3.2 | Capacity Building & Institutional Strengthening

Institutional capacity is a recognised factor that significantly influences the sustainability of programme handovers. Capacity building is most effective when integrated throughout programme implementation, rather than introduced only during the exit phase (Hayman *et al.*, 2016; Khan and Khan, 2012).

The literature notes that capacity building goes beyond technical training related to programme delivery to include financial management, governance, leadership, and strategic planning

(Gardner, Greenblott and Joubert, 2005). Improving these systems enables local organisations to manage programmes independently and engage more effectively with donors and stakeholders.

However, capacity-building efforts are often introduced too late, limiting their effectiveness and leaving local organisations insufficiently prepared for transition (Hayman and Lewis, 2017; Hayman *et al.*, 2016). More effective approaches are those that respond to local needs and emphasise long-term organisational development rather than short-term training interventions. As a result, capacity building is not just a mechanism for transferring knowledge but also a process of supporting the long-term organisational development of local partners.

### 3.3 | Financial Sustainability & Funding Dependency

Financial sustainability is a major challenge in NGO handovers, particularly where local organisations rely heavily on external funding (Khan and Khan, 2012; Allaby and Preston, 2005). The withdrawal of international support can create significant operational difficulties if alternative funding sources are not established (Milenova *et al.*, 2025).

Dependency on single donors is a recurring issue, limiting the ability of local organisations to sustain activities independently (StopAIDS, 2018). This is particularly problematic in contexts with limited domestic funding or weak government systems (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019).

The literature emphasises the importance of supporting funding diversification during programme implementation, including improving fundraising skills, building better partnerships with government institutions, and encouraging greater community contribution to programme activities (Duvernay *et al.*, 2023; Rispel *et al.*, 2010). Programs that rely on locally available resources or that are integrated within government service delivery structures appear more likely to continue after international support ends. However, structural constraints such as short funding cycles and resource limitations continue to challenge the achievement of financial sustainability.

In these contexts, transition may need a combination of organisational capacity development and a gradual reduction in external funding, while increasing collaboration with local stakeholders to ensure the programme activities can continue in some form following NGO withdrawal (Duvernay *et al.*, 2023).

Overall, the literature suggests that financial sustainability is a significant factor in the outcome of programme handovers. Where international NGOs support local partners to diversify funding sources and reduce reliance on external donors, programmes are more likely to remain operational after the handover process has finished.

### 3.4 | Partnership Dynamics & Power Relationships

The literature notes that the quality of partnerships between INGOs and local organisations plays a significant role in influencing handover outcomes (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). While partnerships are often central to programme delivery, they are also influenced by unequal power dynamics, especially where INGOs retain control over funding, programme design, and decision-making processes (Hayman and Lewis, 2017).

This concentration of control can limit the ability of local organisations to influence key parts of programme implementation and transition. Research suggests that decisions regarding programme closure or handover are frequently made by international headquarters, with limited input from local partners (Hayman, 2015). Therefore, local organisations may be expected to assume responsibility for programmes that they have had limited involvement in shaping, potentially undermining both ownership and sustainability.

To address this, the literature emphasises the importance of participatory approaches to transition planning. Where local partners are actively involved in decision-making around timelines, responsibilities, and resource allocation, handover processes tend to be more collaborative and better aligned with local capacities (Burrows *et al.*, 2016; Khan and Khan, 2012). These approaches support a shift from relationships defined primarily by funding flows towards more equitable partnerships.

Closely linked to this is the concept of local ownership, which is recognised as a determinant of sustainability. Programmes that are co-designed and implemented with local actors are more likely to be maintained after NGO withdrawal, as local organisations are familiar with operations and requirements (Rispel *et al.*, 2010; Duvernay *et al.*, 2023). However, achieving genuine local ownership is challenging in existing aid structures, where donor requirements and accountability pressures often restrict the degree of autonomy afforded to local organisations (Hayman, 2015).

The literature suggests that sustainable handovers depend not only on technical and financial factors, but also on the extent to which partnerships are structured around trust and shared decision-making.

### 3.5 | Community Ownership & Locally Led Sustainability

Community engagement is identified as an important factor for the sustainability of interventions following handover. Programs that involve communities in both design and implementation are more likely to align with local needs and continue beyond the transition period (Rispel *et al.*, 2010; Duvernay *et al.*, 2023). This shows the shift towards locally led approaches, where sustainability is linked not just to organisational capacity but also the extent to which interventions are embedded into local social systems.

Community participation can take various forms, including consultation during programme planning or the establishment of community-led management structures. In some cases, local committees or community groups have enabled programmes to continue operating after international partners withdraw, supporting both accountability and local ownership (Novosseloff, 2018; StopAIDS, 2018).

However, the literature also notes that community ownership cannot be assumed simply because programmes operate in local contexts. Where interventions remain dependent on external knowledge or funding, communities may lack the capacity or resources to sustain activities independently (Allaby and Preston, 2005; Duvernay *et al.*, 2023). This suggests that sustainable handovers need efforts to build on existing community structures rather than introducing externally driven systems.

Overall, the literature suggests that community ownership plays a complementary role alongside organisational capacity and partnership dynamics, reinforcing the importance of interventions being embedded within local systems to support long-term sustainability.

### 3.6 | Monitoring & Learning After Exit

Although the importance of sustainability is recognised, relatively few studies research what

happens after INGOs handover. Authors note that while organisations may invest significant resources in programme delivery and transition planning, far less attention is given to monitoring the long-term outcomes of handovers once external actors have exited (Hayman, 2015; Hayman and Lewis, 2017).

This lack of follow-up is largely attributed to funding constraints and organisational priorities, which often limit the ability of INGOs to continue monitoring outcomes once programmes formally end (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). Therefore, much of the available evidence focuses on short-term outputs rather than long-term sustainability (de Gruchy and Kapilashrami, 2019).

The lack of post-exit evaluation limits opportunities for learning, making it difficult to assess if specific handover approaches are effective (Gardner, Greenblott and Joubert, 2005). While some case studies show the value of continued engagement with local partners, such examples remain limited or inaccessible to those outside the specific INGO organisation (Burrows *et al.*, 2016; Duvernay *et al.*, 2023).

This shows the need for greater emphasis on post-transition monitoring to better understand how handovers function in practice. Addressing this gap requires greater attention to practitioner perspectives and real-world experiences of handover processes, particularly from those directly involved in managing or receiving programme transitions.

### 3.7 | Gaps in the Literature

Despite synthesising useful insights into factors that influence handover sustainability, the literature has several limitations. Much of the available evidence is based on conceptual discussions, practitioner guidance, or organisational reflections rather than how these processes operate in practice (Hayman, 2015; Hayman and Lewis, 2017).

Another significant gap is the limited representation of local organisational perspectives. The majority of studies focus on the experiences and strategies of international actors, with less attention given to the challenges faced by local organisations during and after transition (Burrows *et al.*, 2016; Duvernay *et al.*, 2023). This imbalance limits understanding of how sustainability is experienced in practice by those responsible for maintaining interventions.

Also, the lack of post-exit evaluation limits the evidence base, making it difficult to assess

long-term outcomes (Hayman *et al.*, 2016; Khan and Khan, 2012). Addressing these gaps needs further research covering handover processes over time and incorporating practitioner and local perspectives. In response, this study uses qualitative interviews to give practical insight into transition experiences.

### 3.8 | Synthesis of Literature Findings

Across the literature, the sustainability of NGO handovers is influenced by a combination of interdependent factors rather than any single intervention. Effective transitions depend on the alignment of early planning, organisational capacity, financial conditions, and partnership dynamics, all of which must be developed over time.

Early and structured exit planning consistently emerges as an enabler, with phased approaches allowing local organisations to gradually assume responsibility (Hayman, 2015; Hayman and Lewis, 2017). In contrast, reactive or late-stage transitions are associated with weaker outcomes (Harake, 2024; Hayman, 2015). Similarly, capacity building is most effective when it goes beyond technical training to include broader institutional development, including financial systems and strategic planning capacity, under a strong governance structure (Gardner, Greenblott and Joubert, 2005).

Financial sustainability presents a more structural challenge, with dependency on external funding limiting the ability of local organisations to maintain programmes independently (Allaby and Preston, 2005; StopAIDS, 2018). At the same time, partnership dynamics play a critical role, with trust and shared decision-making supporting more effective transitions, while power imbalances can undermine local ownership (Hayman, 2015; Hayman and Lewis, 2017).

Despite these insights, there remains limited evidence on how handovers function in practice. As a result, while the literature identified key influencing factors, further research is needed to understand how these operate in real-world contexts over time.

