Global Protection Cluster

Guidance for Protection Cluster coordinators to support partners implementing sudden programme closure

April 2025

This document[1] provides guidance to Protection Cluster coordination teams on how to discuss and prepare with partners for any closure of their protection programming. In principle, each partner and operation should have an exit strategy in place for their programming.[2] While it is desirable that an exit strategy is based on a situation where there are no further needs, or where local authorities/services have the capacity to take over from protection programming, programmes close for many reasons. This includes situations such as a loss of funding, sudden loss of access, or a shift in needs in another location.

- This document recognises that with the reduction in foreign aid in 2025, partners will close programmes before they originally intended, and without full transition measures in place.
- This note will also reflect on the actions that can be taken by Protection Cluster coordination teams to facilitate the programme transition process considering sudden programme closure.

It is important to recognise that:

- All efforts should be made to ensure any programme closure is necessary, planned, and conducted in a principled manner.
- Most partners will have their own internal guidelines and best practice on closure of programmes and partners should be supported to adhere to these.
- The closure or scale down of programming will have an impact on people who were receiving support and assistance, particularly those whose assistance is disrupted.
- Protection is an interagency response – and the reduction of service provision from one partner will have an impact on other partners. It is important that we engage in this collectively and responsibly to ensure that this does not have a negative impact on community trust and the access of remaining organisations.
- The scale down of programming will have an impact on the ability of protection partners to reach their collective objectives under the HNRP and cluster strategy.
- Programme exit/scale down can be a very emotional process. It may create distress among affected communities who may no longer receive previously provided support and services. It may also be very difficult for partners because colleagues and counterparts will lose jobs.
- The funding shortfalls expected in 2025 are system wide, which means non protection actors will also end programming. This will have an impact on the capacity and focus of any remaining protection partners and directly hinder referral/access to basic services.
- Some relevant guidance is already available (e.g. CPHA Alliance on closure of case management programmes).

The core ethos of this guidance can be applied across the protection spectrum.

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[1] This document draws on the Whole of Syria Child Protection AoR programme closure guidance (March 2025), Guidance Note for Partners in Protection Sector Northeast Nigeria (March 2025), Bond Guidance Note on Closing Programs (March 2025), and inputs from NRC ICLA and PfV programme leads.

[2] This should be the case for international partners, including those that give grants and funds to local partners. Local partners may not have specific exit strategies, where they do not anticipate leaving specific communities or areas.

Safeguarding risks associated with Programme Closure

Protection cluster coordinators should be aware of safeguarding risks linked to sudden programme closure, and any potential rise in the risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.

- There is a risk of increased vulnerability to exploitation or abuse (incl. trafficking, sexual violence, child labour) because of sudden shift in situation which may leave communities/individuals without essential resources.

- With reduced assistance, communities may face increased pressure on existing resources, potentially leading to increased violence, conflict or social tensions.

- Negative reactions to sudden programme closure may result in protests/demonstrations, or targeting of local program staff, volunteers.

- Sensitive data related to individual cases may be compromised in a rapid exit.

- Incomplete programmes may cause harm, leaving individuals more vulnerable.

- The loss of trust with communities may lead to disinformation/misinformation and an impact on overall acceptance of humanitarian aid in complex contexts.

1. Developing a Rapid Exit Strategy

It is the experience of the protection sector that most partners will work as hard as possible, within their resources, to implement the responsible exit of programmes. Partners find ways to ensure the safe closure of any individual or community level protection programmes.

There are several different types of exits, depending on the capacity of the partner:
1) Reduced activities or closure of specific activities/services
2) Temporary exit until further funding is secured
3) Transfer of activities/services to another organisation or integrated into other sector
4) Complete closure of activities, with no alternative programme

A partner's options for an exit strategy depend on:

- Levels of available funding and if they can conduct a more phased withdrawal.

- The presence of other operational actors and the capacity and willingness of other actors to take over activity functions and assistance provision.

- Engagement and reaction of communities and authorities to the information of draw down or withdrawal.

- Energy and vision of programme management team to imagine alternative programme interventions, including those that can be provided by other actors or through a cross-sectoral integrated approach.

Where there is no alternative protection actor, the full closure of a programme is the option of last resort.

The Impact on Local Partners

A very common scenario for local partners is that their funding (including funding from UN agencies and INGOs) ends, so they continue providing services without resources. This is an unfair and unsustainable situation for these partners.

Protection responses rely on formal networks of national and local partners, and informal networks such as volunteers and focal points. Clusters should work to identify these partners and mechanisms to encourage a transfer of partnership and/or network responsibilities.

2. Guidance for an exit process of protection programming

Ending of a Community Level Project

Protection projects are often the core of humanitarian community engagement. Initiatives such as community centres operate as one stop shops and community hubs for essential information and services and are essential infrastructure in any new crisis. Their closure negatively impacts the communities that access them.

For organisations that support communities in their early warning, and community safety and resilience strategies, sudden project ends can cut off this vital support in helping communities reduce their direct exposure to violence and risks.

> **Guidance/Tips**
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> 1. Work with communities to update relevant community level plans and provide them with the most recent and relevant information necessary to implement these plans.
> 2. Carry out an information campaign, first with project participants and then publicly, so that project participants can understand what will happen next and whether there will be alternative sources of support. See examples:
>   - Key Messages for Programme Participants and Wider Community
>   - UN OCHA Collective Messages on the Suspension of Humanitarian Assistance – Information for Communities and Affected People
> 3. Assess whether contact with communities can be maintained remotely.

Ending of Individual or Family Cases

Specialised protection programming such as legal assistance, protection case management, PSS interventions, supports individuals at high risk of violence and other protection risks, and are often people who rely on their relationship with the partner for safety support as well as a crucial component of their mental and emotional well-being.

