

# Executing an Exit Strategy for International Organizations' Post-Conflict Projects<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses how international entities working in post-conflict countries can develop and implement relevant and effective exit strategies. It highlights the process to be adopted so the INGOs can disengage from their interventions related to aid provision, reconstruction and rebuilding in the post-war environment in a manner consistent with the goal of ensuring local sustainable development. The paper reviews several contextual elements before over-viewing the project management process as well as the varying elements that frames the "Exit Strategy's" dynamic – and guarantees the continuous delivery of services even when aid is withdrawn.

**Key Words:** Post-conflict countries; Exit Strategy; Service Provision; Disengagement.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Context**

When feasible, and once the conflicting parties reach an agreement, it is recommended to support INGOs in addressing the needs of the affected population. This principle could be the focus for the leader of the post-conflict project (Ahmed et al., 2018).

The project manager, working closely with other involved parties (both global and domestic), must establish and ensure the implementation of terms for a new coordination plan (Anderson, 1993). Some fundamental requirements may consist of a signed peace deal, the parties' agreement to allow free movement of people and goods in conflict zones, acknowledgement of the (rebuilt) Government's authority by the parties involved, active involvement of conflict parties' representatives in post-war planning, and an agreed-upon method by parties to resolve any breaches with an INGO acting as a potential mediator (Anderson et al., 2003; Burder, 2014; Autesserre, 2017).

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The country needs to assess its professional abilities for handling post-war projects promptly to transition into a national capacity mode for addressing post-war issues and later focusing on reconstruction and rehabilitation (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Burder, 2014).

Prolonged conflicts often lead to affected populations and institutions developing coping mechanisms, which could serve as a foundation for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts (Bano, 2012; Ahmed et al., 2018). Humanitarian workers need to highlight these mechanisms to organizations that will participate in planning and implementing economic and social recovery initiatives (Chandler, 2010).

Right after the peace agreement is signed, there should be a reassessment and agreement on the coordination mechanism for the post-war intervention project within the implementation plan (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2003). The examination of the mechanism should concentrate on linking aid with rehabilitation and reconstruction projects and programs that could be anticipated under the peace agreement framework (Burder, 2014; Autesserre, 2017).

In situations where only a portion of the nation is impacted by war, there might be planning and coordination systems in place to focus on development in regions unaffected by the conflict. These mechanisms need to be considered when planning the exit strategy (Chandler, 2010; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

## **1.2. The Choice of the Topic**

One of the most important and challenging tasks when it comes to any international development project in post-conflict countries would be to end it from the initiator / implementor's side – especially if it is an international entity (Ahmed et al., 2018). Indeed, the project manager must consider the multiple dynamics when ending a development project while working to provide the necessary guidelines, tools, equipment, and resources on how to ensure a locally led development as part of a sustainable exit strategy (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Indeed, in today's government funded organizations as well as third sector entities working on international projects are much more focused on the implication of local parties in the of the project's stages so to ensure a smooth transition and management (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). The idea is to look beyond the different technical and operational aspects of an exit strategy by reviewing the broader relationship between local and international actors (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

The topic is not a new one, however, it would be appropriate to understand the partnerships' dynamic between International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) and local Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), public administrations, etc. when it comes to exit strategies (e.g. INGOs

playing the role of an observatory actor, closing country offices, delegation process, privatization, PPPs, etc.) (Ahmed et *al.*, 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

The idea is to share some reflections regarding that matter given the ever-changing landscape of international interventionism – development in post-war environments (Burder, 2014). On another note, it is of crucial importance to review how local entities and people affected by the policies and actions of international organizations piloting such projects will accept and experience such an exit strategy (while considering their role in such a process) (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

### **1.3. Purpose of this Paper**

The purpose of this paper is to establish a context which allows the decryption of the dynamic of executing in Exit Strategy by INGOs working on post-conflict projects. By doing so, we aim to increase the available and accepted knowledge on conflict / post-conflict transitions while considering sustainable projects led by local entities benefiting from foreign assistance (in all its forms – i.e. consultancy, funding, management, etc.) (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Ahmed et *al.*, 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

The paper outlines current debates on why this change is occurring. Also, the research studies how exit strategies and transition periods impact the international actor / local party dynamic. On another note, the paper reviews the consequences of such a change. In other words, the paper reviews:

- What are exit strategies.
- Why exit strategies occur.
- The impact of each factor and element that shape the relationship between the INGOs and the local organizations.
- How to prepare for an exit strategy.
- The role of each concerned party before and after the exit strategy.
- The effectiveness of exit strategies.

## **2. Conceptual Framework of Exit Strategies & Transitions**

### **2.1. Context**

The topic of "Exit Strategies" is confusing and evades emergency, crisis, and development practitioners. Hence, disciplinary research discusses these and other questions regarding the significance of "Exit Strategies" in post-conflict countries (Ahmed et al., 2018). Scholars believe that while the term 'exit strategy' may seem appropriate for the task, it is somewhat deceptive as it only addresses one aspect of the plan (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006); hence, it could be taken to imply a fixed timeline for withdrawing from investment in a specific country, especially a post-conflict one (Gross, 2014). Therefore, it would be appropriate to explain the various prevalent themes and elements that incorporates the dynamic of this topic.

### **2.2. The Exit Strategy**

An "Exit" in a project means removing all externally sourced resources from a full program area. Essentially, a project exit can mean either removing external support from the entire project area or withdrawing support from specific communities or districts within the project area (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). It may also pertain to the conclusion of a project's funding cycle, followed by an extension through a continued recovery program or a more extended development program. Lastly, it could involve a mixture of withdrawal, extending the project or transitioning (Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

An "Exit Strategy" in a project is a detailed plan outlining the process of withdrawing resources while ensuring the program goals are still achieved in a post-conflict setting (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). In the broader perspective, the "Exit Strategy" might consist of various outcomes or backup plans that deal with unpredictable elements, like repeated droughts or the impacts of the instability of a post-conflict country (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). Contingency plans could involve preparing for additional resources in instances where complete withdrawal from project areas is not feasible.

The purpose of an Exit Strategy is not to expedite the departure - as exiting is not valuable just for the sake of it. The goal is to enhance the likelihood of achieving sustainable results for the project (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). A broader definition could be a project's "sustainability strategy" achieved through phased exits from certain project areas, complete withdrawal, or shifting to related programs in certain areas (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006).

Planning "Exit Strategies" in collaboration with implicated partners and stakeholders before closing out a project leads to improved project results and promotes dedication as well as commitment to project sustainability (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Furthermore, effective "Exit Strategies" can assist in alleviating conflict that may occur when support is withdrawn while still striving to achieve project goals (Ahmed et al., 2018). Having

"Exit Strategies" can define a sponsor's role to post-conflict countries and local partners, making it clear that their involvement is temporary and preventing misunderstandings and dependency in the future (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Ultimately, they play a crucial role in guiding relief programs through their sustainability plan or preparation for the next phase (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). On the other hand, if "Exit Strategies" are lacking, project transitions and exits are expected to be less organized (Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

### **2.3. The Transition Strategy**

A project transition refers to the shift from one form of aid and development project to another. In a post-conflict setting, it commonly signifies a shift from focusing on one form of intervention to another, often resulting in reduced allocation of resources (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). On the other hand, a project transition can also denote the switch from one kind of project to a different one (Tomasini & Van Wassenhove, 2009).

A "Transition Strategy" can be suggested as another option. It holds a functional significance, representing the shift from the conclusion of one mission to the start of activating other instruments. This involves the absorption or handover of activities by other instruments, donors, or external partners after the mission ends (Gross, 2014; Yamron, 2020).

### **2.4. The Responsible Graduation Strategy**

"Graduation" marks the conclusion of assistance - an irreversible exit from the project (Devereux *et al.*, 2016). As per some experts and professionals, "Graduation" signifies the conclusion of a project within communities or a project location. Other professionals utilized this term to explain the process of beneficiaries (or communities) completing a specific project once they have reached the desired outcomes (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). In other words, a "Graduation Strategy" outlines how a beneficiary will be smoothly transitioned out of the project without jeopardizing the project's goals for that individual, while ensuring continued progress towards those objectives (Gardner *et al.*, 2005). Similar to an "Exit Strategy," the purpose of the "Graduation Strategy" is to guarantee the sustainability of effects once the recipient has concluded their involvement in a project or intervention (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

Thus, a "Responsible" graduation strategy in post-conflict countries involves enhancing and backing up livelihoods in the process. Nevertheless, in certain post-war settings, local groups have raised objections to these claims, viewing graduation as a reason to reduce essential development funds instead of a true indication of advancement (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Burder, 2014; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017; Yamron, 2020).

## **2.5. Handing Over Projects**

At the conclusion of a project, it is possible to hand it over to a nearby collaborator (Gardner et al. 2005; Lee & Özerdem 2015; Pal et al., 2019). This frequently entails the response serving as a "bridging" function, leading to partners eventually assuming control or incorporating these tasks (Gross, 2014). Prearranged communication is essential for both the handover process and the successful execution of any subsequent mission (Ahmed et al., 2018).

## **2.6. Phasing Down Projects**

Phasing out involves slowly decreasing program activities and relying on local organizations to continue providing program benefits as the original sponsor, implementing agency, or donor decreases its resources (Oswald & Ruedin, 2012; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Phasing down is frequently an initial step before transitioning over and/or phasing out (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). This is done by gradually reducing services while maintaining a minimal presence (Gardner et al. 2005).

## **2.7. Phasing Out Projects**

"Phasing Out" can be defined as a sponsor pulling out of a program without transferring it to another entity for ongoing execution (Oswald & Ruedin, 2012).

Ideally, a project should be concluded once permanent or self-sustaining changes have been achieved, removing the need for further external support. It is understood that achieving self-sufficiency through behavior change and asset creation activities in a post-conflict setting will take a long-term investment and may not be fully achieved within the timeframe of a specific project (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017).

Programs can be planned from the beginning to instill knowledge, skills, and tangible assets within a set time frame, taking funding cycles into account for phasing out timing in the planning process (Slob & Jerve, 2008; Oswald & Ruedin, 2012).

**N.B.** Funding periods do not always align with requirements – especially in a post-war environment. Donor assistance and funding schedules could create artificial deadlines for project termination (Burder, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018).

## **2.8. Phasing Over Projects**

The third method of Exit Strategy is called "Phasing Over". In this scenario, program activities are handed off by a sponsor to local institutions or communities (Bano, 2012). In a post-conflict

project, there is a focus on building institutional capacity to ensure services can be sustained by local organizations (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). The phase out strategy is implemented in several operational sectors in post-conflict nations, where INGO personnel educate local partners to take over and manage project tasks (Lee & Özerdem 2015; Pal et al., 2019).

## **2.9. Operational Presence**

Many INGOs and international organizations use the term “Presence” to refer to a more comprehensive understanding of their function. This leads to a clearer acknowledgement of the presence and involvement of INGOs, including their entrance and departure (Ahmed et al., 2018).