# Practitioner Perspectives on INGO Handover

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## 4 | Practitioner Perspectives on INGO Handover Processes

This section presents findings from the key informant interviews, organised into six themes derived through thematic analysis. These themes were developed by coding, combining deductive codes informed by the literature with inductive codes emerging from participant responses. A summary of practitioner perspectives cumulative themes influencing handover, including enablers and barriers, is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Summary of key themes, enablers and barriers**

Theme Number	Theme Description	Main Enablers	Main Barriers
<b>Exit Planning &amp; Sustainability</b>	Sustainability is strengthened when transition is planned early and embedded in programme design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phased transition processes</li> <li>- Early, structured exit planning</li> <li>- Defined roles &amp; responsibilities</li> <li>- Institutionalisation within systems</li> <li>- Early national involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of early planning</li> <li>- Short transition timelines</li> <li>- Shifting programme objectives</li> <li>- Programme displacement</li> <li>- Loss of continuity after exit</li> </ul>
<b>Capacity Building</b>	Capacity enables local actors to sustain programmes independently beyond external support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Continuous, integrated training</li> <li>- Development of local trainers</li> <li>- Application of learning in practice</li> <li>- Institutional capacity strengthening</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Misaligned training participation</li> <li>- Over-reliance on external resources</li> <li>- Lack of sustained support</li> <li>- Behavioural disincentives</li> <li>- System-level constraints</li> </ul>
<b>Funding Conditionality</b>	Funding structures change the conditions and feasibility of programme transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flexible, unrestricted funding</li> <li>- Continuity through follow-on funding</li> <li>- Forward-planned resource commitments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Short funding cycles</li> <li>- Abrupt funding withdrawal</li> <li>- Mid-project funding cuts</li> <li>- Incentive distortions (e.g., DSA)</li> <li>- Lack of post-exit funding</li> </ul>

<b>Power Dynamics</b>	Power relations influence decision-making and local ownership in transitions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participatory decision-making</li> <li>- Equitable partnerships</li> <li>- Shared leadership practices</li> <li>- Community representation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Donor-driven decisions</li> <li>- Limited local influence</li> <li>- Hierarchical systems</li> <li>- Institutional power imbalances</li> <li>- Funding control by external actors</li> </ul>
<b>Community &amp; Stakeholder Partnerships</b>	Strong relationships influence the ownership and sustainability of programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Early stakeholder engagement</li> <li>- Co-creation and shared design</li> <li>- Trust and relationship-building</li> <li>- Mentorship and backstopping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Late stakeholder engagement</li> <li>- Fragile trust under funding instability</li> <li>- Regression to consultation-only models</li> <li>- Unsupported voluntarism</li> <li>- Reduced engagement under budget constraints</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation &amp; Evaluation</b>	Sustainable handover is stronger when implementation is supported through monitoring, follow-up and integration into local systems beyond project closure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Structures M&amp;E systems</li> <li>- Feedback loops &amp; follow-up</li> <li>- Institutionalisation of practices</li> <li>- Post-exit engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Lack of post-exit evaluation</li> <li>- External shocks</li> <li>- Behavioural barriers</li> <li>- Attribution challenges</li> <li>- Disconnect between strategy and system capacity</li> </ul>

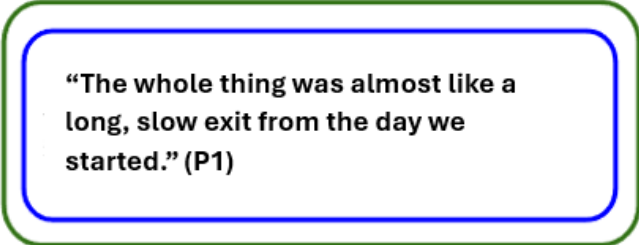
While these themes are presented as distinct categories, the findings indicate substantial overlap between them. In practice, participants described handovers as influenced by the interaction between planning, funding, partnerships, and system capacity rather than any single factor in isolation. This shows that sustainability is not driven by discrete actions, but by how these factors align over the programme lifecycle.

## 4.1 | Exit Planning and Sustainability

This theme examines how the timing and design of exit planning shaped programme sustainability. It draws on codes including early exit planning, phased transition, national involvement, and institutionalisation, all of which reflect how sustainability is influenced by early programme decisions.

### Enablers

Participants consistently described successful transitions as those where exit planning was embedded from the outset and implemented gradually. This included early involvement of national actors, clear allocation of responsibilities, and integration into institutional systems. In these cases, the exit of the INGO was not experienced as a disruption, but as a continuation of an early-established process. As Participant One explained:

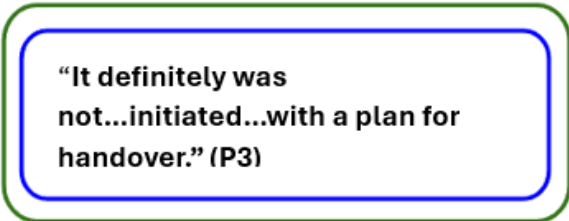


**“The whole thing was almost like a long, slow exit from the day we started.” (P1)**

These approaches allowed programmes to transition into locally led systems, reducing reliance on external actors over time.

### Barriers

In contrast, barriers emerged where exit planning was absent or introduced late. Codes relating to limited transition time, shifting objectives, and sustainability challenges reflected how programmes were often forced into reactive handovers. Participants described short timelines and weak continuity after exit, with local actors insufficiently prepared to sustain activities. As Participant Three noted:



**“It definitely was not...initiated...with a plan for handover.” (P3)**

Across accounts, sustainability challenges were frequently linked to early design limitations, suggesting that failure to plan for exit from the outset significantly undermines long-term outcomes:

**“Once the NGO leaves... they tend to forget (P4)**

**“NGOs coming and going... [communities] forced to work at the whim of whatever is the latest project.” (P1)**

## 4.2 | Capacity Building

This theme describes how capacity was developed to support continuation after INGO withdrawal, drawing on codes including continuous capacity development, training approaches, institutional embedding, and behavioural factors.

### Enablers

Sustained programmes were associated with long-term, integrated capacity building. This included ongoing training, applications of learning, and development of local trainers and systems. Participant Seven said:

**“It’s not just training... it’s the opportunity to apply what you’ve learned... and that continuation.” (P1)**

Two distinct approaches to capacity building are seen. In some cases, capacity was treated as a discrete event, such as training or resource provision, with the assumption that it would be sustained once delivered. In others, it was understood as an ongoing process, embedded

throughout the programme and integrated into routine practice. Sustained outcomes were consistently associated with this latter approach, while short-term or one-off interventions were less likely to last. This suggests that capacity cannot simply be transferred at the point of exit, but must be developed over time alongside local actors.

*"When you say capacity strengthening, a lot of people think about, okay, let's do this training, train a group of people and let them go. Well, the way we treated capacity strengthening was a little bit different... one, it's the opportunity to apply what you've learned. And second, it's that continuation. So the booster sessions, the training of trainers... can you become a trainer yourself?" (P7)*

### Barriers

Short-term or resource-based approaches were less effective. Codes relating to misaligned incentives and reliance on external inputs showed how training often failed to translate into sustained practice. As one participant explained:

*"Because of the money...people that are not relevant [attend training]...somebody from ophthalmology to come and train in emergency obstetric [care]." (P4)*

System-level constraints further limit sustainability:

*"You're handing over to a system that cannot afford medicines..." (P6)*

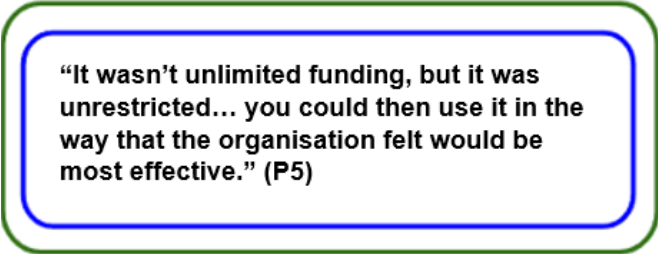
These accounts summarise that capacity cannot be separated from the context in which it is applied. Training alone cannot compensate for systems where staff lack incentives to use new skills, nor can strengthened institutions function without adequate resources. This suggests that sustainable capacity depends less on what is delivered and more on whether it can be embedded into everyday practice within existing system limitations.

### 4.3 | Funding Conditionality

This theme looks at how funding structures shaped transition conditions, drawing on codes including funding dependency, short cycles, donor restrictions, and continuity mechanisms.

#### Enablers

Flexible and continuous funding arrangements enabled more effective transitions by allowing programs to adapt to evolving needs. In particular, unrestricted funding supported this by removing limitations tied to pre-defined budgets and deliverables, allowing organisations to respond to the practical demands of handover processes. In contrast, restricted funding limited flexibility, making it difficult to resource relational, adaptive, and transition-specific activities. This suggests that the structure of funding, rather than simply its availability, is important in shaping how effectively handovers can be implemented. Participant Five described what this made possible:



**“It wasn’t unlimited funding, but it was unrestricted... you could then use it in the way that the organisation felt would be most effective.” (P5)**

This flexibility allowed resources to be directed towards transition-specific activities that would be difficult to justify within rigid funding structures, while also giving greater donor trust in organisational decision-making.

A related approach involved having long-term financial commitments within programme design,

supporting continuity beyond the grant period rather than treating sustainability as an end-stage consideration. As one participant described, this allowed community platforms to continue operating after formal programme closure:

***"Foward purchased a decade of time available for each of those platforms." (P1)***

### **Barriers**

Across interviews, funding conditionality was a key barrier, influencing not only if programmed could continue, but also which activities were prioritised or neglected. Short funding cycles and abrupt withdrawal frequently led to premature exits, often driven by donor timelines rather than local readiness.

***"We just ran out of money...we had to close it." (P8)***

This shows a misalignment between funding structures and the longer timeframes needed for sustainable change, with participants emphasising that meaningful impact cannot be achieved within short grant periods:

***"I would love to say that three-year grants work. They're not efficient... if you are really seeking long-term impact, sustainability, or something meaningful with the communities... that doesn't happen in a night. It takes time, effort, and human resources." (P7)***

Funding instability also disrupted transition processes, with activities such as learning, dissemination, and sustainability planning often deprioritised when resources were reduced. Without follow-on funding, participants note that programme knowledge and progress could be lost:

***"If we don't get further funding... we might lose what we've learned." (P2)***

Furthermore, the lack of funding for post-exit evaluation limited the ability to assess long-term outcomes, reinforcing the gap between implementation and sustained impact.

