

# From Donor-run to Country-owned Transitioning Programs

*Development programs must inevitably transition from being donor funded to country owned. However, such a transition is not easy, requiring all stakeholders to be committed to the sustainability of the program and being aware of what such transition entails.*

Low and middle income countries receive funding for development programs from private sources such as foundations and corporations. These development programs seek to improve the health outcomes and improve the overall quality of life of the country, with an eye to achieving long-term sustainability. However, donor agencies and development partners generally commit to a finite engagement within a country or state on any particular program and depart after a given time period, leaving the recipient government to its own devices. Given their time-bound nature, the transition of donor run programs to country-owned health delivery platforms is essential for the sustainability and long-term impact of health programs.

The necessity of the eventual transition of donor run development programs to country ownership is predicated on the notion that the natural owner of development programs is the country itself. The Comprehensive Development Framework proposed by the World Bank in 1999 also promotes the need for country ownership of development programs. The finite engagement of donors corresponds to their role in the development sphere: to provide the resources and expertise for programs with the goal that they will become implementable by the recipient government by the time of transition. The transition process is intended to facilitate a smooth transfer of the program's management, implementation, and 'ownership' to the intended host country recipient, and should thus be well managed.

The allocation of effort and resources for achieving successful transition is in the best interests of all parties. First, it ensures that gains are not lost in the transition and that key aspects of the program or related agenda are not abandoned altogether. Second, a well-managed transition is critical to the legacy of the private donor. Finally, a well-executed transition reduces disturbances that implementing partners and other stakeholders may face as the shift occurs. Robust transition strategies will have means in place to mitigate these disturbances when they do occur.

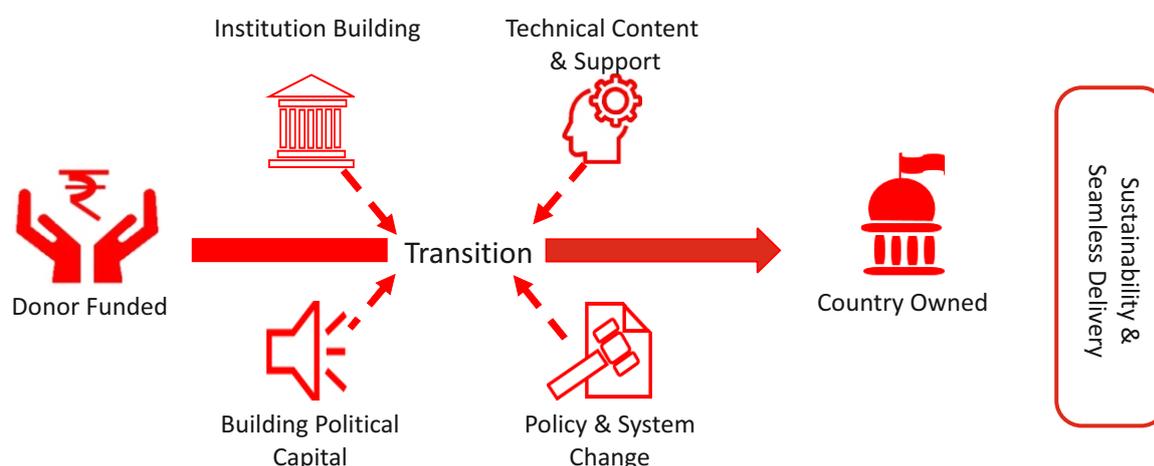
## **What does transition entail?**

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The term 'transition' refers to the shift in managerial and/ or financial responsibilities from a private donor to any country-owned health delivery platform, such as the government, the end user community groups, private sector or other development partners, or any of these in combination. Complete transition occurs when there is both managerial and financial handover of responsibilities to the health delivery platform of the recipient country. In a partial transition of a development program, certain responsibilities remain with the private donor, often for a finite amount of time but at times more indefinitely.

The flexible nature of a partial transition underscores the fact that transition need not (and often perhaps should not) occur all at once. Transition can take place over a period of several months or even years, depending on the needs and capacities of the donor, recipient government, and various stakeholders. Transition may comprise multiple phases, each with timings that meet the needs of key actors. It may be in the best interest of the stakeholders to, for example, transition services to the hands of the government in several batches over the course of few years. The time lag between each batch allows each to be used as a learning opportunity for all stakeholders, who can apply those learnings before the next phase of the transition.

### Elements of an effective transition



In addition to a simple handover of responsibilities, transition may entail, where necessary, the building of capacities of the government itself and other implementing partners and institutions prior to the actual handover. The financial capacity of the government to absorb costs during transition must be assessed, and gaps filled or the program modified to correspond to the updated budget. Strengthened health systems and sustainable funding become increasingly important as donor agencies withdraw from a particular context. The capacities of communities, non-governmental organizations, and government entities must be adequate to handle the responsibilities associated with transition and post-transition program administration and service delivery. Thus a key aspect of transition that must not be overlooked is to enhance these capacities.