## **2.10. Project Sustainability**

Certain international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) opt for using the term “Sustainability” instead of “Exit” to avoid hindering their relationship with local partners, or because they view exiting as a gradual process rather than a sudden event (Gardner et al., 2005; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

## **2.11. Project Transition**

A project's transition refers to the shift from one form of support or development project to another, according to Gardner et al. (2005). In a post-conflict context, it typically signifies a shift from focusing on one form of aid to another and typically suggests a reduction in resources (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Appe & Christopher, 2018).

## **2.12. The Lack of Exit Planning among INGOs**

INGOs, their partners, stakeholders, as well as their beneficiaries, all have motivations that work against and prevent the structuring of “Exit Planning”. Indeed, numerous implementers may understand and agree with the idea of “Exit Planning” in theory, but various exceptions make them see it as not feasible or suitable in practice (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). Exceptions frequently stem from two issues:

- **Post-conflict development is different from aid relief efforts:** Post-conflict development projects differ from disaster relief, despite appearances being deceiving. However, numerous international agencies tend to categorize every immediate requirement as a humanitarian emergency (Ahmed et al., 2018). It is important for them to consider the key distinctions between endemic poverty or natural disasters and the effects of conflict. INGOs need to be vigilant in identifying the point at which they shift from managing emergency situations to hindering the progress of sustainable solutions. The threshold is likely reached in a slow and gradual manner, occasionally obscured by pressing,

noticeable requirements (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). Another inquiry is if the organization can transition from offering relief to carrying out a development assistance model, which necessitates structural changes and an exit strategy (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006).

- **The lack of "Need" is not an Indicator of "Local Capacity"**: Numerous INGOs focus on enhancing local capabilities in post-conflict countries rather than solely offering assistance (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). If this helps the local economy, it is a big step towards achieving sustainable growth. However, what they often anticipate is the sign that shows the local systems are ready and their job is finished, which is just the absence of need (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). This is a huge flaw. Essentially, it is believed without saying that achieving a development vision by everyone will indicate local preparedness (Ahmed et al., 2018). Yet, if this assertion were true, then all governments worldwide (even in peaceful and stable conditions) would be perceived as incapable of addressing their social, environmental, health, or other issues (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017). If governments had to wait for all social issues to be resolved before receiving development assistance, they would likely never be deemed prepared. Unfortunately, INGOs do not make efforts to develop practical, time-limited strategies for leaving because they think it is impossible to eliminate the aftermath of conflict (Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

### **3. Exit Strategies: Determinants and Elements**

#### **3.1. Pre-exit Questions**

During the development of exit strategies, various questions need to be addressed (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019):

- To what extent does the post-conflict concerned community feel a sense of commitment to sustaining project activities?
- How much do project activities matter to the concerned beneficiaries?
- What is the extent of desire for the services that are being gradually replaced?
- Are local stakeholders equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out the post-conflict project activities?
- Do local entities carrying out the gradual activities have enough institutional and human resource capacity?
- Do local stakeholders implementing phased programs have the resilience to withstand shocks and changes in the post-conflict setting?



### 3.2. Types of Exit Strategies

Experts contend that international interveners have various types of "Exit Strategies" (Edelstein, 2017). Many interventions have a long withdrawal process that leaves a small force behind to increase the security or uphold the legitimacy of post-war involvement norms in the country (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Burder, 2014).

Based on the existing literature, three distinct contexts have varying exit procedures which pose unique management obstacles (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Slob & Jerve, 2008; Engen & Prizzon, 2019):

- **Exit from force majeure scenario:** exiting through crisis management where conflict re-erupted in a post-conflict country (given its instability).
- **Exit from an aid-dependent environment:** exiting a post-conflict country while ensuring that externally funded projects can continue in a sustainable manner.
- **Exit from graduating countries:** transition within the framework of reshaping bilateral connections in a post-conflict environment.

Different factors must be considered for creating an exit plan in each unique situation (Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Ahmed *et al.*, 2018).

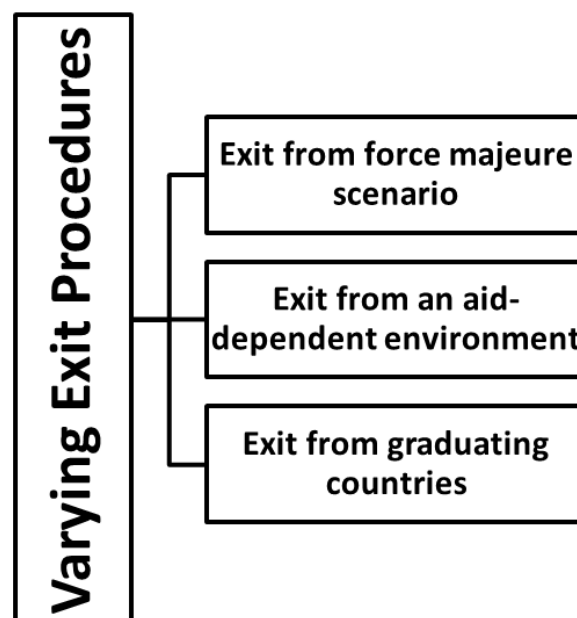
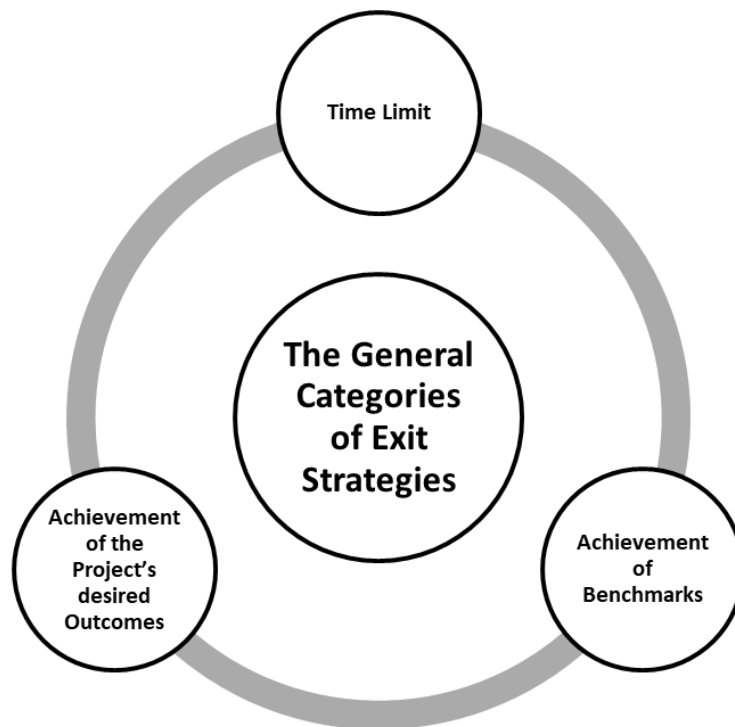


Figure 01. The Varying Exit Procedures

### 3.3. The General Categories of Exit Strategies

Experts say that exit projects come in different types, but they can be classified into three main categories.

- **Time Limit:** The temporal parameters of relief, recovery and development post-conflict projects are contingent upon the funding cycles that underpin their implementation (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). The imposition of time limits may serve to intensify a project's focus on the establishment of sustainable systems, or alternatively, may result in the imposition of artificial timing constraints (Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).
- **Achievement of the Project's desired Outcomes:** Despite the inherent challenges of achieving the intended post-conflict project impact within a given timeframe, which may even give rise to perverse incentives, there are instances where indicators of project impact can be employed as exit criteria (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). Impact indicators may be employed to concentrate project "graduation" efforts on the more self-reliant post-conflict communities or the efficacious project components. Lastly, impact indicators can inform and guide the timeline for the exit strategy (UNESCO, 2016).
- **Achievement of Benchmarks:** Benchmarks may be defined as the measurable indicators of identified steps in the graduation process of an exit strategy (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). They are part of the monitoring and evaluation planning matrix from the outset (UNESCO, 2016). Benchmarks should be linked to the graduation process and to the project's components to be phased out or over.



**Figure 02. The General Categories of Exit Strategies**

On a different point, numerous context-specific indicators must be met prior to leaving a post-war setting (Burder, 2014). Indicators, which can be either contextual or programmatic, should be closely connected to the accomplishment of project objectives (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). On the other hand, they could also involve improved government capabilities or outside limitations like a shortage of donor funding (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2018). On the other hand, these indicators can also help determine when to go back to a post-conflict/conflict situation or to expand qualifications for additional development and/or aid (UNESCO, 2016; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

When leaving a country that has recently experienced conflict, it is crucial to assess if the communities still require ongoing support. In certain scenarios, it may be feasible to phase out without impacting project results. If ongoing support is required to maintain results, transitioning to government, local institutions, or other funded programs could be possible (Bano, 2012; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). When it is not possible to continue providing aid after the program ends, certain project outcome indicators may need to be changed (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). Exploring other suitable options could also be considered as they might help in maintaining results (Ahmed et al., 2018).

### **3.4. Determining the Timeline Project Exit**

When determining the timeline for Exit Strategies in post-conflict projects, various factors must be considered. Exit plans need to be integrated into the initial design of these particular projects. This will support the creation of sustainable interventions, as an Exit Strategy essentially serves as a 'plan for sustainability'. Food assistance programs may find it more difficult compared to other projects and will need the participation of communities and local partners right from the beginning (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed *et al.*, 2018).

It is crucial to set a departure schedule aligned with project funding and clearly communicate it to the community (Burder, 2014). As project implementation will impact Exit Strategy activities, it is crucial for the exit plan to stay adaptable, considering that certain exit criteria and benchmarks might require adjustments throughout the program's duration (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

It is advised to gradually implement exit plans in stages to achieve sustained results in post-conflict project sites by learning from previous experiences and applying them to future sites (Hayman & Lewis, 2018). Finally, maintaining communication with communities' post phase over or program phase out will aid in sustaining outcomes (Yamron, 2020).

### **3.5. Exit Strategy Monitoring & Evaluation**

Research shows that exit is incredibly hard to do well (Hayman *et al.*, 2016). To determine the success of an exit strategy, an evaluation should be conducted after a period has elapsed following the project exit (UNESCO, 2016). Indeed, an evaluation and/or lessons-learned exercise should be undertaken in all cases. However, since funding is not usually programmed in the manner of a post-conflict setting, research shows that exit strategies are rarely evaluated (Gardner *et al.*, 2005; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017).

Ongoing and timely monitoring of benchmarks is crucial for the effective execution of Exit Strategies. The supervision of Exit Strategy benchmarks needs to be incorporated into the project's monitoring and evaluation plan as a whole (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). This will help avoid duplicating monitoring efforts and make the most of the data already available (UNESCO, 2016). Although 'process indicators' can track how well the program or local partner is progressing on a certain scale, result indicators can determine when communities are ready to transition out of projects (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

An assessment should be done after a certain time has passed since the program ended to measure the effectiveness of an Exit Strategy (Booth, 2011). Exit Strategies are not often assessed due to funding not being typically structured in this way (Ahmed *et al.*, 2018).

There are three main ways to assess the effectiveness of an Exit Strategy:

- If the project's influence has continued, grown, or been enhanced since its conclusion.
- If the activities are maintained in their current form or altered.
- If the systems that are created maintain their efficiency.