***"I don't think any of the research funding allows us to capture that long-term impact because there isn't anything that tells you, oh, you can go back and check, or you can track this... No, they leave you." (P7)***

## **4.4 | Power Dynamics**

This theme explores how power relations influence decision-making during transition, drawing on codes including top-down decision-making, limited partner influence, and equitable partnership practices.

### **Enablers**

Some participants described efforts to redistribute power through participatory decision-making and shared leadership practices, which supported greater ownership among local actors.

For example, rotating roles in management processes helped shift authority within teams:

**"In every management meeting... rotating chairing...note taking...leadership... and like everyone... contributing to the agenda." (P7)**

This suggests that power is not only shaped by formal structures but also through everyday practices that determine who leads and contributes.

At the community level, code empowerment captured a parallel shift of how there were efforts to amplify marginalised voices. One participant describes how involving Tuberculosis (TB) survivors and community leaders in decision-making spaces created meaningful change in visibility:

***"Some like TB survivors or like those who have never travelled in their entire life, just to go to Copenhagen, for example... So, it was such a turning point for them" (P7)***

Previously, their voices have been:

**"Almost not heard at all...sidelined." (P7)**

While programmes could not fully alter wider structural power plays, these practices allowed more equitable decision-making within their immediate environments of influence.

## Barriers

Structural power imbalances remained a key barrier, with decision-making authority closely tied to control of funding.

***"Power is about who holds the money." (P6)***

Participants described how decisions about programme closure were often made centrally, with limited input from local partners, reinforcing top-down dynamics.

***"All the money came to us, and we parcelled it out... it was led by the funding." (P1)***

However, power was not only financial. Positional authority also influences whose voices are heard, particularly in interactions between INGOs, government actors, and local partners. Similar dynamics were evident within organisations, where hierarchy and gender influenced participation.

As one participant mentioned about their knowledgeable colleague when the boss entered:

***"She almost retreated into the background. And I was like, "That's not good, because you are the voice. He doesn't have the same depth of involvement. She speaks about things with passion; she knows the details." (P7)***

These findings suggest that power works across multiple levels, influencing not only strategic decisions but also everyday interactions, and limiting the extent to which handovers can be genuinely collaborative.

## 4.5 | Community and Stakeholder Partnerships

This theme explained how relationships influenced sustainability, drawing on codes including co-creation, early engagement, trust, and partnership fragility.

### Enablers

Early stakeholder engagement, particularly during programme design, was strongly associated with ownership and continuity. When communities were involved from the start, they were able to influence programme objectives and priorities, rather than simply influencing implementation. As one participant noted:

***"We brought in the widest possible group of stakeholders at the beginning... They helped us write the proposal." (P1)***

A related enabler was community co-creation, where local actors acted as partners rather than recipients. This approach was linked to stronger and more sustained engagement, with participants describing how locally driven initiatives continue beyond programme support. For example, one participant notes how participatory research allowed community members to take ownership of interventions:

***Instead of us conducting the research, we work with them to co-create and design the interventions... a group of TB survivors and community leaders who felt they owned it. They felt that it's theirs, it's their work, it's their baby." (P2)***

## Barriers

Late engagement and funding instability were barriers which weakened partnerships. Participants suggested that when stakeholders were brought in too late, opportunities for genuine ownership were reduced. As one participant noted:

***"Sometimes stakeholders are brought in too late. In areas of limited statehood, coordination is harder." (P6)***

A second barrier concerned fragile trust, especially when programmes were disrupted by funding instability. Participants described how broken commitments could damage relationships with communities and undermine confidence in the handover process. One participant reflected:

***"We got a funding cut... you've worked so closely with the community and kind of promised them... keeping those relationships is definitely a challenge when there's such uncertainty around funding... communities feel like they can't trust you." (P2)***

Reliance on voluntary effort also raised concerns about long-term sustainability. In some cases, continued engagement depended heavily on voluntary effort, raising questions about how durable this could be over time. As one participant observed:

***"Healthcare workers were volunteering themselves... They were motivated. They saw they could reach more people... that gave them the motivation, the push. They felt they're proud to be part of the program, but at the same time, I worry that if this is like this, how long can this be sustainable... if there's no support whatsoever." (P7)***

## 4.6 | Implementation and Evaluation

This theme looks at how programmes were implemented and assessed after handover, drawing on codes including monitoring systems, institutionalisation, and post-exit evaluation.

### Enablers

The strongest enabler described was a structured monitoring process, supporting continuity and the gradual transfer of responsibility. Organisations that had follow-up visits and feedback loops within programme design were better able to reinforce implementation and shift accountability over time.

As one participant described:

***“ We have what we call the M&E visits [Monitoring & Evaluation]...we go to the facility to see if they have started implementing what we have trained... then we’ll have a final dissemination meeting where we will invite the state government and primary health care teams... people from the Ministry of Health or the Primary Health Care teams can tell us how our project has impacted their state and what they intend to do next for sustainability.” (P4)***

This suggests that monitoring can function not just as a reporting mechanism, but as a tool for having responsibility within local systems.

Post-exit follow-up, where it occurred, had a complementary role by maintaining relationships beyond formal programme closure. Participants described periodic check-ins using predefined indicators to assess ongoing progress and support partners after exit:

**“We had indicators...checklists... and a way to monitor against those. We would call often six months later... to check how they were doing.” (P5)**

Institutionalisation further improved sustainability, particularly where interventions were embedded within existing systems rather than remaining project-bound. One participant gave an example:

***“But one very good thing that they do is for their final year midwifery students, all the students go through a full set of training before they graduate... so that one I know is sustained. Then some of the centres... that are in the teaching hospital, because it is in the teaching hospital, people are continuously using it.” (P4)***

### **Barriers**

In short, post-exit evaluations are widely limited due to funding constraints. Once a project officially ends, financial support for continued monitoring also ceases. Participant 5 described this limitation explicitly:

***“Most organisations won’t do it because they literally don’t have the funding.” (P5)***

External shocks were an additional barrier, particularly pronounced in fragile and LMIC (low- and middle-income countries) contexts, such as conflict and disease outbreaks. Participant 6 described a situation in which these disruptions were not exceptional events but a defining feature of the operating environment:

***“Transition takes years...delays due to COVID, conflict.” (P6)***

A third barrier arises from individual behaviour rather than at the level of system structure. Participant 4 described a pattern that had appeared even in well-resourced settings, the ongoing use of the facilities depended on something that equipment provision alone could not guarantee:

*"The other thing also is if there is a demand from the side of the health workers...if the health workers themselves are interested in learning these things. The mannequins are there. It is an open space. They're on their own... People run their lives. If you're not in training, it's only those resident doctors who are in training." (P4)*

## 4.7 | Synthesis of Interview Findings

Across interviews, sustainable handovers were consistently described as the result of long-term programme design rather than short-term transition activities. Participants emphasised that continuity depended on how interventions were structured, funded, and embedded from the start, reinforcing the idea from literature of the importance of early planning, institutional capacity, and strong partnerships, all supported by adequate funding cycles.

However, these enabling conditions were not experienced as independently achievable. Instead, sustainability emerged where multiple factors worked together, particularly funding flexibility, equitable partnerships, and system-level capacity. Where these conditions were fragmented, participants described transitions as compressed and externally driven, so ultimately unsustainable. This shows that the effectiveness of individual strategies is contingent on the presence of broader enabling environments.

Importantly, funding and power dynamics were repeatedly positioned as underlying determinants influencing all the other themes. Rather than acting as isolated barriers, these factors influenced if planning could be implemented, whether capacity could be sustained, and if partnerships could operate equitably. This suggests that sustainability is not just a technical challenge, but one within a set of broader structural conditions that influence decision-making

authority and resource allocation.

Another insight from the interview is the distinction between formal programme design and lived implementation. While many programmes incorporated elements associated with best practice, participants described how these were often adapted or deprioritised in response to contextual pressures. This means that sustainability is not determined only by the presence of specific elements, but by how they are put into practice and adapted when needed.

As a result, handovers were rarely experienced as discrete events, instead they were understood as complex, iterative processes influenced by interactions between organisational practice and wider system constraints. This reinforces the need to view sustainability not as an outcome of individual intervention, but as a function of how multiple conditions work together over time.

# DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS



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## 5 | Discussion and Limitations

### 5.1 | Overview of Findings

The findings show that sustainable NGO handovers are influenced by a combination of interdependent organisational, financial, relational, and contextual factors rather than any single intervention. While the literature presents a relatively consistent set of enabling conditions, the interview findings show the extent to which these are mediated by practical constraints within the programme delivery environments.

This suggests that the primary challenge is not a lack of conceptual understanding, but a persistent gap between what is recommended and what is operationally feasible within existing systems. In practice, sustainability is seen not from the application of individual strategies, but from multiple conditions working together over time. Where it is absent, even well-designed interventions struggle to produce sustained outcomes.

Importantly, this reframes the concept of handovers not as a discrete technical process, but as a system-dependent outcome influenced by interactions between actors, resources, and institutional structures. This has implications for how sustainability is both conceptualised and pursued in practice.

