



## Closing programs whilst continuing to keep people safe: what to consider

### Why would we close a program early?

Development and humanitarian programs previously have abruptly had to come to an end for a variety of reasons.

These include civil unrest and political instability, rejection from local governments and global pandemics (such as Covid-19). Most recently because of President Trump's recent executive order, *Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid*. The stop-work orders for existing programs have led INGOs to figure out how best to stop the work that they are doing to conform to the order without leaving communities with greater risks.

It is imperative that they continue to keep the communities they operated in safe. This guidance should support organisations to tackle this task.

### What could the immediate impacts on communities include?

- **Increased unmet needs** – The termination of projects will leave gaps in essential services and support, affecting communities in multiple ways, not least in unmet needs and psychological strain.
- **Increased gaps in information and communication** – Communities will require clear guidance on what is happening now and what to expect in the future, how this affects them, and what their options and alternatives are.
- **Heightened risks**, especially in protection and safeguarding – Vulnerable groups will face increased risks, leading to a higher demand for protective services.
- **Increase in psychological stress** – Uncertainty and the loss of support systems may contribute to anxiety and distress among affected individuals.
- **Rising tensions and competition for scarce resources** – With reduced assistance, communities may face increased pressure on existing resources, potentially leading to increased conflict or social tensions.

### What are the safeguarding risks when closing programs abruptly?

There are a variety of safeguarding risks to communities when closing programs abruptly and unexpectedly. These include, but are not limited to:

- Children and adults who receive support from INGOs and NGOs will be abruptly cut off; potentially without time to seek alternatives. This in turn could increase their vulnerability to exploitation or other abuse because the sudden shift in situation may leave them without vital resources (food, medical care, shelter, education etc.). It is possible that an increase in sexual exploitation and trafficking may occur. Especially vulnerable groups such as survivors of Gender Based Violence (GBV), children, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, the elderly, refugees and internally displaced people are likely to face sudden increase in risks. There is a potential to also see an increase in general violence as communities adapt to the sudden reduction in resources and support.
- The reduction in NGOs may lead to increased power imbalances between those who remain and those they seek to help. If there is only one provider of aid in the community, community members may be even less likely to share SEAH or safeguarding concerns.
- It is likely that some INGOs and NGOs will have open safeguarding cases, such as investigations or support plans in place for survivors. These will be extremely difficult to close, and potentially unsafe for the survivor and investigators to complete once operations are closed. The risks here are significant – both to survivors who have taken part in the investigation, expecting (and being promised) some level of protection and support, including psychosocial support, relocation, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and to Subjects of concern (SoCs) whose cases may have resulted in an unsubstantiated claim, and who will not have the opportunity to clear their name.
- Communities may have strong negative reactions to sudden program closure, which may result in protests/demonstrations, including violent ones, or targeting of local program staff, volunteers, and other personnel working in those communities. This may have a long-term impact on the credibility of individual NGOs in that community, and INGOs/NGOs as a whole.
- Risk of very sensitive data being compromised in a rapid exit, as we have seen in previous conflicts, for example where a militia group has taken over an NGO site and accessed data relating to HIV cases, GBV, protection and other disclosures. The risk is that this may happen in a similar way to abandoned NGO sites.
- Risk of incomplete programs causing harm – such as unfinished medical treatment leaving individuals more vulnerable in future, part-completed therapy work, removal of life-saving services such as stabilisation centres part-way through treatment plans.

- The survivor support pathway may crumble leaving survivors of SEAH without the expected support.
- With unfinished development work (especially clear in infrastructure and WASH development) will likely mean that there is unfinished work which contractors that are not USAid funded may bid to complete – not knowing who these contractors are, could mean that there is a lack of safe recruitment or background checks, meaning these contractors bring a risk of exploitation.
- Health and Safety issues leading to an immediate risk of harm. For example, where there is unfinished construction work and sites are not secured/locked, this could cause minor, or major injury or result in death.
- The loss of trust and perceptions of broken contracts with communities and programming partners. There are increasingly strong anti-aid and anti-western narratives being spread online and through parallel networks like WhatsApp that erodes the acceptance that NGOs rely so heavily on for safety in complex contexts. NGOs and their staff may be seen as more acceptable and desirable targets for criminals as they have lost community support, and hostile actors may feel the opportunities outweigh the risks.
- The immediacy of programs closing leads to risk of terminated employees and their families seeking compensation or retaliating against the NGOs for their loss of livelihood. Exacerbated by narratives which have been circulating implying that some NGOs have kept money they owe to partners and staff rather than honoring their obligations, this creates risk of violence or theft. Local staff and their families may themselves lose access to some forms of services and support.
- The freeze or termination of USAid is resulting in significant reductions of staffing levels, including safeguarding staff who work for INGOs and NGOs. It's imperative that they really consider the importance of their already stretched safeguarding teams to avoid exploitation in programs and projects that continue to operate. Cutting safeguarding budgets is often a false economy as safeguarding mismanagement can have serious implications for funding and real reputational risk.