### Challenges to transition

Donor agencies face challenges related to the eventual transition process from the very beginning of their engagement until sometime after the program has been fully transitioned into a country-owned program. Preparing and executing a transition plan may be particularly challenging for donor agencies who are historically concerned with technical solutions, health metrics and indicators, and for whom the realm of capacity building and engagement with the government may be uncharted territory. Oftentimes, challenges appear in the following realms: relationship building, planning, communication, and maintaining results and quality.

*Relationship building:* A strong relationship with the government and other actors is necessary from the initiation of a donor agency's engagement, if the development program must eventually transition to the

hands of these actors. Challenges for donor agencies arise owing to the number of actors and stakeholders involved (political actors, bureaucrats, implementing partners, developing partners, technocrats, etc.) and the length of time during which these relationships must be cultivated and maintained. Engagement with the government and political actors must also be mindful of political alliances and when possible, remain neutral to avoid alienating any actors or parties.

*Planning:* A plan for transition can be difficult to formulate, especially in contexts where there may be rapidly evolving political environments and weak state health leadership. Donor agencies must remain flexible during periods of uncertainty, while remaining clear-eyed about the ultimate goal of country ownership. The transition plan may have to be modified several times throughout a donor agency's engagement in a state, and periodic re-evaluation can help to recalibrate efforts. Additionally, the plan for transition may encompass changes in certain aspects of the program. A spirit of flexibility is needed here as well to acknowledge and accept this and manage expectations without abandoning the transition plan altogether.

Donor agencies may be tempted to focus early efforts on the improvement of health indicators, leaving a plan for transition to be determined closer to the time of actual handover to the country partners. Considering the building of a robust, effective, and efficient program at the same time as a future transition plan is a difficult balancing act with which donor agencies must contend.

*Communication:* Donor agencies should aspire to facilitate the working together of various actors and stakeholders involved in the development program

and to efficiently share information and knowledge among them. However, donor agencies often struggle to engage both high-level and lower-level stakeholders reliably and adequately. Especially during the transition phase, it is critical that the actors are aware of the transition plan and any modifications made to it, particularly as it pertains to their roles within the program.

*Maintaining results and quality:* While the transition is taking place, and for some time afterwards, governments and donor agencies may see dips and declines in results and quality of the program outputs. This is a major challenge of the transition process, and can occur despite the best-laid plans. As it is impossible to predict each and every factor that could cause some slippage in the outputs, donor agencies are tasked with keeping an eye on results and quality even after the transition so that issues can be spotted quickly and addressed appropriately. This will help to ensure the implementation of a clear and positive government program.

### **No perfect approach**

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Any approach to transition must be tailored to fit the country context and complex ecosystem in which the development program is taking place, and take into account the policy environment and key stakeholders in the country. As this context and environment is ever changing, a spirit of flexibility must be adopted and maintained throughout the transition process. The context-dependent nature of the transition task means that a 'one size fits all' strategy cannot be applied. Donor agencies must determine how best to approach transition on a case-by-case basis. There are several key reasons for this. First, there exists considerable variability in countries' commitment to development programs which may determine the path that the transition should take. More committed governments may already be heavily involved with the development program even prior to the commencement of transition. The commitment of government entities may also waiver with changing political and social tides and shifting development needs and priorities.

Second, the priorities and capacities of donor agencies differ, and must be taken into account when creating a transition strategy. In a time when economies of donor agencies are shrinking or remaining stagnant despite growing need for international aid, donor agencies must be discriminatory as they make decisions about where,

how, and for how long to engage. As their priorities and capacities change, transition plans must be adjusted accordingly.

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Finally, the way in which the donor run program was initially implemented more or less dictates how transition must be managed. For example, larger development programs may require more extensive and deliberately paced transition processes, while a simpler handover may suffice for smaller programs. Additionally, the level of involvement of the government in the program during the period of donor run administration determines the starting point for transition.

### **Best practices**

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The key to successful transition is the existence of a strong foundation of support and expression of ownership from the government, such that there is a renewed energy in a particular program during and after transition. In a sense, the task for donor agencies is thus to foster this foundation of support and entice government entities to desire and take ownership of development programs.

There are several measures that donor agencies can take to foster a country or government's sense of ownership. If donor agencies are to be cognizant of their own responsibilities with respect to transition, they must ensure that several key pieces are in place before and during the transition process. These target areas help to ensure not only government support but also government capacity, maximizing the possibility of success. There are four main components of an efficient and sustainable transition that donor agencies must prioritize to ensure the legacy of the program.

*Technical content:* Technical content includes materials that add to the overall knowledge base that informs actions. Leaving behind a trove of standard operating procedures, guidelines, training materials, course materials, and case studies