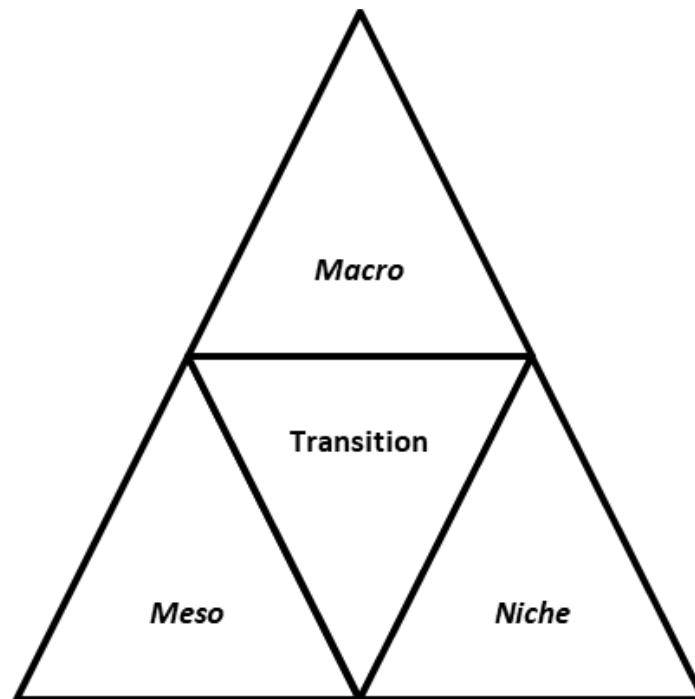
## **4. Constructing Exit Strategies and Ensuring Proper Transition Periods**

### **4.1. Context**

Transition periods for INGOs working on post-conflict projects are a governance approach that aims to both facilitate and accelerate sustainability transitions. This is done through a participatory process of multiple stakeholders' viewpoint. Each implicated participant (in a post-conflict project) will provide their input to develop an appropriate shared vision and goals that will be subsequently tested (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Ahmed et al., 2018).

The transition will be applied on three different levels (Alonso & Brugha, 2006; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017; Engen & Prizzon, 2019; Yamron, 2020):

- **Macro Level:** It refers to the overall socio-technical setting that encompasses both the intangible aspects of social values, political beliefs and world views and the tangible facets of the built environment including institutions as well as the services that are now being delivered.
- **Meso Level:** It refers to the dominant practices, rules and technologies that provide stability and reinforcement to the prevailing socio-technical systems.
- **Niche Level:** It refers to the area at which the space is provided for radical work.



**Figure 03. Transition Operations' Levels**

#### **4.2. Reconstruction driven by the local population**

In post-conflict countries it is important to ensure sustainability and peace (Autesserre, 2017). INGOs are heavily engaged in war-torn environment to establish a peaceful and safe society (Anderson, 1993. Anderson et al., 2003).

In post-war environments, the impacted areas are usually left devastated. There are many refugees, wounded, and trauma victims (Burder, 2014). On another note, the infrastructure and vital services are destroyed along with public administrations – which can only accentuate the situation and set the foundations for future conflicts (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; Chandler, 2010). Hence, reconstruction can only succeed if it is begun by the local community who should have a considerable influence over how funds are allocated (Burder, 2014; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018).

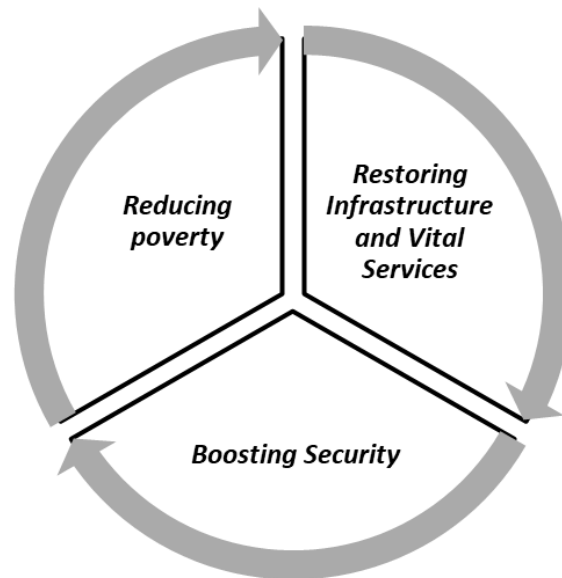
Indeed, a country's recovery may take years. Effective coordination among donor countries, international aid groups, and local entities is critical for any project's success (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). There should also be a regional focus, so that restoration efforts include not only the conflict zone but also the neighboring countries (so not to have additional wars) (Anderson, 1993; Burder, 2014).

#### 4.3. Main Areas of Post-conflict International / Local Partnerships

Post-conflict international reconstruction partnerships aim to work on many projects which include (but not limited to):

- **Restoring Infrastructure and Vital Services:** INGOs are heavily involved in the rehabilitation of key services and infrastructure following wars, whether during or after the conflict. It should be highlighted that in long-term disputes, this scenario is exacerbated by the ongoing cycle of destruction and rapid repair in the face of changing demands (Ahmed et al., 2018). It should be emphasized that there is a lack of systems-level understanding of the current situation on the ground, as well as a mismatch between what is supplied and what is needed in the community (Burder, 2014). As a result, INGOs must have a structured framework for understanding and addressing local basic services, as well as how they might be restored to reflect the changing requirements of the local population, which has been affected by the conflict (Chandler, 2010; Engen & Prizzon, 2019). In other words, there is a need for a viable way to restoring infrastructure function to provide necessary services that are resilient to temporary returns to violence and help the overall rehabilitation of the afflicted community (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- **Reducing poverty:** Poverty plays a crucial role in wars. Hence, eliminating poverty in post-conflict regions in a sustainable manner (and through a well-structured framework) is an important way of resolving and preventing future conflict(s) (Chandler, 2010). However, poverty is rarely the immediate cause of war (Burder, 2014). Poverty-related conflict is often exacerbated by other causes and factor such as social inequality, lack of public services, nepotism, poor governance, etc. (Ahmed et al., 2018). INGOs typically will need to address social injustice by supporting initiatives and advising foreign governments on how to build national as well as local-communal norms and rules (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- **Boosting Security:** Even in peacetimes, post-war countries frequently experience a downward spiral of violent conflict, a dysfunctional economy, and political instability (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017). They lack the financial resources required to make significant advances in their security sector (Burder, 2014). As a result, individuals are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and inadequate security (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). To strengthen security, concerns must be addressed inside the national entities accountable for it: the army, police, and judiciary (Anderson, 1993). INGOS must work with the local partners to ensure that these institutions function on behalf of the nation's

residents while adhering to the rule of law (Bano, 2012; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018). On another note, their projects also include promoting stability, demobilizing former combatants, etc. (Chandler, 2010).



**Figure 04. Main Areas of Post-conflict International / Local Partnerships**

#### **4.4. Key Terms and Notions**

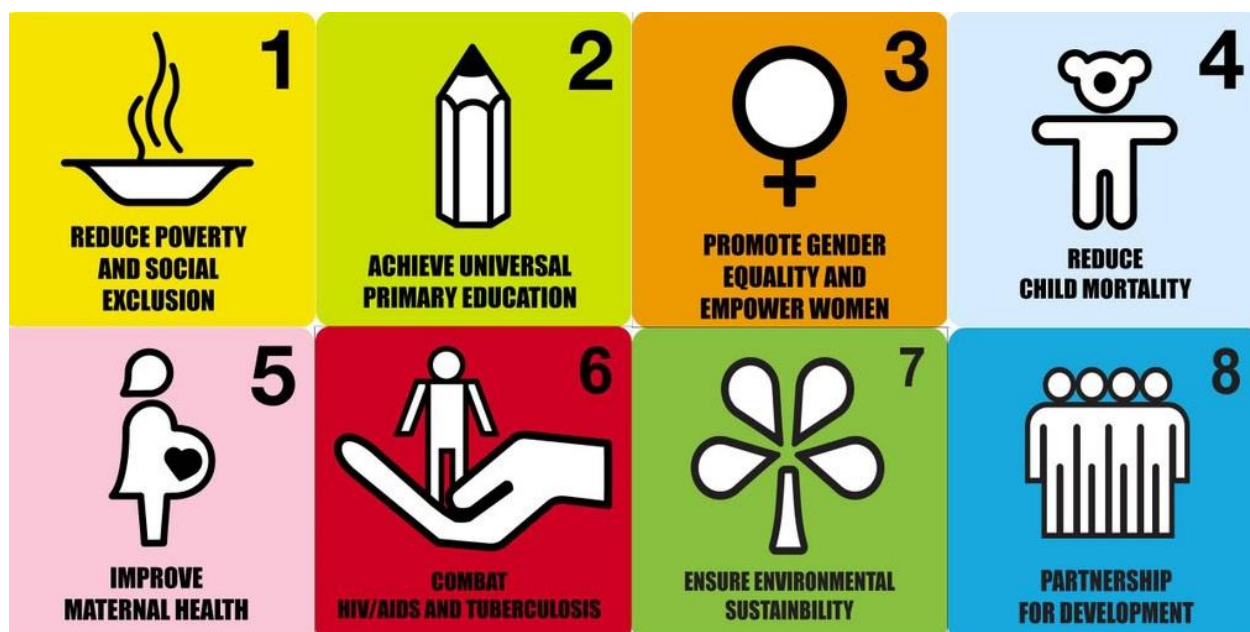
##### **4.4.1. Development**

The concept of “Development” is both highly contested and controversial – and continuously revised. In a broad sense, the concept can be understood as being linked to any initiative, plan, project, activity, etc. concerned with improving the wellbeing of people on all levels.

Of course, the concept itself (as any) is not static – and was (and still is) subjected to change in parallel to the evolution of how it (“development”) is understood. This is due to the change in its understanding and exercise: disciplinary, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary. In other words, it has broadened (especially since the 1990s) from being understood in purely economic terms to a more socio-ergonomic perspective (what a community is able to become and do). (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Hence, the concept of development is perceived as an ensemble of actions that are exercised based on a pre-established process within a network of interconnecting elements (Ahmed et al., 2018).



Based on the conceptual evolution of “Development” both in theory and in practice, the UN first launched the MDGs (Millenium Development Goals) in 2000 – that were eight international development goals for the year 2015; These included: (1) the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger; (2) the achievement of universal primary education; (3) the promotion of gender equality and empower women; (4) the reduction of child mortality; (5) the improvement of maternal health; (6) the combat of HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) ensuring environmental sustainability; and (8) the development of a global partnership for development. (Oswald & Ruedin. 2012; Kumal et al., 2016; Fallah et al., 2022).