### How do we communicate to those affected why programs are closing suddenly?

When closing projects, it is important to ensure what and how we communicate is done sensitively, honestly and helps reduce any potential additional distress. Cross organisationally, we need to ensure that our messaging of the circumstances that we found ourselves in are consistent to ensure that we are minimising distrust and competing interpretations.

1. **Engage local leaders first** – Inform traditional leaders, ministry leaders, implementing partner leaders, formal and informal women leaders and local authorities privately

before making a public announcement. Seek their guidance on communicating the message effectively.

2. **Be honest but compassionate** – Explain clearly the sudden exit without technical jargon. Acknowledge the hardship it may cause and reassure the community that this decision was not taken lightly.
3. **Show empathy and respect** – Listen and recognise concerns, respectfully acknowledging communities' worries and frustrations, even if communicated with anger and disappointment. Ensure non-verbal communication such as body language and tone of voice are calm and open.
4. **Acknowledge unmet expectations** – Be transparent about what will and won't happen next, express regret for unfulfilled commitments, and avoid making false promises. Make pathways to reporting ethical concerns, like safeguarding or fraud, clear and effective.
5. **When and where to share this information:** Carefully choose the timing and setting to prevent community tensions or panic. Share the information in appropriately sized groups, ensuring inclusivity. Consider alternative ways to reach marginalised or hard-to-reach groups, particularly children, the elderly and people with disabilities – who may not be able to attend town hall style meetings.
6. **Ensure staff and volunteer safety** – Prepare staff for potentially strong reactions, exit in a way that prioritises safety, and consider security measures if tensions are high.

## What should INGOs consider when closing their programs?

1. Consider opportunities to enhance localisation in the closure. Are there CSOs or community groups that you can transfer resource (however limited) to continue the work? Can you prioritise safeguarding training and AAP (accountability to affected people) training? Bond would encourage global training providers to rapidly support CSOs with core skills such as safeguarding during these periods.
2. Where possible, retain a skeleton staff to ensure orderly closure of programs, activities and program sites. Ensure the skeleton staff has a safeguarding specialist within the group to finish safeguarding casework, or, alternatively train a senior staff member on safeguarding skills to enable this work. Where this isn't possible, consider joining with other affected INGOs to leave a joint skeleton staff in place to handle complaints, safeguarding concerns, liaison with local authorities and other related duties. Local investigators can be found [here](#).
3. Global INGOs and UN should work closely together (where possible dependent on organisational capacity) to establish and prioritise the communities that will be affected by multiple NGO closures at once and agree a joint communications plan to avoid communities who receive high levels of support from multiple NGOs to go through

similar conversations multiple times. This communication plan must include safeguarding messaging, such as who to contact, and how, if unresolved safeguarding concerns surface. Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach.

4. Prepare for an influx of demands for information and assistance as well as complaints. This includes additional staff and phones where possible. If there are exits from certain projects and program areas, please either share a generic or country-wide hotline and feedback/complaints channels that are accessible remotely. Include these channels in all your communications.
5. Establish community focal points, ideally with additional phone credit, in areas no longer accessible, to relay feedback, complaints, and requests for information and assistance.
6. If correctly trained staff are available support accountability and wider project staff to be prepared for sensitive conversations through refresher training on Psychological First Aid, and a GBV Pocket Guide.
7. Ensure risk assessments are up to date and adapted to reflect any newly identified risks based on the ongoing situation and the stage of the program – this should be updated alongside local staff and communities (including children) for your work in the area. Ensure the risk assessment includes threats related to SEAH. Consider the possibility for this to be done inter-agency. for example, all mid to large size INGOs and NGOs and CSOs are invited to take part and find solutions together. Threats could include:
  - a. Impact of multiple closures on the community and corresponding increased risk of SEAH and GBV, reliance on remaining NGOs/power imbalance
  - b. Trafficking
  - c. Sexual exploitation
  - d. Sensitive data in the wrong hands
  - e. Whether cases can be shared with local authorities
8. Honesty and openness will be key in communicating to communities; safeguarding staff should work with AAP staff to input into communication strategies and language that reflect the local community, not one size fits all. Recommend that these take a 'solution' focus – how can the community adapt, what ideas do they have, how can the NGO support them in a limited way what training can be rapidly provided? Safeguarding messaging must be embedded here.
9. Share quality assured local support mapping what has been completed with the community lead, ensuring that communities know where to access support should they require. Make sure you check which of the support services you have in your mapping are going to continue operations.
10. Once the mapping is completed, where one INGO, NGO or CSO is still operating in a certain place, consider how that NGO could support the completion of safeguarding case

