

Praxis Note No. 70

# Working at the Sharp End of Programme Closure: EveryChild's Responsible Exit Principles

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INTRAC

“How can a UK-based international development charity have most impact?” The question of aid effectiveness has provoked much organisational soul-searching recently as part of the ‘[doing development differently](#)’ debate but it is also a question that EveryChild had started to ask itself in 2008. The answer that emerged for us was a radical one: in order to achieve greater impact for vulnerable children, we decided to gradually close all of our international programmes and to transfer our organisational assets to a new organisation called *Family for Every Child* (an international alliance of national organisations which we had helped to create).

The decision to close all of our international programmes then triggered a second question: “How can we ensure that we close programmes in a responsible way?” This Praxis Note describes how EveryChild went about answering this question from a practical perspective, and we hope that the issues covered will be useful for anyone interested in programme cycle management, and particularly for anyone working at the “sharp end” of programme and partnership closure.

## Introduction

In 2011, EveryChild played a key role in establishing an international alliance of national civil society organisations with a proven track record in child care and protection called *Family for Every Child*. The purpose of this alliance was to give national organisations a platform for sharing and amplifying the expertise of its members through joined-up policy, advocacy, research and practice exchange.

EveryChild believed that handing over power to national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working directly with communities would result in greater scale and reach than could be achieved by a single international non-governmental organisation (INGO) working in isolation. As a result, in 2012 we took the decision to put our money where our mouth was, and to cease funding international programmes with partners and Country Offices as they came to the end of their project lifecycles, and to shift our funding to the alliance instead.

What this decision meant in practical terms was that all of EveryChild’s country offices and partner programmes would close, and all of EveryChild’s programme staff would be made redundant within the space of four years.

### About EveryChild

EveryChild is an international development charity working to stop children growing up vulnerable and alone. Working with local partners we keep children safe when they are alone and at risk. We protect children in danger of ending up on their own by keeping families together. And we get children back into a safe and caring family, wherever we can.

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## A principled approach

EveryChild had closed a number of partnerships and country offices in the past, and while some of these exits had gone smoothly, others had been more challenging.

### Learning from painful past experiences in Peru

The closure of EveryChild's office in Peru in 2010-11 was a particularly painful experience, as we attempted to close an office which had been operating for 15 years within the space of just 3 months, and to hand the remaining project activities over to a local NGO instead. The main reason for the closure was financial, as we needed to make substantial budget cuts following the financial crash, and Peru was proving very hard to raise funds for in-country as donors had shifted their funding away from the region.

However, because the process was rushed and underfinanced, the exit ended up dragging on and required additional money for legal fees and staff time.

This was one of the pivotal experiences that shaped our understanding of the damage caused on both sides by attempting a hasty exit, and this led us to adopt a very different approach to exit from 2012 onwards.

We had also heard from partners how previous exits by other INGOs/funding partners tended to happen very quickly (often because they were driven by cash-flow issues), and that few organisations invested in a responsible exit at all.

When the decision to close all 18 of our remaining Country Offices and programmes was taken, we realised that we urgently needed to consider not just **when** to close the partnerships, but also **how** to close them. We therefore developed three simple "responsible exit principles" to guide this process, which were:

1. As far as possible, **ensure the work we have done is sustainable** – this could be continuation of services or lasting changes in children's lives.
2. **Ensure that exit does not have a detrimental effect** on the children and communities where we work.
3. As far as possible, **ensure that expertise and momentum for change in the country is not lost.**

These principles provided a broad basis that would guide decisions and discussions about exit with partners and country offices.

These were agreed by EveryChild's Management Team and our Board to ensure that there was cross-organisational buy-in before the exits began, and they were then shared with partners and country office staff.

### Exit criteria

In addition to the "responsible exit principles", we also developed a number of "exit criteria" in October 2012 in order to inform decisions about exactly **when** to withdraw from each partnership so that any potential negative impact on children or communities where we worked would be limited.