**Figure 05. Millenium Development Goals (MDGs)**

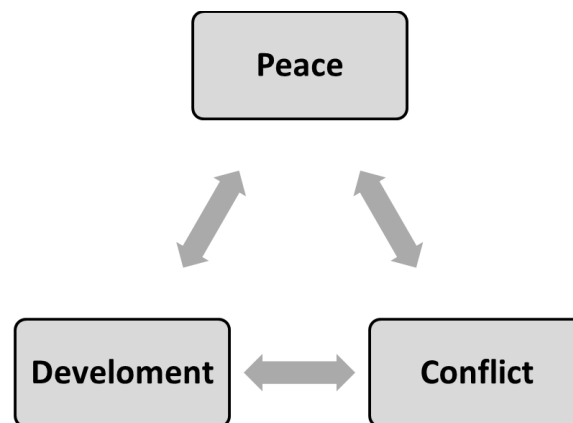
The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) succeeded the MDGs in 2016. These are seventeen (17) goals set by the UN member states – that include eradication of poverty, alleviating hunger, good health, education, gender equality, clean water and sanitation, affordable and clean energy, sustainable cities and communities, protection of habitat on land and in below water, combat climate change, builds resilient, inclusive and sustainable infrastructure and industry, decent work for all, responsible consumption and production (Couche-Franquet et al. 2023).



**Figure 06. Sustainable Development Goals (MDGs)**

What interest us and serves our study is SDG 16 which focuses on peace, justice and strong institutions (Bano, 2012). According to neo-liberal experts (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2003; MacGinty, 2008; Autesserre, 2017; Sapkota & Neupane, 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019; Wu et al., 2022):

- There can be no peace without a well-structured and proper development.
- There can be no development without peace.
- A conflict can set back a country's development by several years.
- Development can either postpone or eradicate the factors that can lead to a future conflict.



**Figure 07. The Intrinsic Relationship between Peace, Development and Conflict**

#### 4.4.2. Peacebuilding

Another concept that was highly studied and reviewed by experts (both scholars and practitioners) is that of “peacebuilding” (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017). Also, the organization in charge of maintaining world peace (the United Nations) have seen their definition of “peacebuilding” evolve during time – and more specifically since the 1990s:

- **Definition 01 – According to UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali’s 1992 report:** An action that is conducted with the aim to solidify peace and avoid relapse into conflict or initiate a new one (UNGA, 2005).
- **Definition 02 – According to the 2007 Brahimi Report on UN Peace Operations:** An ensemble of activities undertaken on the far side of conflict to reassemble the foundations of peace and provide the tools for building on those foundations something that is more than just the absence of war (UNGA, 2000).
- **Definition 03 – According to the UN Secretary-General’s Policy Committee:** a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening national capacities at all levels for conflict management, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace and development (UNGA, 2005).

Thus, we understand that peacebuilding must include strategies that are coherent and tailored to specific needs of the concerned post-conflict country, based on national ownership, and should comprise a carefully prioritized, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities aimed at achieving the above objectives (Anderson et al., 2003; Booth, 2011; Autesserre, 2017).

#### **4.5. Power Dynamics and Exit Strategies**

The power dynamics that shape the relationship between international actors and local players have a significant impact on the exit strategy (Girben, 2007; Ahmed et al., 2018). This is due to the parties' unequal contribution, stance, and power position. Indeed, power dynamics are important in shaping and structuring interactions between different aid partners, as well as the narratives, norms, and practices surrounding both existing and transitional situations.

Researchers and practitioners alike have worked on (Alonso & Brugh, 2006; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Burder, 2014; Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023):

- Exploring exit and transition strategies.
- Determining the factors influencing exit strategy design and implementation in post-war countries.
- The process adopted by INGOs to choose an exit strategy.
- Reviewing local partners' participation in exiting strategies and transition periods.
- The decision-making process for conducting and implementing exit strategies.
- The narratives and processes surrounding the change shaped.

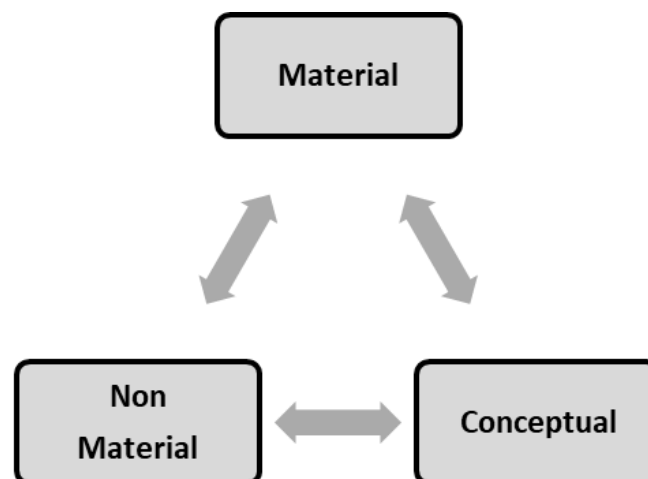
#### **4.6. Exit Strategies and Transitions**

There is a need to properly decrypt **“Exits”** and **“Transitions”** in the context of international interventionist projects in post-conflict countries. This need is due to the increasing number of withdrawals of aid projects and programs of INGOs around the world since the outbreak of COVID-19 (2020-2023). Indeed, these phenomena have raised many questions regarding the dynamic of such a process and how to describe it (Oswald & Ruedin, 2012; Engen & Prizzon, 2019; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023):

- Handing over responsibilities;
- Transferring jobs;
- Phasing out their presence;
- Transition period;
- Winding down;
- Wrapping up activities;
- Moving on to new endeavors;
- Etc.

This is why it would appropriate to properly identify the many interpretations of the definition of “Exit Strategy” in post-conflict countries:

- **Material-based definition:** It is a tool used by INGOs operating in post-war environment to plan and structure the implementation of their exit project which includes the withdrawal of financial, human, material and other form of resources (Burder, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018); on another note, this also includes the cessation of activities delivery by INGOs and / or the closure of an office in a precise post-conflict environment – while structuring sustainable service delivery (Autesserre, 2017).
- **Non-material-based definition:** This implies that INGOs must review their exit process in the context of post-conflict peacebuilding – while considering their relationship dynamics and power balance with local partners (i.e. decision-making processes, knowledge, accountability processes, etc.) (Girben, 2007) – while working towards setting the appropriate climate for this transition in an unstable and / or fragile environment (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2003; Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- **Conceptual definition:** It is the act of directly and indirectly moving away from the having an influence, add value, set a new culture / mindset / behavior, etc. that best supports multiplying impact in post-conflict countries – while ensuring the sustainability of what was put into place (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017; Yamron, 2020).



**Figure 08. The Different Interpretation Perspectives of an “Exit Strategy”**

#### **4.7. The Process of the “Exit Strategy”**

The process of an “Exit Strategy” is a mindset and a process given that INGOs involvement in a post-conflict country must take place in a well-planned way, so that the benefits gained by the local parties and the services benefiting the deprived communities continue, after the international entity’s withdrawal. In this context, it should be noted that an “Exit Strategy” (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Yamron, 2020; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023):

- Is a process and not a single event.
- Is a sustainability project.
- Is a series of project steps.
- Is a culture / mindset / behavior.
- Is an “*emancipation*” act that enables the local parties to move away from a heavy reliance on traditional foreign aid to alternative forms of cooperation that are better matched to a partner country’s needs and often generate mutual benefits.
- Is a gradual and deliberate process, specific to the context in which it is occurring.
- Is a process to ensure that an exit causes minimal harm given the circumstances.
- Etc.

Hence, once an international organization takes the decision to “exit”- it must include the creation of or transfer to local stakeholders that can enable a greater long-term impact. Such a process is based on “Exit Principles” designed to minimize the potential negative impact on the concerned communities (Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Such principles aim to ensure complete work and projects were sustainable, either in the launching of continuing vital services (that should have been public) or in lasting impactful positive change. That said, several key elements must be considered (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; UNESCO, 2016):

- “Exit” projects can spark innovative ideas for long-term sustainability, leading to new opportunities.
- Transparency and communication are crucial.
- Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and learning lead to improved exit processes.

## 4.8. The Exit Strategy's Dynamic

### 4.8.1. Context

There are many ways to ensure a proper exit strategy – even though each one means that an INGO is leaving the post-conflict country based on a predetermined plan. The used model will aim to ensure that INGOs and their local partners are prepared for the termination of the existing dynamic of their relationship and projects (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). In a post-conflict context, having a well-developed exit strategy is critical and ensuring service delivery is the main objective.

### 4.8.2. The Dynamic

An Exit Strategy's model possesses a very particular dynamic (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018; Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023):

- **The Role of Local Staff:** Local staff are key to the viability of local projects and activities.
- **The Role of External Experts:** International – external experts can help facilitate the process as is.
- **The Importance of Planning:** Rigorous preparation must take place which includes assessments of local challenges and the development of handover plans, vetted through consultations with both external and local leaderships. This is done through substantial technical and operational assessment process to ensure that local entity would be sustainable and effective following handover.
- **Criticality of Coordination:** There is a need for the creation of an exit project liaison groups.
- **Training Local Parties:** Coaching and training must take place on technical, financial and organizational issues – to ensure service delivery by the local stakeholders who will be managing the project.



**Figure 09. The Main Elements of the Exit Strategy's Dynamic**

## 5. Locally led Peacebuilding Development Projects

### 5.1. Context

International aid exits and transitions in post-conflict countries cannot be understood without considering the context in which they occur. Issues related to aid effectiveness, such as national and local ownership of post-conflict development projects must consider conditionality, sustainability, and capacity building (Anderson, 1993; Alonso & Brugha, 2006; Booth, 2011).

Indeed, comprehending the process of planning and implementing these exits allows for a greater recognition of the ongoing influence that these development policies and practices have on local institutions, governments, civil society groups, and communities (Autesserre, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2018; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

Since the early 2000s, there has been more progress on exit strategies within INGOs. This is because the international stakeholders have realized the need to improve aid effectiveness within the context of MDGs attainment – which included the improvement of the quantity and quality of humanitarian assistance (Anderson et al., 2003; Booth, 2011). In other words, there was a new conviction where donors are not to develop post-war countries – but rather assist them to develop themselves (Burder, 2014; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).

In the core of all actions and strategies of INGOs operating in post-conflict countries, disparities in power dynamics are quite present and evident, whether in giving or decreasing international aid (Girben, 2007). To comprehend the effects of hierarchies and political ties in the field of post-conflict international interventions, it is crucial to consider (Anderson et al., 2003; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018):

- What is the reason behind donor countries and INGOs interventionism?
- What determines when aid ends and phases out?
- What do local participants go through in those procedures?
- How are local stakeholders implicated in post-conflict development projects?

Many critics point out that international development projects are often criticized because some experts believe that the main aim of international assistance is to advance the political and economic interests of donors rather than benefit aid recipients (Anderson et al., 2003). Many have contended that politically motivated aid did not result in development in post-war countries, as most of them were unable to recover (Burder, 2014). Some people believe that foreign aid has fostered dependence, disrupted markets, and fueled corruption (Ahmed et al., 2018). When making strategic decisions about where and how to provide international



assistance, INGOs and donor organizations often neglect the needs of the communities receiving the aid (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Additionally, many experts in the field have observed that the donor's priorities frequently dictate the outcomes to align with foreign policy goals.