### 5.2 | Enablers of Sustainable Handovers

Across the findings, early and structured exit planning is found to be a necessary condition for sustainability, but not a sufficient one. While consistently promoted in the literature as a core component of effective handover (Hayman, 2015), its impact is contingent on the extent to which it is supported by broader organisational and financial conditions. In this sense, early planning functions less as a standalone strategy and more as an enabling method that creates the conditions for other processes, such as capacity development and partnership-building, to take place. However, the findings suggest that planning alone does not guarantee sustainability. Where planning is not accompanied by sufficient time, resources, and flexibility, it risks becoming procedural rather than transformative. This shows the distinction between the

presence of planning and its effectiveness, suggesting that current models may overstate its impact without considering the conditions required for its implementation.

A similar pattern is evident in relation to capacity building. Although widely recognised as essential, the findings identify a distinction between capacity as an output and capacity as a process (Khan and Khan, 2012). Where capacity development is continuous, and institutionally grounded, it contributes to long-term sustainability. In contrast, where it is delivered as a discrete intervention, its effects are often short-lived. This shows a broader issue in how capacity is conceptualised within development programming. While training and resource provision are often used as proxies for capacity, the findings suggest that these alone are insufficient to sustain change. Instead, capacity must be within systems and organisational structures. This reinforced the idea that sustainability is not achieved through knowledge transfer alone, but through the integration of that knowledge into everyday practice.

Partnerships also show how enabling conditions work through interaction rather than isolation. Trust and collaboration are not just beneficial conditions, but ways through which authority, responsibility, and decision-making are negotiated during transition. As such, strong partnerships do not just facilitate handover processes, but actively influence their outcomes (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). Crucially, the findings suggest that partnership quality influenced the extent to which other enablers can be seen. For example, effective capacity development and planning processes are more likely to succeed where relationships are characterised by trust and shared ownership. This shows the interconnected nature of enabling conditions, reinforcing that sustainability depends on how these factors work together rather than independently.

Financial flexibility is another critical, but often under-recognised, enabler. While the literature tends to frame sustainability in terms of long-term financial viability, the findings show that the structure of funding itself plays a more immediate role in shaping what is possible during transition (Allaby and Preston, 2005). This suggests that sustainability is influenced not only by the availability of resources, but the degree to which funding arrangements allow for adaptation and responsiveness. In this way, funding structures do not simply support implementation, but actively direct the process through which sustainability is pursued.

In summary, these findings challenge the idea that handovers can be achieved through the application of discrete best practices. Instead, they show the need for alignments between

multiple enabling conditions, without which even well-designed strategies are unlikely to succeed.

### 5.3 | Barriers to Sustainable Handovers

Barriers to sustainable handovers are not just the inverse of enabling conditions, but are deeper structural constraints that limit the extent to which recommended practices can be implemented. While the literature frequently identifies challenges such as funding dependency and limited planning timelines, the findings suggest that these are symptoms of broader systemic issues rather than isolated obstacles (Duvernay *et al.*, 2023).

Funding structures are one of the most significant barriers. Although sustainability is widely framed as a long-term objective, the dominance of short-term, project-based funding creates a structural misalignment between programme design and expected outcomes. This limits the feasibility of gradual transitions, often forcing organisations to compress handovers into timeframes that are insufficient for meaningful capacity development or institutional embedding. This misalignment has wider implications. It suggests that sustainability is not undermined by poor practice alone, but by the conditions under which programmes are funded and implemented. As a result, even where organisations attempt to follow best practice, they may be limited by factors beyond their control. This shows the argument that sustainability cannot be addressed only at the programme level.

Power dynamics further reinforce these barriers. Despite the policy emphasis on localisation, decision-making authority often remains concentrated within international organisations, particularly where control of funding is retained (Hayman and Lewis, 2017). This limits the ability of local actors to have a say in transitions, reducing ownership, and limiting the extent to which handovers can be adapted to local contexts. In this sense, barriers to sustainability are not just technical or organisational, but are within the governance structure of the aid system itself. This raises questions about the extent to which localisation can be achieved within existing power arrangements.

The findings also highlight organisational and human factors that are less visible in the literature but have significant impacts for implementation. Staff turnover, uncertainty, and the emotional impact of programme closure can disrupt continuity and weaken institutional work, particularly

during critical transition periods. These dynamics suggest that handovers are not purely technical processes, but are influenced by the organisation's environments in which they take place. This adds a layer of complexity, meaning that sustainability is influenced not just by structural conditions, but also by human and organisational factors that are often overlooked in formal guidance.

These barriers suggest that the limitations of handovers cannot be fully addressed through programme-level adjustments alone. Instead, they show systemic limitations that influence what is possible in practice, indicating the need for more fundamental changes in how transitions are structured and supported.

## 5.4 | Gaps and Tensions

A key part of this study is the identification of tensions between how sustainable handovers are conceptualised in the literature and how they are realised in practice. While existing guidance presents a relatively coherent model of best practice, the findings suggest that these models often overlook the structural conditions that influence implementation.

One of the most prominent tensions relates to early exit planning. Although widely seen as a central determinant of sustainability, its feasibility is frequently constrained by funding cycles and organisational decision-making processes (Hayman, 2015). Therefore, transitions are often started in response to external pressures rather than planned from the outset. This suggests that current models may overestimate the extent to which planning can be operationalised in practice. It also shows a disconnect between normative expectations and operational realities, where recommended practices are difficult to implement within existing systems or models.

Similar tensions are evident in relation to localisation. While policy frameworks emphasise the redistribution of power to local actors, the findings suggest that this shift remains partial. Decision-making authority, particularly in relation to funding and programme closure, often remains within international organisations (Hayman and Lewis, 2017). This suggests that localisation may work more as an aspirational principle than a consistently realised practice. As such, handovers may reproduce existing power dynamics rather than fundamentally changing them.

Another important gap concerns monitoring and evaluation. Although the importance of post-exit

evaluation is widely acknowledged, the findings show that such evaluations are rarely done in practice (Harris and Tuladhar, 2019). Funding limitations, combined with methodological challenges in attributing long-term outcomes, limit the ability of organisations to generate evidence on what happens after exit. Also, the limited availability of publicly accessible evaluations suggests that organisational incentives may not favour transparency. This restricts opportunities for sector-wide learning and contributes to the persistence of knowledge gaps.

These tensions show a wider limitation within the evidence base. While there is strong agreement on what should support sustainable handovers, there is far less understanding of how these function under real-world constraints. This shows the need to go beyond normative models of best practice and instead engage more critically with the structural conditions that influence implementation. Without this, efforts to improve handover processes are likely to remain limited by the same systemic challenges identified.

## 5.5 | Implications

The findings suggest that improving the sustainability of NGOs needs changes not only in programme design, but also in the wider systems that influence how transitions are planned and implemented. This reinforces the need to view handovers as long-term processes within programme cycles, rather than end-stage activities.

For international NGOs, this shows the need to embed transition planning throughout programme design, rather than approaching exit as a final stage. This involves prioritising long-term capacity development and ensuring that interventions are integrated within existing institutional systems. This means going beyond short-term delivery models towards approaches that support sustained organisational change.

For donors, the findings emphasise the need to better incorporate funding structures with sustainability outcomes. Short-term and inflexible funding was consistently identified as a limitation, constraining the ability to implement gradual and context-responsive transitions. More flexibility, alongside longer funding cycles, would allow organisations to adapt transition processes and support more durable outcomes. Also, increased investment in post-exit evaluation is needed to improve the evidence base on long-term sustainability.

For local organisations, improving institutional capacity remains important, particularly in relation

to governance and financial management. However, the findings also indicate that sustainability cannot be achieved through local efforts alone, especially where structural constraints such as funding limitations and power imbalances persist.

Overall, these implications suggest that achieving sustainable handovers needs a shift from viewing exit as an endpoint to understanding it as a system-level process influenced by interactions between organisational practice and structural conditions within the humanitarian sector.

## 5.6 | Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the number of key informant interviews was relatively small and done within a limited timeframe, which limited both recruitment and data collection. Therefore, the sample may not fully reflect the diversity of perspectives across different contexts,

Second, the study uses predominantly grey literature, including organisational reports and case studies, which may not be subject to the same level of methodological rigour as peer-reviewed research. This introduces potential bias, particularly where findings have organisational priorities or selective reporting.

Another limitation relates to the limited availability of post-exit evaluation data. Both the literature and interview findings indicate that such evaluations are rarely conducted or publicly accessible, limiting the ability to assess long-term sustainability outcomes.

Finally, the diversity of contexts in which NGO handovers occur limits the generalisability of findings. However, the combination of literature and practitioner data gives a good basis for identifying common patterns and challenges across settings.

# RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION



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## 6 | Recommendations & Conclusion

### 6.1 | Introduction

The recommendations presented draw on findings from both the literature and key informant interviews. Rather than proposing single solutions, they reflect a set of interdependent conditions that collectively influence whether handovers result in sustained outcomes. Across the analysis, sustainability and local ownership were not discrete outputs, but outcomes contingent on how transitions are designed and governed over time. This reinforces the idea evident in this report that handovers are not just an event, but a process which should be within wider programme and system dynamics. As such, the recommendations are structured by three stakeholder groups, INGOs, donors, and local organisations, recognising that sustainable outcomes depend on coordinated action across these actors rather than any group alone.