The criteria included:

- Honour our commitments, even if not in writing, where partners have

reasonable grounds for expecting something to happen and have made plans based on that expectation.

- Consider the sustainability of the partner organisation but recognise that addressing this may be beyond EveryChild's remit and capability.

In practice, this meant that EveryChild would complete all of its existing projects and fulfil its written and verbal commitments to partners with only a couple of exceptions, such as when we decided to exit from Ghana after a pilot project ended instead of developing a longer-term partnership.

Some of the criteria were in tension with each other, so we had to consider timeframes for exit carefully on a case-by-case basis.

### **The unwritten principle**

Between 2014-15 EveryChild participated in a year-long Action Learning Set on programme exit alongside Oxfam GB, British Red Cross, WWF-UK and Sightsavers which was coordinated by INTRAC, and it was only when reflecting on our responsible exit process during one of these meetings that we realised that EveryChild had adopted a fourth unwritten principle for responsible exit. This was to ensure continuity between Country Office staff/partner staff and their existing point of contact within the EveryChild UK programmes' team wherever possible. Feedback from overseas staff and partners had taught us that protecting existing working relationships would sustain trust and institutional knowledge about the project, and minimise disruption to partners and communities by extension.

### **Partner involvement**

The Programme Management Team debated whether EveryChild's partners could meaningfully be involved in discussions about whether or not to end our country programmes.

Our Partnership Policy stated that we should "*provide opportunities through consultations and learning events for partners to influence EveryChild's policy, strategy and approach*" and "*give serious consideration to partners' perspectives on options and choices when decisions are to be made*".

However, as the decision to exit had already been taken at corporate level, we realised that our partners' perspectives would not have influenced the decision so consulting them at this stage would have been tokenistic at best.

Instead, we decided that the best way to enable our partners to meaningfully engage in the process was to invite them to help develop tailored exit objectives and exit indicators for each programme. These enabled EveryChild and our partners to have a common vision for exit, but also to articulate organisational priorities on both sides e.g. "*for partner x to identify what's needed for community based structures to continue beyond exit*" and "*for EveryChild to continue forwarding potential alternative funding opportunities for partner x*".

This provided an exit "road map" to guide how the exit took place, and how we would know when we had arrived at our final destination.

## Walking the talk: An example of how we applied responsible exit principles in Moldova

EveryChild Moldova was established in 2001, and built on the work of the European Children's Trust UK which was first established in Moldova in 1995. As a result of its work, the number of children in institutions dropped dramatically - over 7,000 children moved into family-based alternative care; 15 residential institutions were closed; there are now 1,200 trained Moldovan social workers (at least one in each community) from a base-line of zero; 105 foster carers are now employed by local authorities; and policy and legislation have been strengthened.

As EveryChild Moldova grew in capacity, experience and credibility over the years, we were able to localise our office there, and a new Moldovan organisation called Partnerships for Every Child (P4EC) was officially launched in April of 2012. Today P4EC continues to have a strong presence as an important partner of the Government of Moldova, an active advocate for systems reform, a child welfare service provider, and a child protection capacity building body.

EveryChild partnered with P4EC from 2012 onwards, and we had originally planned to exit from Moldova in March 2014, once the remaining projects there had come to an end. However, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) approached EveryChild and offered us a one year cost-extension for work with P4EC in Moldova from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2013 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014, based on the strength of their work.

In theory, this should not have been possible because it would have meant extending our original Moldova exit timeframe by at least four months.

However, using our responsible exit principles for reference, EveryChild's management team discussed whether to accept the additional funding, given its knock-on implications for exit timeframes and for EveryChild staff capacity, as this would require further support from the programmes, finance and fundraising teams. Our decision was to accept USAID's proposal even though it meant changing our original exit timeframe, as this would enable P4EC to continue its excellent work and to increase its long-term sustainability whilst strengthening its fundraising capacity which met all three responsible exit criteria.