The end of these programmes can be a significant shock to individuals and families that are receiving assistance and can occur before people have found a dignified solution to their issue.

Guidance/Tips

1. Inform all concerned individuals, if feasible individually, if not through community messaging, of the closure of the programme as soon as possible.
2. Handover services to an alternative actor such as a local/national authority or a different protection actor, to ensure continuity and minimise disruption.
3. Ensure that all open or pending cases (e.g. legal cases, cash assistance, PSS assistance) are properly dealt with either by handing them over to other actors or by closing them, and that this happens with the full consent of the programme beneficiaries in question.
4. Ensure that all personal data from project participants, including case management databases and legal case files, are properly disposed of.
5. Ensure participation of and clear communication with target populations, local actors, and other stakeholders throughout the exit and handover process.
6. Where there is no alternative provider – all case information should be handed back to the project participant.

3. Key Partner Responsibilities for an Exit Strategy

The following checklist provides an overview of issues that a partner should consider when planning an exit strategy. These are not exhaustive, and partners will have further internal considerations such as duty of care.

Checklist	✔
Programme Beneficiaries	
Direct beneficiaries of the programme have been informed (and if possible consulted) about the change to the programme in appropriate manner and provided with information about alternative services.	
All individuals who have provided Personal Data to the programme have been informed about how their Personal Data will be handled and assent/informed consent has been secured for any transfer of data to a new service provider. (Also see point on data protection below)	
If possible, existing feedback and complaints mechanisms (including for sensitive complaints such as SEA or fraud) will remain in place and function during the change to the programme and for a period afterwards.	
Case Transfer	
The organization has identified high risk cases and discussed transfer modalities with a receiving organization. If it is not possible to identify a locally relevant partner, discuss with the Protection Cluster for alternative option.	
If transferring cases to another organisation, there is confidence that the receiving organisation has sufficient capacity (i.e. skilled staff, SOPs, resources etc.) to take on these case management activities and this has been verified with the relevant coordination body.	
Community Planning	
Community leaders, community-based protection mechanisms, and any other volunteers have been informed (and if possible consulted) of the change to the programme and provided with information about alternative services to be able to provide direction to other available services.	

Are programmes/activities handed over to a local CSO/community group? Is there a transition plan in place and plan to transfer assets?	
Communicating with Other Stakeholders (incl. donors, authorities)	
Donors are informed of the change to the programme and the exit strategy used.	
The organization has also met with other relevant stakeholders (e.g. local authorities if applicable, other sectors operating in the same geographic area) and explained the change to the programme and the exit strategy used.	
Data Protection	
Electronic and hard copy Personal Data and sensitive data has been moved or destroyed as per procedures agreed in data protection protocols and information sharing protocols.	
Coordination	
The change to the programme has been communicated to the Protection Cluster coordination mechanism and to any other relevant organisations in their area of operation (including UN OCHA and other protection partners).	
Organisations are made aware of any community safety and security plans that have been put in place.	
Organisations are made aware of specific agreements and messages with authorities, particularly those that have an impact on remaining partners in the area.	
Plan to dispose of assets	
Organisations should ensure they have a plan to protect or dispose of assets. Where possible, transfer assets to local organisations and communities.	

4. How can the Protection Cluster support Exit Planning?

Protection Clusters play an important role in the programme transition processes and supporting exit planning. Clusters are intermediaries with donors and other stakeholders and might be called upon to speak with local and national authorities. The reality of the transition processes and exit strategies is that partners might not find adequate solutions.

Protection Cluster will need to be clear and specific in its advocacy, there will be different solutions for different partners, locations and programmes, to mitigate the impact of the reduction in protection activities.

One of the most challenging aspects of exit planning is that often there is no like for like swap where a partner can fully hand over all programmes and beneficiaries. Partners and clusters might have to think imaginatively about what else you can do to reduce the risk of affected populations that is realistic in the operational environment and maintains community contact.

A. Partner Engagement

- Foster an environment of transparency across partners, to ensure timely information sharing on scale down or exit plans.

- Encourage partners to provide clear information to communities, and authorities, on any scale down or exit, and share information on alternative protection services.

- Discuss key messages to communities and authorities – and develop common guidelines on transfer of goods/assets and data protection where required.

- Be sensitive to the impact on local partners, who are likely to be asked to do significantly more with even less.

B. Support Planning

- Update cluster tools that enable partner decision making and engagement – such as 3W and service mapping.

- Support referral processes, particularly for high-risk caseloads and people in need of specialised services. Be willing to engage with cluster lead agencies where there are referral gaps.

- Share information in a timely manner, including relevant inter-cluster information such as any information on the withdrawal or scale down of non-protection partners.

C. Update a Minimum Response Strategy

- Plan with partners on how to ensure a minimum response presence with the existing resources, including where relevant by transitioning to integrated multisectoral programming. Discuss with partners how to ensure minimum presence – options include:
    - Remaining partners expand services
    - Remaining partners transition to multisectoral programming
    - Partners develop mobile services to enable coverage
    - Partners adopt a protection focal point system to strengthen case identification and referral
    - Discuss early warning systems
    - Simplify processes such as protection monitoring
- Advocate on critical gaps that will increase exposure to protection risks

D. Frontline and Emergency Response

In this early stage of the financial reduction, partners might initially be less flexible as they internally manage the impact of the funding reduction and reorient existing financing towards a safe and principled exit of certain locations or response activities. It is important that the cluster continues to coordinate together on emerging situations.

- Ensure the cluster continues to discuss and share information on emerging protection situations and hosts frontline response capacity.