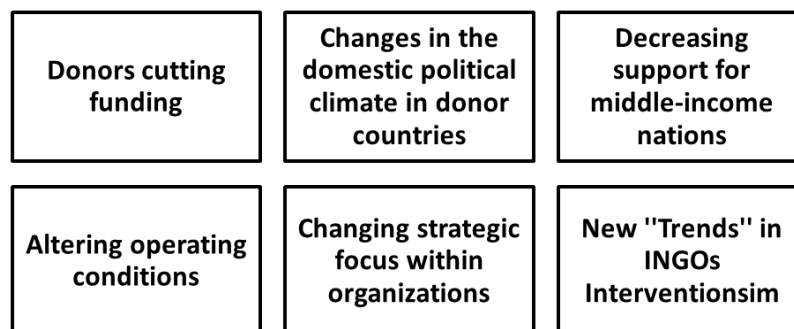
Recognizing the political role of international aid can help researchers comprehend why it is provided to certain post-conflict countries and withheld from others. Reducing aid linked to donor countries' / INGOs foreign and security interests does not need the same sustainability evaluation as other objectives like locally driven development (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006; UNESCO, 2016). Furthermore, aid exits motivated by politics frequently occur suddenly, putting at risk the relationships between those providing aid and their local partners (Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

Donors' political interests play a central role in aid allocation and withdrawal processes, affecting the local context of aid recipient nations in multiple ways. In the end, donors are involved in intricate power dynamics and have influenced both empowering and disempowering parties they aim to assist (Girben, 2007; Ahmed et al., 2018).

## **5.2. Drivers of Exit Strategies**

Changes in the global socio-economy and world/regional politics have significantly affected the international development landscape in post-conflict countries. Due to changing aid strategies and funding trends, experts and decision-makers alike must address external factors related to aid terminations and development led by local communities (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

There are various factors leading to a decrease and removal of international aid, such as donors cutting funding, changes in the domestic political climate in donor countries, decreasing support for middle-income nations, altering operating conditions, and changing strategic focus within organizations, etc. (Ahmed et al., 2018). Furthermore, continual shifts in domestic politics within donor nations are resulting in reductions in global aid, which will likely cause more INGOs to withdraw their support, including those who did not prioritize donor-independent sustainability from the start (Anderson et al., 2003; Appe & Christopher, 2018).



**Figure 10. Some of the Drivers of Exit Strategies**

### 5.3. Gridlock or Opportunities?

Many international actors believe that the post-conflict community is incapable of leading their own development, contributing to the political dynamics in development aid. Many aid providers see local capacity based on how well local organizations can handle technical project tasks (Ahmed et al., 2018). This fails to consider how local organizations operate within a larger context, consisting of numerous interconnected networks. Assistance efforts may lead to local communities feeling helpless and reliant on outside help (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

Global doubts about the abilities of local actors have influenced the nature of partnerships in the international development field. Believing that locals lack knowledge, experience, and skills creates an unequal dynamic between outsiders and insiders (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Some professionals believe this has played a role in systemic racism in the global development field, resulting in a wage disparity between local and international employees and marginalizing local individuals from decision-making roles in an organization (Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

It is important to recognize that many experts have pointed out that while there has been a move towards locally driven development through the aid effectiveness agenda, most of the motivation and guidance for changing the international aid system still originates from donors (Booth, 2011). Put simply, local groups involved in post-conflict initiatives continued to prioritize the foreign policy objectives of donor countries and organizations over the needs of the community (Ahmed et al., 2018). Certainly, donors have been influential in guiding global conversations on aid reform and establishing patterns. At the same time, the involvement of community members in decision-making and program development by aid agencies and organizations is still minimal.

Local actors are not as well represented and donors and INGOs are overrepresented, influencing the aid agenda in a specific manner. In this situation, experts in the field have recognized a stark difference in two perceptions of projects after a conflict:

- **Local Stakeholders:** They have concentrated on promoting growth on a local, national, or regional scale, considering the involvement of government, private sector, civil society, and other stakeholders at these levels, as well as the impact of national policies and decision-making. In essence, their worries involve thinking about where power is situated and how it affects the activities that follow (Girben, 2007; Appe & Christopher, 2018).
- **International Organizations:** usually concentrate on the technical aspects of institutional reform, such as conventional capacity building programs, while disregarding the essential questions of power (Girben, 2007; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

Certainly, INGOs must grasp the variations in projects and adjust to the local environment when transitioning leadership and control from international to local parties (Alonso & Brugha, 2006).

On another note, such a transition may provide new opportunities for local stakeholders to prepare the ground for future development projects to ensure a peaceful environment (Anderson, 1993; Autesserre, 2017). Also, this might constitute a new opportunity for emancipation, economic projects independence, a more local-centric project approach, etc. (Anderson et al., 2003; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).

Indeed, transitions are challenging – however, they also present an opportunity that arises from the current changes in global policies and funding approaches (Alonso & Brugha, 2006). Even though pulling out donor funds may decrease existing local capabilities at first, experts have pointed out that it can also spark greater creativity among local entities as they adjust to decreased aid support (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Certainly, the decrease in funding can accelerate the shift towards development led by local individuals as they assume responsibility for policies, services, and financial resources (Ahmed et al., 2018).

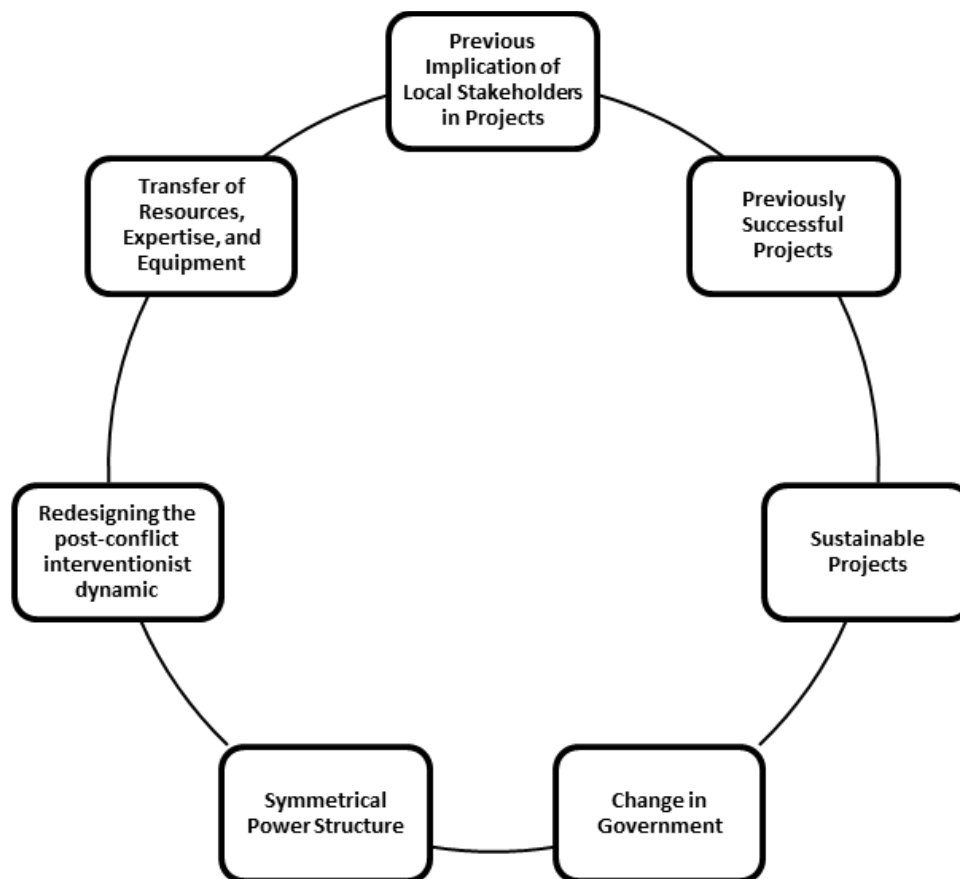
When external restrictions are lifted, an increase in innovation occurs, although not without potential risks. INGOS need to reduce the risk by creating criteria to determine a project's "readiness for transition" using indicators from international organizations like the World Bank and UNDP. Readiness is assessed in the first stage before moving on to transition planning (UNESCO, 2016).

#### **5.4. Managing Transitions**

This new approach led to some improvements in the relationship between donors and aid recipients and a rebalancing of power (Girben, 2007); this includes replacing the prevailing top down, donor-dominated model with a system of genuine mutual accountability that balances the legitimate interests of donors, recipients and, most importantly, the deprived-impacted post-war community (Burder, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018). This is done through the redesign of the post-conflict interventionist dynamic by involving aid recipients and other local bodies (i.e. government bodies, private sector, civil society, etc.) in all processes of local project development, analysis, research, planning, monitoring, implementing, control and reviews, recruitment, procurement, etc. (Alonso & Brugh, 2006; Appe & Christopher, 2018). Another important aspect of creating a proper symmetrical power structure – is to have a resource balance and ownership (Girben, 2007; Booth, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2018).

It is to be noted and stressed that an exit strategy will probably not work properly if the post-conflict project did not have positive impact / results. This will be the result of a properly engineered interventionist project as well as the change that will occur in government (e.g. political leadership, economic relations, public policy, etc.).

Also, the withdrawal of direct assistance and commitment of INGOs in post-conflict development project toward locally led development activities will depend on the success and sustainability of what was already achieved (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Hence, sustainability lies at the heart of a successful exit strategy (Engen & Prizzon, 2019).



**Figure 11. Conditions for Proper Post-Conflict Transitions**

Experts have noted that many INGOs involved in post-conflict initiatives were giving preference to local parties who aligned with their structures. This system has the potential to disrupt the local civil society by favoring professionalized entities selected by donors, thus weakening local organizations (Ahmed et al., 2018). Therefore, local stakeholders and civil society in post-conflict countries are the most significant, but they are mostly a product of foreign support, relying heavily on their donors and having limited collaboration among themselves (Appel & Christopher, 2018). Furthermore, some believe that the sector is controlled by donor priorities and overlooks the abilities of aid-receiving countries due to its emphasis on external resources (Couche-Franquet et al., 2023). This results in various negative impacts on local control and possession (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

External resources determine how international actors view the environments where they want to operate. This caused local NGOs to reorganize to stay competitive in the development field, but in doing so, they left behind their original structures and approaches, resulting in them becoming less connected to the communities they serve (Couche-Franquet et al., 2023). In these instances, the unequal distribution of resources creates a power difference that allows those

with resources to control and possibly weaken local priorities and voices (Girben, 2007; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). This may result in strengthening local stakeholders who are given resources over those who are not, thus altering the existing local context (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Support from donors may have been meant to enhance the efficacy of local parties, but it can also diminish their grassroots ties and lessen accountability to the community. For instance, civil society continues to receive just a small portion of funding directly (Appel & Christopher, 2018).