work with support from the departing INGO. This would be necessarily light-touch, but could involve ensuring a contact point for survivors and linking up survivors to support where possible. Departing NGO's should budget for this and provide training as necessary.

11. Inform the community that the program will be paused/stopped whilst setting a clear outline of what support is and isn't available - clarity should be provided that local reporting mechanisms will remain in place for an agreed period. You should also provide an alternative way to report once the local mechanisms are no longer operating, allowing communities to continue to report SEAH relating to the work you have undertaken. This can be done through existing reporting mechanisms or a hotline, and should include anonymous reporting options.
12. Connect communities with in-country CSOs that can provide support.
13. Work with local partners and local CSOs to ensure that they have adequate resources, policies, processes and training to effectively manage safeguarding concerns, should they arise.
14. Ensure all sensitive data are secure, prioritising sensitive data in more remote bases which may be paper based such as HIV, GBV, Safeguarding.

### Remember, you are not alone

You are not the only organisation facing this issue – reach out to other INGOs or local partners in the areas that you are working with and support one another. This is not a moment to be competitive, but one to come together to support the communities we work in.

Use Bond's [members directory](#) to understand who else is working in the communities that you are in – thinking also about any other networks that your organisation is part of and taking the opportunity to collaborate with its membership. For those working in humanitarian assistance, consider reviewing guidance from the [UN office for the coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#).

### Annex 1

#### Key Messages for program participants and wider community

*It is essential to adapt these for your individual context. The areas that most need input from you are highlighted in yellow below*

1. Termination/reduction in funding in activities

- Due to circumstances beyond our control, we will **no longer be able to provide certain services** that you may rely on.
- We know this will have a big impact, and **we want to be open with you** about what this means.
- Funding for this project **has been stopped with immediate effect.**
- We **regret that this news has come so suddenly.** Our organisation was not informed about this in advance, so we are sharing this information with you as soon as possible. Unfortunately, we were unable to provide any updates before today.
- We and other similar organisations have been impacted by these cuts. [provide further details as appropriate on direct impact – specifically around whether we will be able to continue working in that area]
- This means that the project activities [provide further details as appropriate on direct impact on programs: how are activities affected, which ones, for how long, and what alternatives are there for said support/services].

## 2. Signposting/linking to other support services

- We are **not the only organisation that has been impacted** by this funding cut.
- However, we are aware of **other organisations who are still providing support** in specific circumstances.
- We **do not have the specific details of their criteria**, but we would encourage you to contact them to request for assistance.
- **Some of our work will continue** as it is unaffected by these cuts [add details of what and where as appropriate]
- For further information on support and services available, please contact [insert relevant FCRM channels].

## 3. Professional and Ethical Conduct

- Our staff are committed to **upholding professional standards and behaviours and doing no harm.**
- We are here to **help**, and we are committed to conducting ourselves responsibly and respectfully.
- Our staff should **never ask for money, goods, sexual favours, or gifts** in exchange for assistance.
- If you are concerned about the behaviour of staff or anyone associated with our organisation, **please report it to us through our feedback and complaints mechanisms.**
- You can report any concern to [add hotline/WhatsApp/community leaders and focal points etc.].

## 4. Strengthening Community Resilience

- People in the community may **react to stressful situations in different ways**, and that is ok. Supporting one another can help everyone get through this difficult time.
- Look out for each other, **especially the most vulnerable in your community**, including the older people, children and people with disabilities, who may struggle more than others.
- Work together with neighbours to **form support groups**, share food and skills, and exchange advice.
- Find ways to **reuse, recycle, and share** resources within the community to reduce costs and make the most of what is available.

- Reduced resources can sometimes lead to tension in communities. If conflicts arise, consider seeking guidance from **community leaders to help mediate and find solutions quickly**.

#### 5. **Advocacy**

- We **cannot promise** that our and others' funding will start again or that our programs will resume.
- We want to listen to your concerns and answer any questions you may have.
- We are **committed to sharing your feedback and concerns** with **[insert advocacy / coordination groups]**