### 6.2 | Best Practices for Sustainable Handovers

In line with the Terms of Reference, six best practices are identified as invaluable to sustainable handovers in public. These are not standalone strategies, but interdependent conditions whose effectiveness depends on working within the broader structural context in which they are implemented.

#### 1. **Embed exit planning from programme inception.**

Exit should function as a core design principle rather than a final-stage activity. Where sustainability is built into programme design from the start, programmes are better able to align elements such as capacity development and financing with long-term ownership. In contrast, late-stage planning limits the ability to prepare local actors and often means short and reactive transitions, reducing their effectiveness.

#### 2. **Use phased and flexible transition approaches.**

Responsibility should be transferred gradually, with timelines adapted to context and local readiness. Fixed, externally driven timelines limit adaptability and weaken

outcomes of handovers. Flexibility is therefore not an optional factor, but a condition for effective transition.

### **3. Strengthen institutional capacity, not just technical skills.**

Sustainable transitions need investment in governance, financial systems, and leadership, alongside technical delivery. Capacity treated as a one-off intervention is rarely sustained, whereas capacity embedded in organisational systems and everyday practice is more likely to be sustained. This shows handovers need to go beyond training-focused approaches towards longer-term institutional improvements.

### **4. Prioritise equitable partnerships and local ownership**

Shared decision-making, transparency, and trust underpin effective transitions. Where local actors have meaningful authority in the processes of programme design and transitions, partnerships are more resilient and outcomes more likely to be sustained. Conversely, where decision-making remains externally controlled, handovers risk reinforcing dependency rather than enabling ownership.

### **5. Ensure flexible and sustainable financing**

Over-reliance on short-term, restricted funding limits the ability to plan and resource transitions effectively. Flexible and longer-term funding allows the relational and adaptive processes that handovers need, including capacity development and partnership-building. Without this, even well-designed transition strategies may not be feasible in practice.

### **6. Plan for learning and post-exit evaluation**

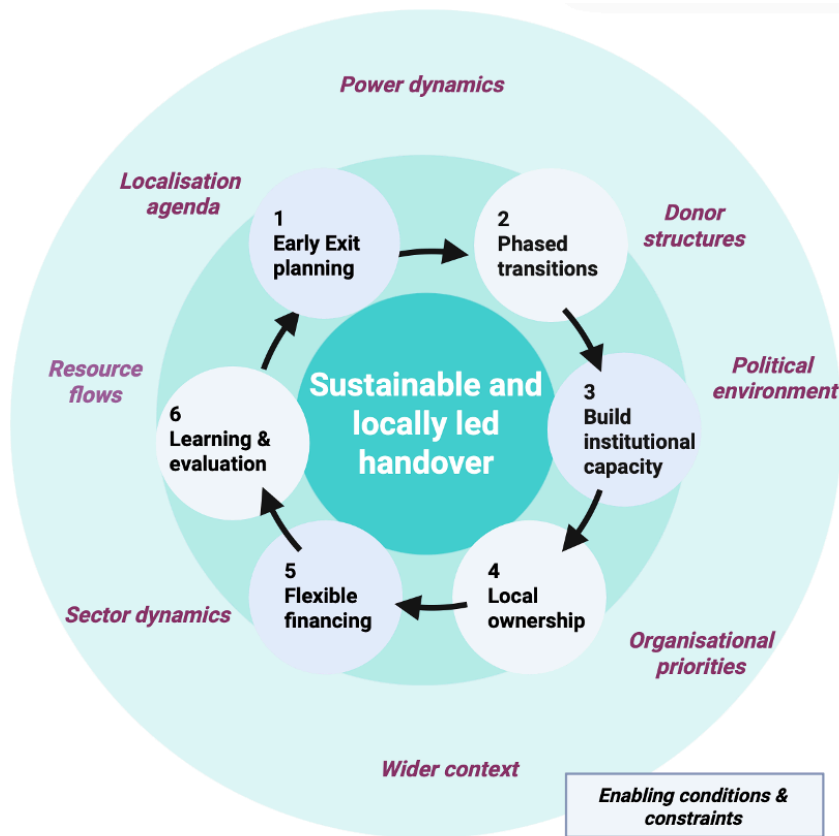
Structured follow-up and knowledge sharing are critical for assessing long-term outcomes and informing future practice. Without post-exit evaluation it limits the understanding of sustainability, and restricts opportunities for sector-wide learning and improvement.

In summary, these practices show that sustainability depends not on the application of individual actions but the workings between them all. Their interdependence is shown in Figure 6, which shows these practices within the broader structural conditions that influence their

implementation.

The best practices are summarised in Figure 6, which shows their interdependence and the wider structural conditions influencing their implementation.

**Figure 6. Best Practices Framework for Sustainable NGO Handovers.**



*Figure 6: This framework illustrates the key interrelated factors identified as critical to sustainable NGO handovers, indicating that effective transitions depend on the alignment of planning, capacity, partnerships, financing, and learning, all of which are influenced by broader structural and contextual conditions.*

## 6.3 | Recommendations for INGOs

For INGOs, sustainability is largely determined by decisions made at the design stage. The findings suggest that exit should be worked into programme makeup rather than treated as an operational afterthought. To support this INGOs should:

- Integrate exit planning from inception, including sustainability indicators within monitoring frameworks.
- Allocate sufficient time and resources for phased handover processes.
- Invest in institutional capacity beyond delivery, including governance, financial management, and leadership development.
- Maintain transparent and continuous communication with local partners throughout the programme cycle.
- Share decision-making authority, particularly in determining timelines and assessing readiness for handover.
- Align exit practice with stated organisational commitments to localisation, so that values are reflected in operational decisions.

These actions are all mutually reinforcing. For example, effective exit planning is dependent on both sufficient time and strong partnerships, while capacity development needs sustained investment and trust-based collaboration. Without aligning these aspects, INGOs may implement technically good strategies but they may fail to translate into sustainable outcomes. This suggests that improving handover processes needs not only change in individual practices, but a bigger shift in how INGOs prioritise sustainability within programme design and delivery.

## 6.4 | Recommendations for Donors

Donor funding structures were a defining limitation on sustainable handovers. Funding arrangements influence not only programme delivery but also the feasibility and quality of transition processes. To better support sustainability, donors should:

- Provide longer funding cycles aligned with the timeframes required for institutional development.
- Increase the availability of flexible and unrestricted funding for transition-specific

activities and responsiveness of evolving contexts.

- Explicitly resource transitions, rather than expecting these to be absorbed within delivery budgets.
- Support post-exit evaluation to strengthen the evidence base on long-term sustainability.
- Embed localisation principles within funding design, including direct funding to local organisations and participatory grant-making approaches.

These recommendations emphasise the idea that sustainability is often limited not by a lack of knowledge, but by the conditions under which programmes are funded. Short-term and inflexible funding structures limit the ability of organisations to implement gradual and context-responsive transitions. Addressing this needs a shift in donor priorities, recognising that sustainable outcomes depend not just on what programmed deliver, but on how they are designed and supported over time.

## 6.5 | Recommendations for Local Organisations

These recommendations are framed within a context of shared responsibility, recognising that local organisations operate within constraints influenced by donors and INGOs. Where enablers are in place, local organisations are well positioned to:

- Strengthen governance and financial management systems to support continuity beyond INGO involvement.
- Diversify funding sources to reduce dependency on single donors.
- Engage proactively in transition planning, contributing to the design of handover processes from the start rather than at the point of withdrawal.
- Develop leadership capacity to sustain organisational direction beyond transition.

However, these actions remain contingent on the structural conditions within which local organisations operate. The findings indicate that sustainability cannot be achieved through local capacity alone, particularly where funding limitations and power imbalances persist. This again reinforced that responsibility for sustainable handovers must be shared across all actors, rather than being transferred solely to local organisations at the point of exit.