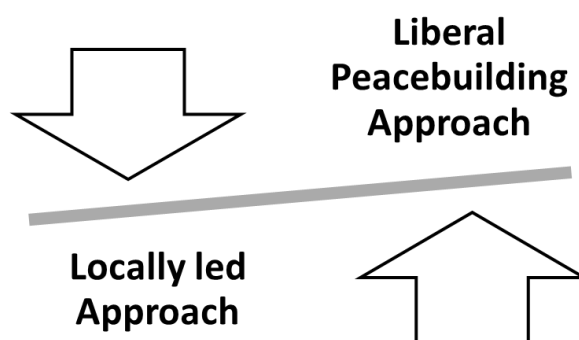
## 6. Aid Dynamics & Hybrid in Peacebuilding Projects

### 6.1. Context

The critical debate in peacebuilding approaches in post-war countries revolves around the central relationship between local and international actors:

- **Traditional “liberal” peacebuilding approach:** It involves the advancement of democracy, implementation of market-driven economic changes, and establishing various other organizations linked to “modern” nations (Anderson et al., 2003; MacGinty, 2008; Autesserre, 2017; Engen & Prizzon, 2019).
- 
- **New “locally led” approach:** It focuses on the local aspects of peace within a broader context of growing assertiveness from local actors and decreased confidence from major actors supporting international peace efforts (Anderson, 1993; Burder, 2014; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

It is worth noting that local approaches have become more prominent in recent years (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).



**Figure 12. The Two Project Peacebuilding Approaches**

Experts recommend the concept of "hybrid peace" to grasp a more collaborative approach to post-conflict peacebuilding projects, to comprehend the relationship between local and international factors (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017). Hybridity focuses on "interaction among diversity" and highlights the ability and authority of every participant to influence the circumstances (Anderson, 1993). This considers the influence of traditional and customary (contextually made) methods and allows for an emphasis on local empowerment and politics in peacebuilding environments (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018).

Recent research indicates that even though many donor countries and INGOs contribute internationally to conflict resolution, successful peacebuilding projects mainly depends on the efforts, priorities, and tactics of local organizations (Anderson, 1993). Foreign involvement can aid in peace efforts and hinder the resurgence of violence, thus improving the likelihood of creating lasting peace, but it is essential for the crucial changes to occur at the community level (that must be led by local stakeholders) (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017).

Nevertheless, there are some postcolonial criticisms that have argued that incorporating local participants into externally guided procedures fails to question the fundamental principles of liberal peacebuilding (Anderson, 1993; Kapoor, 2008; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). In this situation, certain researchers have posited that a hybrid analysis fails to consider all aspects of a conflict and may further the liberal agenda by perpetuating the logic of inclusion and exclusion seen in liberal peace (Anderson et al., 2003; MacGinty, 2008). International organizations often overlook local priorities and concerns when intervening in violent conflicts, taking control of interactions and negotiations with national and local partners (Autesserre, 2017). Frequently, the global actor continues to be the primary influence in determining the results.

Even though a hybrid analysis can assist in recognizing the involvement of local actors in peacebuilding efforts, the aid system still heavily reflects hierarchical power structures (Girben, 2007; Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Hayman & Lewis, 2018).

## **6.2. Conflict Sensitivity and Post-war Projects**

In conflict zones, the connection between global players and community groups faces extra challenges impacting the choice of departure plans, as foreign assistance can disrupt the situation. Truly, international aid provided during a violent conflict becomes intertwined with that conflict and becomes a part of it as well. While aid agencies aim to remain impartial towards those affected by a war, the assistance they provide can have a significant impact on whether the conflict escalates or resolves (Burder, 2014).

With that being said, we can describe 'Conflict sensitivity' as the act of comprehending how aid is impacted by conflict in a specific situation, to minimize unintended negative consequences and to promote positive changes in conflict through humanitarian, development, and/or peacebuilding efforts (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017; Ahmed et al., 2018).

It is important to take conflict sensitivity into account at the project's conclusion. Exit plans must be able to adapt to changes in conflict dynamics and political situations, while also being proactive to manage the expectations of local partners and communities without raising them too high (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Decisions need to be carefully considered and based on the findings of conflict analysis and ongoing monitoring. That said, important questions to consider are:

- *Is it possible for INGOs to consistently prepare for exits?*
- *How can they expedite their exit plans during severe deteriorating situations?*

Additionally, in certain conflict-affected areas, declaring a departure may put local employees at risk and make the local branch susceptible to theft by militia factions. In some instances, there was a risk in actively participating and engaging in participatory processes, while exits were communicated without being celebrated (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

Exit strategies in conflict-affected areas can be made more challenging by the state of civil society, which may be inexperienced or have trust issues affecting their connections with outside parties (Chandler, 2010; Appe & Christopher, 2018).

International actors need to comprehend the contested perceptions of civil society in conflict-affected societies for successful partnerships and exit strategies (Hayman & Lewis, 2018).

## **7. Exit Strategy and Sustainability**

### **7.1. Context**

Implementing a sustainable Exit Strategy aims to ensure that the project's results are sustainable in the longer-term. The post-conflict project will usually operate in a highly challenging environment in the face of complex security, political, economic and social considerations, as well as competing demands on often very limited resources (Ashley & Jayousi, 2006). Many of the solutions to the problems addressed by the project are thus inevitably long-term and unlikely to be fully sustainable within the project timeframe (Ahmed et al., 2018).



In the context of a post-conflict project, sustainability can be interpreted as:

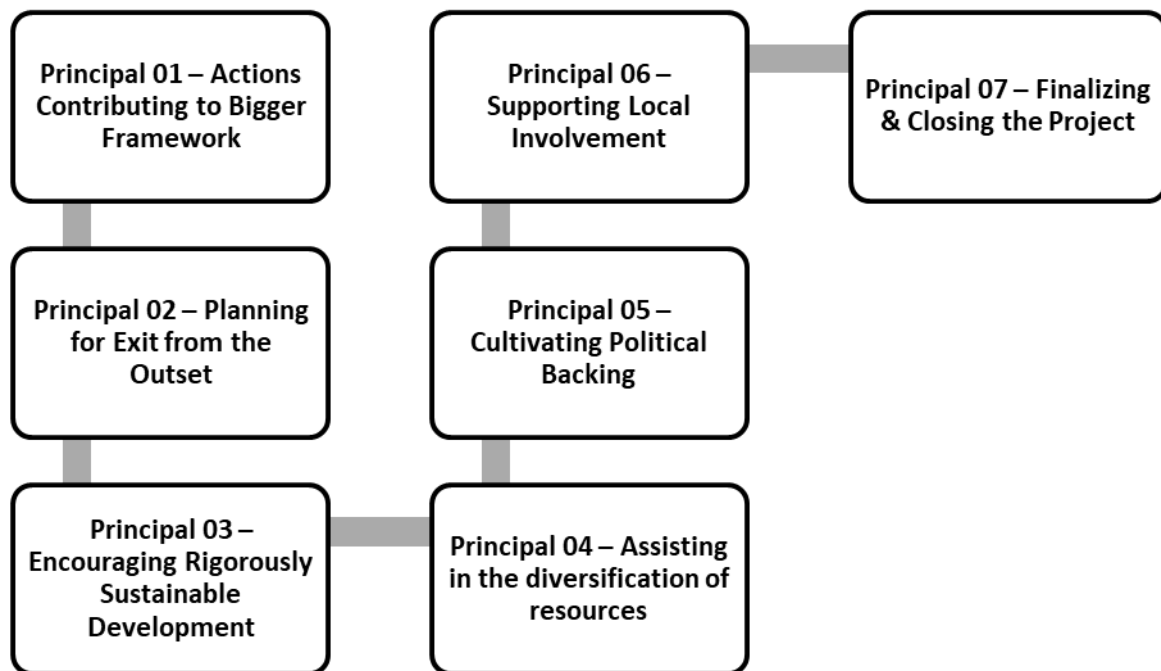
- Contributing to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) involves promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for everyone, and establishing accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (Bano, 2012; Autesserre, 2017). Peace is a necessary requirement for the advancement of society and economy. Conflict, violence, and instability frequently afflict societies in the absence of peace, leading to hindrances in progress and causing the loss of lives and resources (Anderson et al., 2003).
- Following methods aimed at encouraging institutional transformation that can be feasibly implemented using existing local resources both technically and financially (Anderson, 1993; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- Authentic involvement with important government and relevant civil society stakeholders, resulting in a well-defined plan for ending or continuing essential project activities (Appe & Christopher, 2018).

## 7.2. The Principles of a Sustainable Exit Strategy

Experts have analyzed numerous principles that interpret a viable exit plan in post-conflict countries:

- **Principal 01 – Actions Contributing to Bigger Framework:** INGOs involved in post-conflict countries are implementing comprehensive strategies over the long term, rather than ad hoc fixes that do not have the same strategic impact (Yamron, 2020).
- **Principal 02 – Planning for Exit from the Outset:** This approach was created when the post-conflict project started and is being incorporated into every part of programming, such as planning, monitoring, evaluation, and reporting (UNESCO, 2016; Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).
- **Principal 03 – Encouraging Rigorously Sustainable Development:** It steers clear of activities and methods that may need significant financial assistance after the project is done and reduces potential replacement or displacement tasks. Operational support will be given only if there is a clear, written exit strategy agreed with government counterparts to ensure successful outcomes (Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).

- **Principal 04 – Assisting in the diversification of resources:** Many initiatives in post-conflict nations, backed by INGOs, need continuous external support to reach their maximum impact on overall country reconstruction, especially within the public sector (Chandler, 2010).
- **Principal 05 – Cultivating Political Backing:** Political support plays a critical role in ensuring sustainability. INGOs work with important decision-makers at the national level to help enhance policy and legislative frameworks, leading to positive effects on various interconnected issues in a post-conflict environment (Hayman & Lewis, 2018). At a regional level, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) help advance progress by sharing experiences and collaborating on creating and enforcing standards and policies based on evidence, best practices, and international legal frameworks (Yamron, 2020).
- **Principal 06 – Supporting Local Involvement:** International non-governmental organizations acknowledge that counterparts are crucial in this strategy for exiting and ensuring sustainability. The project team collaborates with important counterparts to record successful practices and insights gained from every project task. The strategy will be added as a specific agenda item in project steering committee meetings held every six months to support post-project planning (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- **Principal 07 – Finalizing & Closing the Project:** The last stage before exiting includes wrapping up and transferring responsibilities. This involves a meeting after the project is completed where important partners will evaluate the benefits and structures of the project and the chances of them being maintained, determine which activities can be continued by the government (after reconstruction) and identify where extra external assistance is required (Chandler, 2010).



**Figure 13. The Principles of a Sustainable Strategy**

## **8. The Many Challenges of Exit Strategy and How to Adress Them**

### **8.1. Context**

Developing and implementing Exit Strategies poses many challenges. The creation of Exit Strategies in post-conflict settings is seen as a way for the project to leave the community while still enabling project outcomes to continue (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). Certainly, a properly planned INGO initiative will support lasting project results – all the while incorporating an Exit Plan (Ahmed et al., 2018).