We also supported P4EC to make an independent multi-million application to USAID for a new 3.5 year project which was successful, and means that they are now able to maintain their work with vulnerable children independently of EveryChild.

## Key lessons

### What worked well?

The three principles for responsible exit were **simple and flexible** enough to be applied in different contexts, and provided an extremely effective framework for decision making.

Having exit principles helped our partners to understand the **rationale** behind decision making and provided **reassurances** that EveryChild would not suddenly withdraw. They also provided EveryChild staff in the UK (including those that were not directly involved in exits) with reassurance that this was a carefully managed process, and we found that they could be highly **motivational**.

Having **consistent** exit **principles** which were applied to all partnerships reduced the risk of some partners being treated “differently”. However, it was also useful that EveryChild was able to retain some **flexibility** around final exit dates, to allow partners to capitalise on new funding opportunities and/or to accommodate project delays.

The combination of having **overarching** sustainable **exit principles** and exit tools that included **individual exit plans** drafted in consultation with partners worked well, and allowed partners to identify their own key priorities during exit.

**Agreeing** the responsible exit **principles together** as a Programme Management Team within Head Office worked well, as the members of the team owned them, understood them, and could explain them to our partners.

Having access to **unrestricted funding** meant that we were able to **resource** our exits properly as they often required funds for additional capacity-building. For example, we provided intensive leadership and monitoring and evaluation training to Community Based Organisations in Malawi as well as micro-grants and final legacy grants. Having sufficient resources meant that we could provide an average of 2 years **notice** of exit to partners, and to extend projects slightly if needed.

### What didn't work so well?

**Differing priorities** within EveryChild meant that it took a little time to get cross-organisational buy in for the “responsible exit principle approach”.

**Changing messages** about levels of support for EveryChild office localisation led to some confusion and residual frustration from Country Offices that had begun to localise before the “responsible exit principles” were introduced in 2012. Similarly changing messages about opportunities for existing EveryChild partners to join the new alliance confused many partners.

This was because as the alliance evolved and its membership strategy developed over time, it decided to take a slower and more controlled approach to recruiting new members than originally anticipated. In order to ensure a geographical and thematic spread of members, the membership process that the alliance finally settled on was a ‘membership by invitation model’ following a detailed regional and country level scoping process in order to ensure a geographical and thematic spread of members. Instead of all of EveryChild’s partners being eligible to join as we had originally anticipated,

this meant that only a few former EveryChild partners have been able to join so far.

We consciously decided to focus on ensuring that the **work (rather than partners themselves) was sustainable**, so there was no direct reference to partner sustainability in EveryChild's "responsible exit principles". Despite this approach, **some partners believed that EveryChild was responsible for ensuring their organisational continuity** and for ensuring ongoing support for their work with children without parental care. This required further discussion in some cases, but the responsible exit indicators helped to clearly identify each organisation's responsibilities during exit.

There were only a few programme exit tools and systems in place before the "responsible exit principles" were introduced, so most of these had to be **developed from scratch**. This generated extra work initially, but the advantage was that we were able to develop a simple system that worked well for both EveryChild and partners and could adapt it quickly when needed.

### What did we learn?

1. We realised that we had missed an opportunity to fully develop our exit processes when we had developed our partnership policy and tools several years earlier.
2. The importance of discussing funding timeframes, and starting to plan for sustainability/exit right from the beginning of a new partnership was something we discovered cannot be underestimated. As a result, we are now building sustainable exit into other projects

much earlier. For example, we have helped one of our partners in Nepal called Children and Women in Social Service and Human Rights (CWISH) to develop a sustainability plan a year and a half before the end of the project, and included discussions about exit right at the start of a new three year project in Cambodia.