## 6.6 | Conclusion

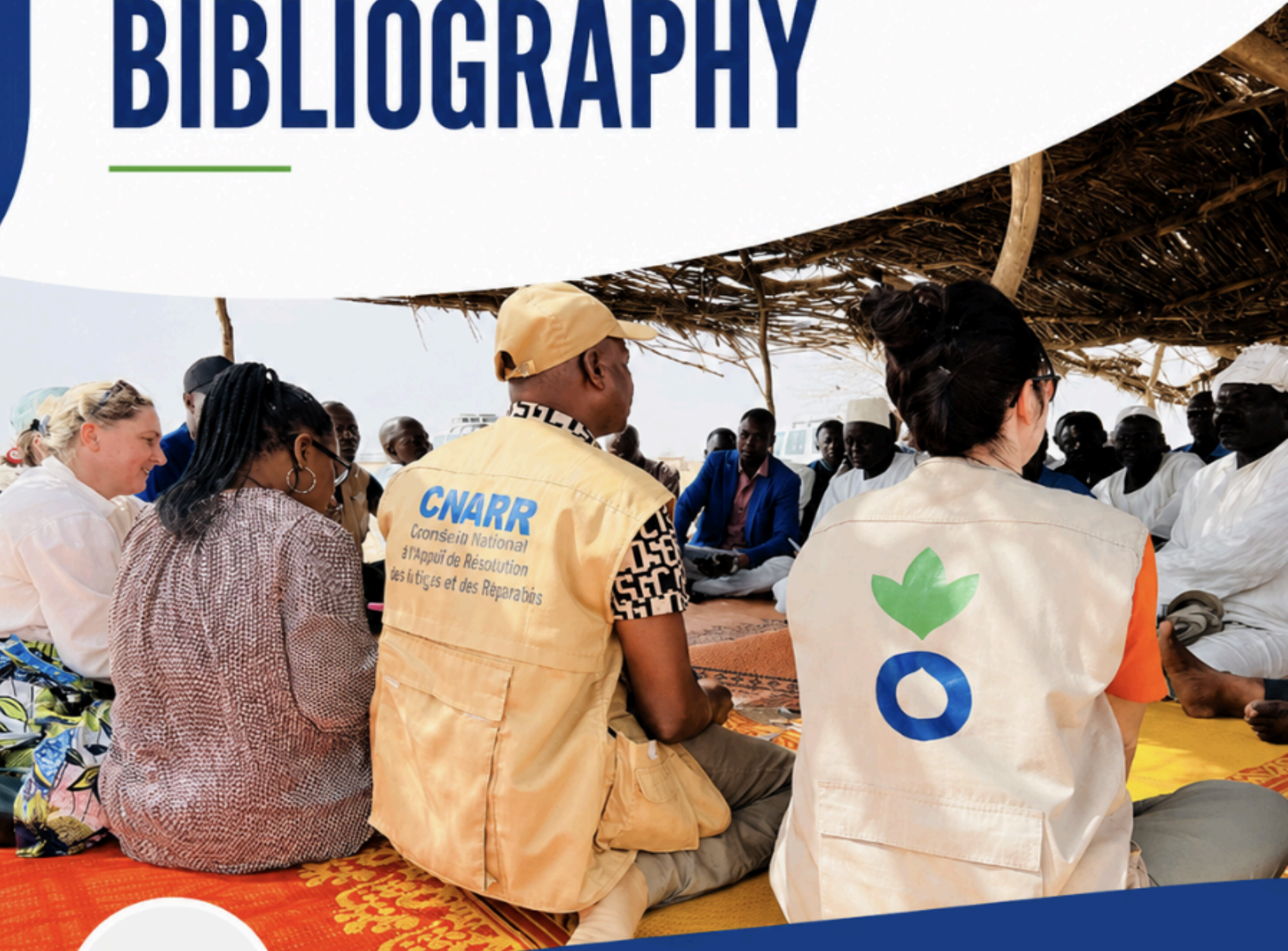
This study demonstrated that sustainable NGO handovers are not determined by individual interventions, but by the alignment of planning, capacity, financing, and partnerships within wider structural conditions. While existing frameworks emphasise these principles, the findings show a persistent gap between conceptual guidance and operational reality.

In practice, funding structures, organizational priorities, and other factors frequently constrain the implementation of recommended approaches. As a result, handovers are often treated as discrete events, rather than as processes embedded throughout the programme lifecycle. This means that sustainability is frequently compromised not at the point of exit, but through earlier design and structural limitations.

Achieving sustainable and locally led transitions needs a shift in how handovers are conceptualised. Rather than viewing exit as an endpoint, it must be understood from the outset, and as a continuous, system-wide process influenced by interdependent actors and conditions. This includes recognising that sustainability is not only a technical challenge, but a structural one, needing alignment across organisations, funding systems, governance arrangement, and relationships.

Without addressing these underlying constraints, efforts to promote localisation and sustainability risk remaining aspirational rather than operational.

# APPENDIX AND BIBLIOGRAPHY



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## Appendix 2 | Search Strategy and Full Search Strings Table

Database	Full Search String	Limits Applied	Results
Discover	<p>Title</p> <p>handover* OR "hand* over" OR post-handover OR handoff OR changeover OR "local ownership" OR "transition strategy*" OR "sustainable transition" OR "exit strategy*" OR "withdrawal strategy*" OR "withdrawal plan*" OR "discontinuation strategy*" OR "discontinuation plan*" OR "step-down strategy*" OR "step-down plan*" OR "knowledge transfer" OR post-NGO OR "NGO withdrawal" OR post-donor OR "donor period" OR "donor withdrawal"</p> <p>Abstract</p> <p>KEYWORDS: humanitarian OR "development organisation*" OR "development assistance" OR "external organisation*" OR "international development" OR NGO OR NGOs OR INGO OR INGOs OR non-government* OR "non government*" OR charit* OR "non-state actor*" OR "non state actor*" OR "non-state entity*" OR "non state entity*" OR "non-state organisation*" OR "non state organisation" OR "voluntary org*" OR "international agency*" OR "Action Against Hunger" OR "AAH" OR "Médecins Sans Frontières" OR "MSF" OR "Doctors without Borders"</p>	English language, after the year 2000	175
Scopus	<p>(TITLE ( handover* OR "hand* over" OR post-handover OR handoff OR changeover OR "local ownership" OR "sustainable transition" OR "exit strategy*" OR "withdrawal strategy*" OR "withdrawal plan*" OR "discontinuation strategy*" OR "discontinuation plan*" OR "step-down strategy*" OR "step-down plan*" OR "knowledge transfer" OR post-NGO OR "NGO withdrawal" OR post-donor OR "donor period" OR "donor withdrawal" ) OR ABS ( handover* OR "hand* over" OR post-handover OR handoff OR changeover OR "local ownership" OR "sustainable transition" OR "exit strategy*" OR "withdrawal strategy*" OR "withdrawal plan*" OR "discontinuation strategy*" OR "discontinuation plan*" OR "step-down strategy*" OR "step-down plan*" OR "knowledge transfer" OR post-NGO OR "NGO withdrawal" OR post-donor OR "donor period" OR "donor withdrawal" ) ) AND ( ( TITLE ( humanitarian OR "development organisation*" OR "development assistance" OR "external organisation*" OR "international development" OR NGO OR NGOs OR INGO OR INGOs OR non-government* OR "non government*" OR charit* OR "non-state actor*" OR "non state actor*" OR "non-state entity*" OR "non state entity*" OR "non-state organisation*" OR "non state organisation" OR "voluntary org*" OR "international agency*" OR "Médecins Sans Frontières" OR MSF ) OR ABS ( humanitarian OR "development organisation*" OR "development assistance" OR "external organisation*" OR "international development" OR NGO OR NGOs OR INGO OR INGOs OR non-government* OR "non government*" OR charit* OR "non-state actor*" OR "non state actor*" OR "non-state entit*" OR "non state entit*" OR "non-state organisation*" OR "non state</p>	English language, after the year 2000	496

	organisation" OR "voluntary org*" OR "international agenc*" OR "Médecins Sans Frontières" OR MSF ) ) )		
Google Advanced	- All these words: NGO - This exact word or phrase: handover - Any of these words: community OR local OR localised OR government	English language, last update: anytime, site or domain: .org	298
Additional Search Methods	Reference list screening and forward citation tracking of included studies	Applied post-screening	48

### Appendix 3 | PICOSS Table for Literature Search Inclusion

Element	Description
Population	International NGO, local NGOs, community-based organisations, public health institutions
Intervention	Handover, transitions, exit, localisation, graduation, transfer of programme ownership
Context	Humanitarian, development, fragile, and low-resource settings
Outcomes	Sustainability, continuity of public health interventions, local ownership, system resilience
Study Type	Grey literature, evaluations, qualitative studies, learning and guidance documents
Setting	Low- and middle-income countries

## Appendix 4 | Literature Thematic Analysis Extraction Table Format

Category	Notes/Ideas
<b>Study Citation</b>	Full reference
<b>Type of publication</b>	Peer-reviewed article, NGO report, evaluation, etc
<b>Sector</b>	Health, WASH, nutrition, etc
<b>Country</b>	The country it's based in
<b>Setting</b>	Humanitarian, development, fragile state, post-conflict, etc
<b>Type of Transition</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Planned handover</li> <li>● Donor-mandated exit</li> <li>● Phased withdrawal</li> <li>● Capacity-building model</li> <li>● Emergency-to-development transition</li> <li>● Localisation policy-driven shift</li> <li>● Sudden funding cuts</li>   <li>● Take note of the duration of the transition period</li> <li>● Take note if local actors were involved in the planning</li> <li>● We want to see how different transition types may give different sustainability outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Intervention Description</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What kind of public health intervention</li> <li>● Scale (pilot, district-wide, national)</li> <li>● Who implemented it originally</li> <li>● What systems were involved (government, community, NGO running in parallel)</li> <li>● This will help contextualise the sustainability ideas</li> </ul>
<b>Sustainability Outcome</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Did the services continue after handover? How long...</li> <li>● Was the quality maintained</li> <li>● Was coverage reduced</li> <li>● Was it integrated into government policy or routine</li> <li>● Did the local organisation have autonomy over it</li>   <li>● Just put a note if the paper doesn't assess post-handover outcomes</li> </ul>
<b>Enablers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Early transition planning</li> <li>● Joint ownership between INGO and local organisation</li> <li>● Long-term donor alignment</li> <li>● Financial capacity strengthening</li> <li>● Leadership continuity</li> <li>● Community engagement</li> <li>● Clear governance structures</li> <li>● Government buy-in</li>   <li>● Note if an enabler is described as structural, relational, financial, political, or organised (for thematic categories later)</li> </ul>

<b>Barriers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short funding periods</li> <li>• Weak financial management systems</li> <li>• Power differences between the INGO and the local partner</li> <li>• Lack of trust</li> <li>• Political instability</li> <li>• Staff turnover</li> <li>• Parallel systems are not integrated into national structures</li>   <li>• Again, categorise where possible, like the enablers section</li> </ul>
<b>Model or Frameworks</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Were any models mentioned or used</li> <li>• Was there a phased model</li> <li>• Any capacity transfer frameworks mentioned</li> <li>• Sustainability checklist</li> <li>• Was there no formal model (informal or ad hoc transition)</li> </ul>
<b>Recommendations from the Study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lessons learned</li> <li>• Suggested improvements</li> <li>• Policy recommendations</li> <li>• Recommendations for donors or INGOs</li> </ul>
<b>Quality/Limitations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small sample size</li> <li>• No long-term follow-up</li> <li>• Only INGO perspectives</li> <li>• No local voices</li> <li>• Weak evaluation design</li> </ul>
<b>Relevance to our study</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just rate the information you've gathered from the paper on a scale of 1-10, how useful it will be for our literature review/adherence to the question</li> </ul>

## Appendix 5 | Interview Question Guide

### Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. This study explores the enablers and barriers to effective and sustainable transitions of public health interventions from international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) to local organisations.