Developing an Exit Strategy entails comprehensive planning, such as transferring asset maintenance, enhancing local groups' capacity, and establishing benchmarks for monitoring their readiness to take over asset responsibility eventually (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

### **8.2. Challenge 01 – General Bad Conditions**

Post-conflict countries recovering from conflict typically face poor conditions, posing a unique difficulty in developing and implementing Exit Strategies. To counteract the impact of these shocks, INGOs should prioritize strengthening community resilience. This involves INGOs collaborating with communities to assess risks and create strategies to prevent future emergencies (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

### **8.3. Challenge 02 – Socio-Economic-Political Environment**

Implementing programs, including Exit Strategies, becomes challenging in a socio-economic-political environment that is uncertain and unwelcoming. Ambiguity surrounding the present and upcoming political landscape in a post-war setting has a negative impact on development initiatives, as INGOs struggle to determine their operational boundaries, resource availability, and the timing and partners for project completion (Burder, 2014; van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017). Establishing crucial relationships for the post-project phase is even more challenging than usual. Exit plans will be negatively impacted by an unstable post-war environment (Ahmed et al., 2018).

It might be essential to create multiple 'exit scenarios' in this ever-changing setting and regularly review your current exit plan in your schedule to make changes as needed based on how things progress (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). Recognizing the added responsibility of strategizing Exit Plans is equally significant in this scenario. More time and effort than usual will be needed (van Voorst & Hilhorst, 2017).

### **8.4. Challenge 03 – The Uncertainty of Future Funding**

The funding of post-war projects may require leaving even if the organization and/or concerned community are not prepared. As the deadline for completing the project approaches, doubts about donor backing for a potential successor program are adding more limitations (Burder, 2014).

To deal with these problems, it is recommended to create backup plans for different funding situations (such as seeking additional funding through fundraising), to make sure that the program does not rely entirely on one donor (Ahmed et al., 2018).

### **8.5. Challenge 04 – Late Planning of an Exit Strategy**

If an exit strategy is not included in the initial planning stages of a post-war project, it may result in disorganized and unplanned execution of exit activities towards the program's conclusion (Burder, 2014). In this situation, the chance to observe and follow the development of a post-war society will be lost, as well as the opportunity to establish close connections and collaborations with local organizations over time (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Even though it's challenging to make up for delayed planning, utilizing knowledge can help enhance current Exit Strategies and create effective ones for post-conflict projects (Ahmed et al., 2018).

### **8.6. Challenge 05 – Insufficient Resources and Funding Constraints**

If an INGO does not plan an Exit Strategy from the start, they may lack the necessary resources to carry out the exit activities later-on. Under these circumstances, it may not always be feasible to provide training and enhance the skills of local stakeholders (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Some experts have suggested to connect with other projects to exchange resources and secure additional funding for exit activities, however, they cannot be considered as solutions but as alternatives (Engen & Prizzon, 2019).

### **8.7. Challenge 06 – Staff Training, Lack of Staff, Experience and Turnover**

Numerous INGO employees lack experience in developing Exit Strategies in a post-conflict environment, therefore it is crucial to provide them with training and support in this aspect (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

High staff turnover in INGOs as well as implicated local partners have a negative effect on continuity and service delivery. In this scenario, more resources are needed for ongoing training and developing skills regularly. High turnover can pose a challenge for Exit Strategies as the partners initially selected to take over project responsibilities may not be available at project completion (Ahmed *et al.*, 2018).

The insufficient number of staff and the significant workload in post-war projects can hinder the completion of exit activities (Burder, 2014). The executing organization might also struggle to find a suitable local group to hand off their program to. Planning for leaving early can assist with dealing with this issue, but the lack of staff and suitable organization may be a common challenge in post-war situations (Burder, 2014; Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

### **8.8. Challenge 07 – Limited follow-up capacity**

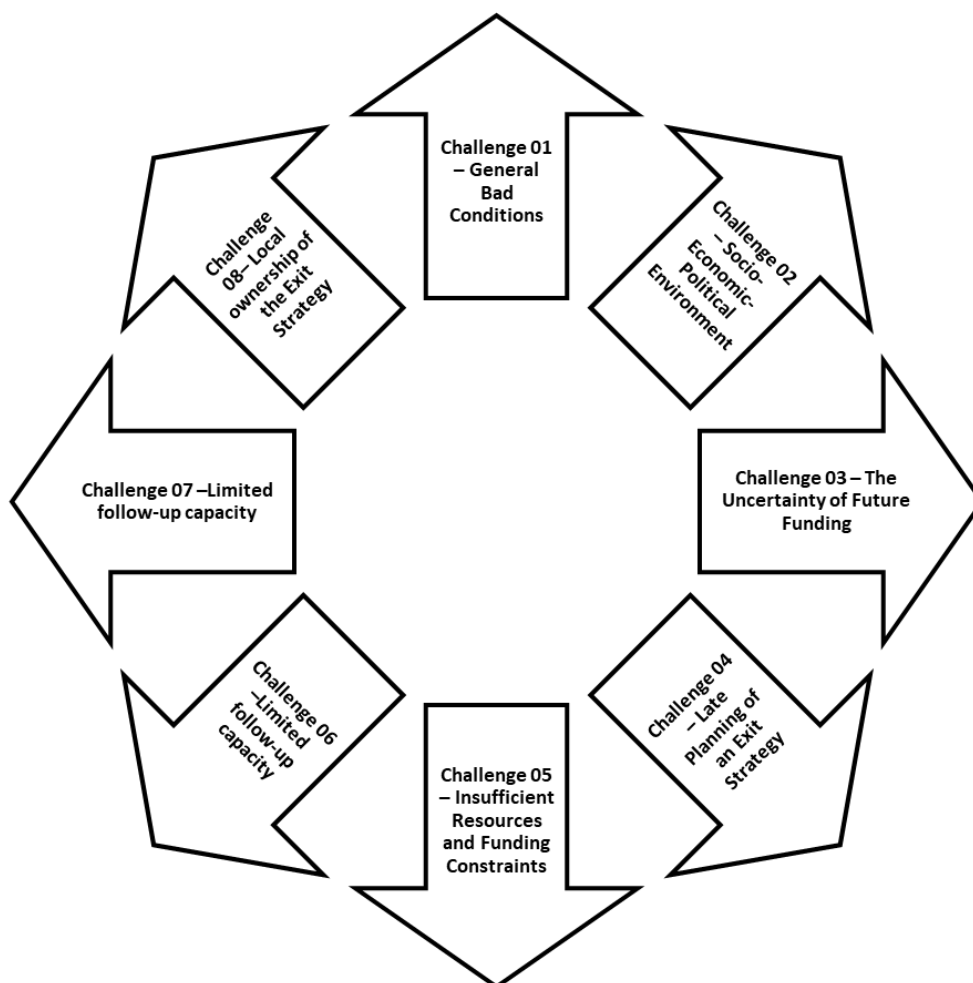
To assess the effectiveness of an Exit Strategy in relation to a post-war project, it is important to carry out a post-project evaluation a few months following the project's completion (Burder, 2014; UNESCO, 2016). Ensuring that the local partner organization, who has taken on responsibility for the activities, is still fulfilling its obligations to the beneficiaries will be crucial (Booth, 2011; Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Additionally, it is important to ensure that all other parties involved, such as the private sector, government, and regional support, are fulfilling their obligations.

A gradual departure from communities and / or activities enables INGOs to assess partners' and stakeholders' capability and dedication to fulfill their responsibilities, offering chances to

evaluate the effectiveness of their Exit Strategy (Ahmed et al., 2018). It might be needed to request additional funding to follow up with partners after the project and conduct an evaluation several months later to determine the sustainability of activities and outcomes (Booth, 2011). It might be feasible to include these expenses in future project proposals, as the knowledge gained can be utilized in the next project (UNESCO, 2016).

### 8.9. Challenge 08– Local ownership of the Exit Strategy

For an Exit Strategy to work well, it needs to be in the hands of the local agencies (partners of the INGOs) who will continue the established activities and ensure the delivery of results to the concerned community (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018). It is essential to develop and communicate the strategy in a clear and open manner (to foster a sense of ownership), as well as to demonstrate a commitment to carrying out continuous actions to uphold agreed upon results (Booth, 2011; Hayman & Lewis, 2018).



**Figure 14. The Many Challenges of Exit Strategy**

## 9. Structuring Exit Strategies

### 9.1. Context

Emergency interventionism in post-conflict countries should be given in a manner that supports both rebuilding efforts and sustained growth projects. The project's leader at the field level, along with the regional office of the INGO (and/or global level), must ensure these systemic connections are established and constantly improved (Hayman & Lewis, 2018; Yamron, 2020).

A relief operation's exit strategy will be more secure if the post-conflict public sector is reconstructed, and local agencies (or government) have the capacity to take responsibility for the concerned community (Chandler, 2010). This ability should extend beyond just providing post-war aid to also include reconstruction and development work (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Burder, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018).

It is the responsibility of the project leader, in collaboration with the in-country team, local stakeholders, and state authorities, to assess if the necessary conditions are in place to implement either a complete or partial exit strategy (Chandler, 2010; Hayman & Lewis, 2018).

### 9.2. Specific Conditions to Exit Strategies

Exiting a post-conflict assistance project too abruptly can be just as harmful as leaving it too late. If necessary, conditions for survival are not met, an early end to the conflict could lead to it resuming within the affected community. Additionally, the potential for instability could be used as a recruitment tool by individuals with political goals seeking to renegotiate the peace deal (Anderson et al., 2003; Autesserre, 2017). A delayed departure could lead to a similar outcome if the recipients rely on humanitarian aid and believe that local NGOs or the government may not meet their expectations (Booth & Unsworth, 2014; Ahmed et al., 2018).

It is important to thoroughly assess if the circumstances are suitable for implementing the exit plan. These conditions consist of (Anderson, 1993; Anderson et al., 2003; Burder, 2014; Autesserre, 2017):

- The decrease in the number of civilians impacted by the conflict is significant.
- An effectively brokered peace deal resulting in the end of fighting.
- The return to regular social, political, and economic functions.
- The Government's ability to fulfill its responsibilities to the people.
- A plan for resource mobilization must be established to address the strategic framework for post-war efforts.

Having an exit strategy in a timely manner is essential to prevent reliance and unrealistic expectations. However, the timing of departure may vary among different sectors and agencies. The identification of the proper timing involves assessing the conditions at both geographical and sector-specific levels and should be carried out by a collaborative group led by the project manager of the international non-governmental organizations.

### **9.3. The "Exit" Project Objectives**

An "Exit" activity is a major transformation within the project – as it means ending several ties with the local environment (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). The "Exit Strategy" is an essential component of the project's strategic plan, designed to offer post-conflict support and development, starting from the project's initial phase. Hence, some objectives must be put into place to ensure this change – which include (Morris, 2015; UNESCO, 2016):

- Ensure that the work was sustainable.
- Ensure that expertise and momentum for change in the country is not lost.
- Inform responsible exit processes.
- Complemented by exit criteria – when and how soon to withdraw.
- Ensure the exit does not have a detrimental effect on the concerned community.
- Put into place exit indicators to monitor the process.
- Etc.

### **9.4. Exit Criteria**

Quality post-conflict projects need to guarantee that the advantages they create will be ongoing and have a long-lasting effect on the community they are aimed at (Engen & Prizzon, 2019). We must plan for the end of any intervention to ensure lasting impact. Exit strategies are important for achieving program goals, preserving benefits, and enabling others to carry on the work initiated by INGOs (Ahmed et al., 2018).