3. We learnt that language matters: we moved from discussing "exit" plans to "sustainability" plans in many cases, as it framed the discussion in a more positive way and better described the process from the partner's perspective.
4. It was important to "drip feed" information about exit and about the development of the alliance to partners and Country Offices at regular intervals to ensure that there was a common understanding and to keep people updated, as opposed to providing intermittent lengthy updates, which didn't work as well. Face-to-face meetings were crucial in sustaining partner and Country Office trust, and to give people a forum to ask questions which they may not have felt comfortable raising via email or skype.
5. We learnt to "hope for the best but plan for the worst" when it came to exit, as they often took longer than expected, particularly Country Office closures where deregistration is dependent on slow-moving legal and national bureaucracy. We therefore decided to build in an "exit contingency" budget line to cover any unexpected additional payments or delays.

6. We discovered that exits can also be creative moments, and can generate new opportunities in terms of staff development. They can also catalyse critical thinking about development, and help people to focus on which activities will be most sustainable in the long-run rather than continuing with the status quo. For example, in Malawi EveryChild decided to carry out a situational analysis of children living on the street and then supported the Government to develop a National Strategy for Children Living on the Street, rather than developing it ourselves. This was much more sustainable in the long-run.
7. We also learnt that “responsible exit principles” can be a useful guide to wider organisational decisions. They have been used to inform decisions about redundancies within the programmes team for example, by looking at the potential knock-on impact of changing personnel on specific partners and projects, and ensuring that these were taken into account in the phased restructures of the programmes team.
8. Finally, EveryChild’s “responsible exit approach” was highly appreciated by partners, and several felt that it made us different from other donors. One former partner in Kenya commented that *“We were not taken by surprise....we have gained a lot of knowledge in terms of exit, and what we appreciated most about this grant was that it was a smooth transition and has not left us in a position of not knowing what to do next. The exit risk assessment gave us a good start on what to build on next. EveryChild is a unique organisation”*.

### Summary box

- Exit principles can provide reassurance and inspiration for partners as well as your own staff, and can help to smooth the “sharp end” of development work.
- Responsible exits matter, and developing principles can help to focus thinking and guide decision-making.
- Language also matters - it can help to refer to “sustainability” plans rather than “exit plans” to frame discussions in a positive way.
- Aim to plan for sustainability/exit from the beginning of a new partnership - even if it is only a top-line conversation initially.
- Drip-feed information about exit regularly, and build in face-to-face meetings where possible.
- Plan for the worst (including when budgeting) but hope for the best.
- If you are exiting quickly for financial reasons, then you are likely to get a very different outcome than if you adopt a managed exit over time.

## References/further reading

- Article by EveryChild's former CEO providing the rationale for the changes at EveryChild: [Broken Promises: Why Handing Over Power to Local NGOs is Empty Rhetoric](#) (Anna Feuchtwang, Guardian, 7/4/2014)
- More information about Family for Every Child can be found here: <http://www.familyforeverychild.org/>
- Report from the first Phase of a longitudinal evaluation of EveryChild's responsible exit process carried out by INTRAC is available here: <http://www.everychild.org.uk/intrac-responsible-exit-report>

A series of blogs by INTRAC consultant Rick James captures issues from this evaluation:

- [Is there such a thing as responsible exit?](#)
  - [Exit: the end of the road?](#)
  - [Which way to sustainable exit?](#)
- EveryChild participated in a year-long Action Learning Set on programme exit alongside Oxfam GB, British Red Cross, WWF-UK and Sightsavers which was coordinated by INTRAC.

The following blogs capture some of the discussions around the Exit Action Learning Set:

- [NGO exit strategies: Are principles for closing projects or ending partnerships necessary?](#)
- [The human side of exit strategy: staff care and personnel management](#)
- [Capacity building partnership relations and exit strategies.](#)

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In case of any feedback or questions on this article please feel free to [contact](#) Lucy Morris via LinkedIn: <https://uk.linkedin.com/pub/lucy-morris/27/2bb/46a>