We are interested in your experiences and perspectives. There are no right or wrong answers, and all responses will be treated confidentially and anonymised in reporting.

### Consent

Before beginning, participants were asked to provide verbal consent for participation and for the interview to be recorded for transcription purposes. Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or withdraw at any time.

### 1 - Participant Background

1. Can you briefly describe your role and your involvement in the transition or handover process?
  - *Position at the time*
  - *Length of involvement*
  - *Level of decision-making authority*
  - *Key responsibilities during the handover*

### 2 - Description of the Handover Process

2. Can you describe the transition or handover process you were involved in
  - *Was the transition planned or driven by external timelines?*
  - *Duration of the transition period*
  - *Who initiated the decision to exit?*
  - *When were local organisations or authorities involved?*
  - *Was the government involved?*
  - *Was there a formal exit or sustainability plan?*
  - *How clear were the transition objectives?*

### 3 - Enablers of Effective and Sustainable Transitions

3. From your experience, what factors contributed to the transition being effective or sustainable?
  - *Early transition planning*
  - *Clarity of timelines and communication*
  - *Defined roles and responsibilities*
  - *Financial arrangements (e.g., donor funding)*
  - *Level of trust between organisations*
  - *Community ownership*
  - *Government engagement or policy support*
  - *Staff confidence in delivering the handover*
4. Which of these factors were particularly important?
  - *Were any factors underestimated at the start?*

#### **4 - Capacity Building and Support**

5. What kind of technical, financial, or capacity-building support was provided to the local organisation?
  - *Systems transferred (e.g., financial, HR)*
  - *Nature of funding withdrawal (gradual vs abrupt)*
  - *Ongoing mentorship vs short-term training*
  - *Training or workshops to support transition*

#### **5 - Barriers and Challenges**

6. What were the main challenges or barriers encountered during the transition?
  - *Short funding cycles*
  - *Resource gaps or delays*
  - *Staff turnover*
  - *Power imbalances*
  - *Policy or regulatory barriers*
7. How were these challenges addressed, if at all?
  - *Could any have been mitigated earlier?*

#### **6 - Post-Handover Outcomes**

8. To your knowledge, what happened after the handover? To what extent were activities sustained?
  - *Continuation of service delivery*
  - *Maintenance of quality*
  - *Changes in scale*
  - *Preparedness of the local organisation*
  - *Unintended consequences*
  - *Post-exit monitoring or follow-up*

#### **7 - Recommendations**

9. Based on your experience, what would you recommend to INGOs or donors designing future exit strategies?
  - *Key priorities*
  - *Common mistakes to avoid*
  - *Factors often underestimated*
  - *Requirements for a sustainable transition*

#### **8 - Closing**

10. Is there anything else you would like to add that is important for understanding effective and sustainable transitions?

#### **Closing Statement**

Thank you for your time and insights. Your contributions are much appreciated and essential in informing practical recommendations for improving future handover processes.

## Appendix 6 | Development of Thematic Framework

<b>Literature-Informed Theme</b>	<b>Description (Initial)</b>	<b>Refined Interview Theme</b>	<b>How it Evolved</b>
Exit Planning & Transition Design	Timing and structure of handover processes	Exit Planning & Sustainability	Expanded to include how early design decisions influence long-term sustainability outcomes.
Capacity Building	Development of organisational and technical capacity	Capacity Building	Retained but broadened to distinguish between one-off training and included continuous capacity development.
Financial Sustainability	Funding continuity and dependency	Funding Conditionality	Refined to show how funding structures (e.g., flexibility timelines) actively shape transition processes.
Partnership Dynamics	Relationships between INGOs and local actors	Power Dynamics	Narrowed to focus more explicitly on decision-making authority and structural inequalities.
Community Ownership	Local participation and engagement	Community & Stakeholder Partnerships	Expanded to include broader stakeholder relationships (e.g., government, communities, and partners).
Monitoring & Evaluation	Tracking and learning from programmes	Implementation & Evaluation	Refined to reflect practical delivery, monitoring, and post-exit sustainability challenges.

## Appendix 7 | Participation Information Sheet

### Interview Information Sheet

#### [Review of sustainable handover of public health interventions from INGOs to local organisations]

[Eve Horsman, Elizabeth Freeney, Aissata Diop, Nadia Haroon, Margaret Aigbekaen]

[Department of Education, LSTM]

#### Information for participants

Thank you for considering participating in this interview, which will take place in February/March 2026. This information sheet outlines the purpose of the study and describes your involvement and rights as a participant, if you agree to take part.

##### 1. What is the research about?

This study aims to explore the sustainability of public health programmes, following their handover from international NGOs to local organisations. It seeks to identify key factors contributing to long-term programme success, examine challenges faced during transitions, and critically evaluate existing handover models. Insights from this interview will help to generate an evidence-based best practice guide for future programme handovers.

##### 2. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. If you do decide to take part, we will ask you to sign a consent form, which you can sign and return in advance of the interview, which will take place on Microsoft Teams.

##### 3. What will my involvement be?

You will be invited to take part in an interview discussing your experience and knowledge of handovers between international non-governmental organisations and local authorities that you have been involved in or are familiar with, aiming to understand the factors that contributed to the success or challenges of these projects. The interview will include approximately [number] questions and will be conducted in a semi-structured format, allowing you to elaborate freely on topics where you have more to share. It will last around 30-45 minutes and will be facilitated by one interviewer, with a scribe present to take notes.

##### 4. How do I withdraw from the study?

You can withdraw from the study at any point until April, when we will begin analysis of the data, without having to give a reason. If any questions during the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to answer them. Withdrawing from the study will not affect you. If you withdraw from the study, we will not retain the information you have given thus far, unless you are happy for us to do so.

##### 5. What will my information be used for?

We will use the collected information to produce a presentation for Action for Hunger and aim to publish a brief to guide sustainable handovers, which may help to inform future research.

**6. Will my taking part and my data be kept confidential? Will it be anonymised?**

The records from this study will be kept as confidentially as possible. Only the five researchers listed above and our university coach, Dr Ian Maddison, will have access to the files and any audio tapes. Your data will be anonymised – your name will not be used in any reports or publications resulting from the study. All digital files, transcripts and summaries will be given codes and stored separately from any names or other direct identification of participants. Any hard copies of research information will be kept in locked files at all times.

**Limits to confidentiality:** confidentiality will be maintained as far as it is possible, unless you tell us something which implies that you or someone you mention might be in significant danger of harm and unable to act for themselves; in this case, we may have to inform the relevant agencies of this, but we would discuss this with you first.

**8. Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has undergone ethics review in accordance with the LSTM Research Ethics Policy.

**10. What if I have a question or complaint?**

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Eve Horsman, at 597113@lstmed.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the conduct of this research, please contact the LSTM Research Ethics Committee Chair via [lstmrec@lstmed.ac.uk](mailto:lstmrec@lstmed.ac.uk)

If you are happy to take part in this study, please sign the consent sheet attached.

## Appendix 8 | Participation Consent form

### Interview Consent Form

#### CONSENT FORM

[Review of sustainable handover of public health interventions from INGOs to local organisations]

[Eve Horsman, Elizabeth Freeney, Aissata Diop, Nadia Haroon, Margaret Aigbekaen]

#### **PARTICIPATION IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY IS VOLUNTARY**

Please sign the form and email it back at any point before the day of the interview.

I have read and understood the study information sheet. I have been able to ask questions about the study, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.	YES / NO
I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study and understand that I can refuse to answer questions and that I can withdraw from the study at any time up until April, without having to give a reason.	YES / NO
I agree to the interview being audio-recorded	YES / NO
I agree to the interview being video recorded, using the function on Microsoft Teams	YES / NO
I understand that the information I provide will be used for a best practice report and publication by Action for Hunger, and that the information will be anonymised.	YES / NO
I agree that my (anonymised) information can be quoted in research outputs.	YES / NO
I understand that any personal information that can identify me, such as my name and address, will be kept confidential and not shared with anyone beyond the study team.	YES / NO
I permit the (anonymised) information I provide to be deposited in a data archive so that it may be used for future research.	YES / NO

Please retain a copy of this consent form.