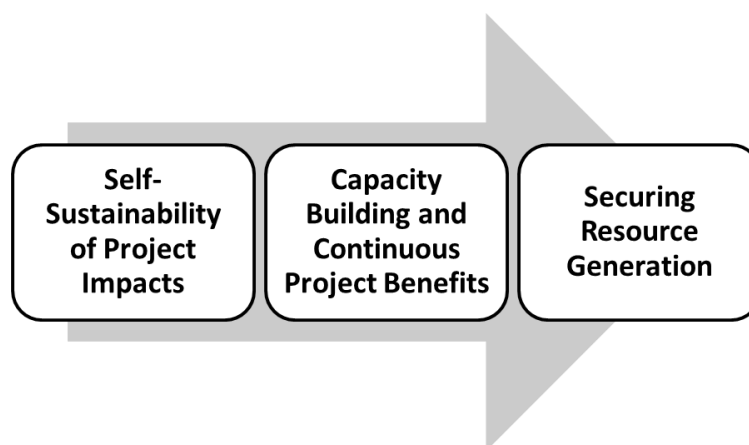
Exit strategies are developed to establish a course of action for leaving once specific requirements have been fulfilled. These standards should show how the advantages of the project will persist - including:

- **Self-Sustainability of Project Impacts:** Projects have the potential to bring about self-sustaining transformations through economic stability, social change, encouraging behavioral adjustments, cultural revisions, and more (Hayman & Lewis, 2018). Additionally, they involve the consistent provision of services that are typically the responsibility of the government or local agencies to meet the community's needs (Booth



& Unsworth, 2014). Truly, the changes must have a lasting impact that is both feasible and acceptable, ensuring that beneficiaries experience the benefits firsthand. In addition, post-conflict projects should establish infrastructure that can have long-lasting effects by teaching communities how to maintain it.

- **Capacity Building and Continuous Project Benefits:** Every plan to leave will require the development of skills and resources to support the ongoing efforts of INGOs by empowering communities, government, or local organizations to carry on the work (Booth & Unsworth, 2014). Important factors for determining the success of capacity building are the ability of individuals to independently manage their own affairs, their acquisition of required technical skills, and their capability to obtain necessary resources for sustaining activities.
- **Securing Resource Generation:** Securing resources is crucial for the sustainability of all post-conflict projects.



**Figure 15. Exit Criteria**

### **9.5. Incorporating Exit Strategies into Post-Conflict Projects**

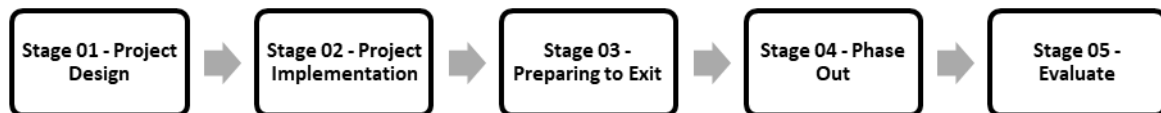
An exit plan outlines a set of actions to ensure the ongoing success of a post-conflict project once the INGO's support is no longer available. Developing an exit strategy at the outset of a post-war intervention is crucial with the involvement of beneficiaries, government, partners, and other stakeholders (Burder, 2014). This can prevent reliance and promote ownership of the development process, while also improving INGOs responsibility towards stakeholders (Booth, 2011; Ahmed et al., 2018). At times, INGOs may need to leave sooner than planned due to budget constraints, changing priorities, or unforeseen issues. In these situations, it is crucial that

the positive impacts of their projects are not reversed when the INGOs leave. Continuously monitor the context and surroundings to ensure the exit plan and timeframe can be adjusted to stay useful.

INGOs are beginning to thoroughly review the stages of an Exit strategy that should be incorporated into the post-conflict projects:

- **Stage 01 – Project Design:** The project leader must develop an “Exit Plan” with input from beneficiaries and partners. The INGO must complete certain steps before they withdraw, as outlined in the exit criteria. The project leader needs to establish an appropriate and realistic schedule for the hand-over (Ahmed et al., 2018). Ultimately, the project leader should connect the “Exit Strategy” to sustainable project goals (such as incorporating local materials to prevent dependence on external resources as a key component of an “Exit Strategy”) (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).
- **Stage 02 – Project Implementation:** It is important for the project leader to establish metrics and regularly review the “Exit Strategy” along with its timeline. They should continuously evaluate and adapt the exit criteria throughout the project to account for evolving situations, always consulting with other involved stakeholders. (Ahmed et al., 2018). They also need to define how responsibilities are divided among various stakeholders regarding plans, activities, resources, and expertise. In the end, it is necessary for them to incorporate the project's tasks into the framework of community organizations that will continue once the project is finished (Burder, 2014).
- **Stage 03 – Preparing to Exit:** The project leader needs to discuss the exit criteria with all involved stakeholders and come to a consensus on the final step-by-step exit and hand-over process (UNESCO, 2016). They must also establish specific indicators (such as developing management skills, mastering technical abilities, securing financial resources, etc.) for enhancing capacity (Ahmed et al., 2018). Frequently, capacity building is overly generalized. Capacity building should focus on specific stakeholders to enhance their skills for advancing project execution (Couche-Franquet et al., 2023).
- **Stage 04 – Phase Out:** The project leader needs to sign official contracts regarding the transfer of funds/ resources, etc. Additionally, the departure should occur in a gradual manner. This will allow local organizations to enhance both their capacity and expertise. It also enables the supervision of the departure procedure to learn from successful practices and address any issues that arise (Booth & Unsworth, 2014).

- **Stage 05 – Evaluate:** The project leader needs to include a post-exit evaluation in the project to determine the longevity of its results. After observing the departure, a post-project evaluation months later can uncover unforeseen issues and impacts (UNESCO, 2016). Including every party with a vested interest in the assessment process can guarantee the precision of the outcomes. (Ahmed et al., 2018).



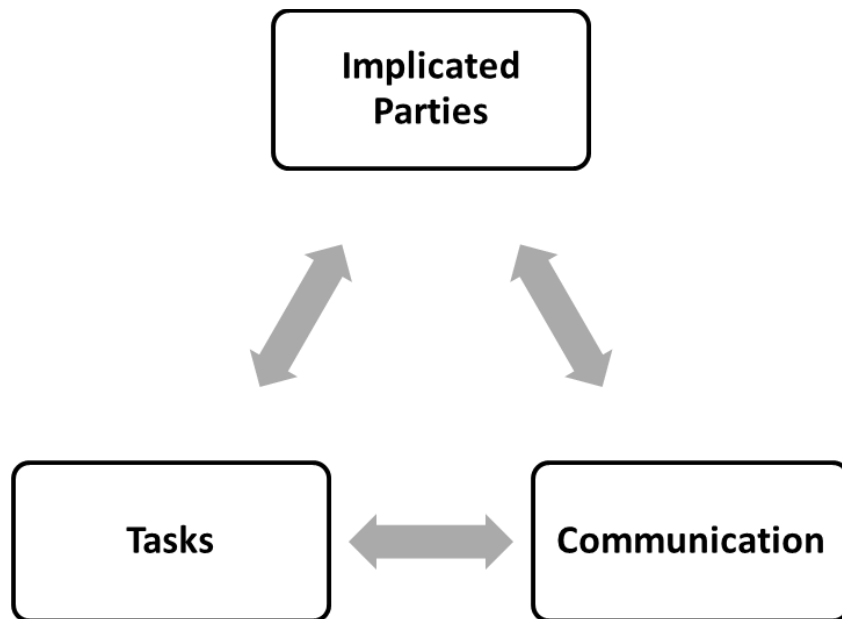
**Figure 16. Exit Strategies incorporation into the Post-Conflict Project**

## 9.6. The Process of Developing an “Exit Strategy”

### 9.6.1 How to Start

There are several elements to determine when starting the process of developing an “Exit Strategy”:

- **Implicated Parties:** Have conversations about this issue with the organization, the affected community, beneficiaries, and other stakeholders. The scope of the Exit Strategy to be created (e.g. project, community, region, etc.) will determine which individuals to involve in the conversations (Burder, 2014; Hayman & Lewis, 2018).
- **The task:** The outcomes of the project that the INGO wants to continue after it is finished must be checked and verified (Ahmed et al., 2018).
- **Communication:** The INGO must exchange and discuss these elements with the implicated stakeholders as their responses will inform the rest of their “Exit Strategy” planning process (Burder, 2014).



**Figure 17. Elements to consider when starting to plan an “Exit Strategy”**

### 9.6.2 Planning Matrix

A planning Matrix for Exit Strategies must be applied.

Prepare for an “Exit Strategy” starting from the “Design” phase of the project	Establish strategic alliances and cultivate relationships within the local community	Developing local skills and capacities	Mobilize Resources & Funds for “Exit Strategy”	Implement a gradual phase-out process for different activities	Allow relationships to develop post-exit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Revisit the process of gradually discontinuing activities.</li> <li>Examine the schedule of activities.</li> <li>Establish the “phase out” as it stands.</li> <li>Organize the tasks required to achieve the milestones.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deciding on potential partners.</li> <li>Deciding what the partners will contribute to the partnership.</li> <li>Checking what the INGO plans to provide to its partners.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifying the necessary competencies, skills, and abilities.</li> <li>Verifying if those capabilities are already in place.</li> <li>Deciding which indicators to use for tracking the development of these skills.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examining the required inputs for service upkeep.</li> <li>Identifying the individuals who can supply these resources.</li> <li>Checking whether these inputs are accessible from either nearby sources or from outside locations.</li> <li>Understanding which advantages of the project can be maintained without ongoing contributions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Examine the primary components of the project.</li> <li>Understanding the elements that rely on one another.</li> <li>Recognizing the completion of studies.</li> <li>Determining the strategy for leaving.</li> <li>Determining the chronological order.</li> <li>Determine the method in which the exit project will be carried out.</li> <li>Determine which tools are used for monitoring.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deciding on the most effective forms of continuous support.</li> <li>Examine the ways in which funding can be secured for continued support.</li> </ul>

**Table 01. “Exit Strategy” Planning Matrix**

### 9.6.3 Articulating the Planning of the Exit Activities

Experts have pointed out that numerous factors can help the project manager in identifying tasks, organizing deliverables, assigning duties, creating a schedule, choosing milestones, and forming a monitoring strategy.

The planning of the “Exit Strategy” must consider (UNESCO, 2016; Ahmed et al., 2018):

- The desired outcome of the strategy.
- The aim of the “Exit Strategy”.
- The proposed “Exit Strategy”.
- The general criteria for the “Exit”
- The dynamic of the “Exit” measures and how to attain them.
- The parties involved in the exit project.
- The roles of each implicated stakeholder.
- The criteria that should be used to evaluation the execution and outcomes of the “Exit Strategy”.
- The benchmarks and indicators to monitor the outcomes and evaluate them while establishing the timeline for such an activity.
- A budget for the “Exit Strategy”.
- Etc.

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