Participant name:

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer name:

Signature: M.Aigbekaen Date 10.03.26

For information, please contact: Eve Horsman, at [597113@lstm.ac.uk](mailto:597113@lstm.ac.uk)

## Appendix 9 | Participant Context Cards

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 1</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Senior Programme Manager / Research &amp; Implementation Lead</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> International Research Consortium / NGO Collaboration</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> Multi-country, low- and middle-income settings</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Involved in designing and implementing transition processes from programme outset, with sustainability built in from the start.</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> Research programme → community-led ownership and continuation</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> Embedding sustainability from outset; capacity building; community ownership</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> Donor restrictions on long-term staffing; funding limitations; partial sustainability outcomes</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 2</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Programme Manager (Academic/Research Institution, UK-based)</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> Academic/Research Institution</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> Sub-Saharan Africa &amp; South Asia</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Multi-country research consortia with local partner-led implementation from the outset. Continuous local ownership rather than formal handover, with continuity through follow-on funding.</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> Research consortium → local partner-led continuation</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> Governance in informal settlements; climate adaptation; participatory research</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> External funding dependency; no structured transition; staff turnover; COVID cuts; political and environmental disruptions</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 3</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Consultant in Public Health &amp; Evidence-Based Healthcare</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> INGO</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> Lower-middle income country</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Supported a transition of programme responsibilities to local government organisations; not the primary lead but acted as a visible figurehead with strong backing from another staff member.</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> INGO-led public health programme transitioning → government-owned and government-managed service delivery</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> Identifying stakeholders, understanding political and power dynamics, and culturally sensitive communication.</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> Donor-driven timelines and decisions, and ensuring continuity and ownership of programmes within government structures post-handover.</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 4</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Country Director/Technical Officer</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> International NGO</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> West Africa</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Led multiple handovers focused on health system strengthening, integrating Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care training and quality improvement programmes into national institutions</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> INGO → government institutions and professional bodies (Ministry of Health, Medical College, Nursing Council)</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> training; health worker capacity building; curriculum and CPD integration; quality improvement and maternal death surveillance</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> Misaligned financial incentives; weak NGO-government coordination; slow government buy-in; staff turnover; high dependency on external funding; weak institutional structures for training, lack of ownership post-project</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 5</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Handover Programme Manager</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> International NGO</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> Global</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Led and advised on multiple exit processes across full organisational closure, country office localisation, and donor withdrawal contexts</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> INGO → local NGO; programme closure; country office localisation; donor withdrawal</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> Managing exits and transitions; sustainable handovers; local ownership; responsible and ethical closure</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> Limited funding for post-exit evaluation; staff retention during organisational closure; emotional impact of transitions on staff and partners; Power imbalances in decision-making (top-down exit decisions)</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Key Informant 6</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Role:</b> Health Systems &amp; Policy Consultant</li> <li>• <b>Organisation Type:</b> International NGO/ Consultancy</li> <li>• <b>Region:</b> Middle East</li> <li>• <b>Handover Experience:</b> Observational and advisory role across multiple INGO-to-government transitions</li> <li>• <b>Type of Transition:</b> INGO-led programme → government and local health system</li> <li>• <b>Key Focus:</b> Health system strengthening; service transition</li> <li>• <b>Key Challenges:</b> Funding cuts; limited system capacity; weak coordination; planning-implementation gap</li> </ul>

### Key Informant 7

- **Role:** Researcher/Programme Evaluator
- **Organisation Type:** International NGO/ Academic Institution
- **Region:** Sub-Saharan Africa
- **Handover Experience:** Researcher and evaluator on a multi-country TB programme; involved in designing community engagement and partnership structures with sustainability built in from the outset
- **Type of Transition:** INGO-led research programme → community-led advocacy; local institutional ownership
- **Key Focus:** Community ownership and co-creation; government and NTP partnership; policy embedding; capacity strengthening via local leadership
- **Key Challenges:** Short funding cycles; structural North-South power imbalances; hierarchical deference undermining local voice; volunteer dependence without long-term support

### Key Informant 8

- **Role:** Nutrition Cluster Coordinator/Handover Specialist
- **Organisation Type:** International NGO
- **Region:** Central American, South-Central Asia, East Africa
- **Handover Experience:** Led multiple programme transitions and closures across emergency and development contexts; developed their own phased transition framework
- **Type of Transition:** INGO/UN → national government (Ministry of Health); INGO → national NGO; full programme closure
- **Key Focus:** post-departure backstopping; identifying specialist 'closer' staff; shadowing; binding agreements
- **Key Challenges:** Short timelines (funding-driven); staff vulnerability (especially women, unqualified workers); internal bureaucratic delays; community disconnection

## Appendix 10 | Original Terms of Reference



### Client Project Proposal Template

LSTM Consultancy Project Proposal Template	
<b>Organisation and Department</b>	Action Against Hunger UK, Health and Nutrition department
<b>Project working title</b>	Review of sustainable handover of public health interventions from INGOs to local organisations
<b>Background:</b> (Two short paragraphs). In the first paragraph, please provide a brief description of your organisation and its objectives. In the second paragraph, please provide a brief introduction to the topic to be addressed by the project. Why is the organisation interested? Why is the subject itself interesting?	<p>Recognised as a world leader in the fight against malnutrition, Action Against Hunger has pursued its vision of a world without hunger for more than four decades, combating hunger in emergencies of conflict, natural disaster, and chronic food insecurity. Action Against Hunger saves lives and tackles the consequences and underlying causes of hunger for people and communities in need, from crisis to sustainability.</p> <p>Action Against Hunger has partnered with local and national groups for over 45 years, including governments and communities, to combat hunger and malnutrition and is committed to strengthening localised approaches, recognising the growing capacity of local and national actors to lead efforts toward a hunger-free world. The shift toward Localisation is essential for achieving sustainable development and humanitarian responses. Localisation reduces dependency on external actors, builds local resilience, and strengthens institutional capacity to tackle hunger and malnutrition. It is therefore essential to generate actionable insights that support resilient, locally led health systems beyond the lifespan of external aid and identify the key factors that ensure long-term success and community ownership, as well as examining the enablers and barriers to effective transitions.</p>
<b>Question:</b> (One or two sentences). What is the motivating question? What is it, specifically, that your organisation would like to know?	<p>What are the enablers and barriers of effective and sustainable transitions of public health interventions from INGOs to local organisations</p> <p>By analysing real-world examples across diverse contexts, AAH seeks to generate evidence-based recommendations to guide INGOs, donors, and local stakeholders in designing sustainable exit strategies that promote resilient, locally led health systems</p>
<b>Objective:</b> (Short paragraph). Please explain what you hope to get out of the answer and how you may use the students' work to advance organisational objectives.	<p>The main objectives will be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To identify key factors that contribute to the sustainability of public health interventions after handover from INGOs to local organisations.</li> <li>● To examine the challenges and barriers faced by both INGOs and local organisations during the transition process.</li> <li>● To assess the effectiveness of existing handover models and strategies used in different contexts.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● To develop a set of best practices that can guide future handovers in public health programming.</li> <li>● To generate evidence-based recommendations for INGOs, donors, and local stakeholders to support resilient, locally led health systems post-transition</li> </ul>
<p><b>Methodology:</b> How the students are expected to answer the question. E.g., desk research, interviews, surveys, review of internal documents, etc. If you wish the students to define the methodology, please say so.</p>	<p>A combination of a comprehensive literature review with mixed-methods data collection—including interviews, focus groups and case studies can be used.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● A comprehensive review of existing literature on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ INGO exit strategies</li> <li>○ Case studies of successful/unsuccessful handovers</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Qualitative Methods to understand why identified projects were successful/unsuccessful <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)/FGDs: With INGO staff, local NGO leaders, government officials, and community representatives.</li> <li>○ Document Analysis: Review project reports, MOUs, and transition and exit plans</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Contact:</b> The name and contact information (email address) of the person within your organisation who will be responsible for liaising with the students.</p>	<p>Alexandra Rutishauser-Perera  Director of Nutrition and Health  <a href="mailto:A.RutishauserPerera@actionagainsthunger.org.uk">A.RutishauserPerera@actionagainsthunger.org.uk</a></p> <p>Mthulisi Dube  Senior Nutrition Advisor  <a href="mailto:m.dube@actionagainsthunger.org.uk">m.dube@actionagainsthunger.org.uk</a></p>

## Appendix 11 | Revised Terms of Reference

The original Terms of Reference were refined to work with data availability and the scope of the study. The objective relating to the assessment of specific handover models and strategies was not included as a standalone part due to limited comparative evidence. Similarly, case study analysis and document review of internal materials was not conducted as primary methods due to access and time limitations. The study instead focused on synthesising literature and practitioner perspectives to identify key enablers and barriers to sustainable handovers.

<b>Component</b>	<b>Revised Approach</b>
Aim	To critically evaluate the factors, challenges, and strategies influencing the sustainability of public health interventions following their transition from international NGOs to local organisations, and to develop evidence-informed best-practice recommendations for future handovers.
Objective 1	Identify key factors contributing to sustainable handovers
Objective 2	Examine challenges and barriers in handover processes
Objective 3	Analyse practitioner experiences of handovers through key informant interviews
Objective 4	Develop practical, evidence-based recommendations for future handover strategies
Literature Review	Retained as a key method to synthesise existing evidence
Key Informant Interviews	Retained as a key method for real-world experiences
Case Studies	Not included as a standalone method
Document Analysis	Not included due to limited access to internal materials
Assessment of Models	Addressed indirectly through thematic analysis rather than formal comparison

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