Ethics & humanitarian project closure

Note: this is a condensed version of a 'guidance note' developed from the Ethics of Closing Projects study. See last page for details.

ETHICAL TENSIONS

While many project closures unfold relatively smoothly, yet closing projects has been described as "the most difficult, the most moveable, and the most emotive task of humanitarian aid" (Hollingsworth 2003 p. 270).

When we interviewed national and expatriate staff of humanitarian organizations who had been involved in project closures, we heard…

"Closing down an operation is always the hardest part I think… to make sure that [there is] coherency, that when we leave we haven't made the organization we've been working with a weaker one which is often the case I'm afraid. **That we leave behind a stronger, better functioning, more respected and more trusted" partner organization**.

"It's also **particularly difficult from a medical perspective** because, you know the situation in [country], I mean, yes, you open for a measles epidemic or a cholera epidemic but then you end up doing all the deliveries, you end up doing any type of respiratory infection, all the malaria cases, etc."

It was very, very, very painful and very difficult and I think that… it didn't always go well, especially for the national staff, so I think there are sometimes things that **we should look at in retrospect and say, did we really do this in the best way possible?"**

PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The **purpose** of this document is to promote discussion and reflection about ethics and the closure of humanitarian projects. While we refer to project closures, we include processes of transitioning (i.e. from emergency to recovery or development) such as phasing down, phasing over or handing over a project, or more abrupt modes of closure.

The **scope** of our analysis is the ethical dimensions of making and enacting decisions to close humanitarian health projects. In other words, we focus on what values are identified, and how these values are lived out or challenged for those involved.[1] Acknowledging the diversity of humanitarian projects, mandates and financial constraints, and the uniqueness of each case and context, this 'Guidance Note' highlights ethical considerations related to closure while offering sample questions that can support deliberation and attention to ethical features of project closure.

HOW TO USE THIS 'GUIDANCE NOTE'

Teams, coordinators, and policy-makers could use this document as a tool to reflect upon and consider how ethical considerations arise in relation to project closure. They could also use it to chronicle a closure process for purposes of accountability or to contribute to organizational learning by noting responses to the questions that are raised. Others may draw upon it, such as **funders, government authorities or community leaders,** in establishing parameters or engaging in discussions with humanitarian organizations about project closure. The document can also be used as a resource for **training activities** on closure or to support **debriefing** of a challenging situation.

1. While there are many logistical and strategic dimensions of closure decision-making, this is not our focus here; nor are we looking at 'forced closures' such as the withdrawal of authorizations by a government or when a major security incident leads to the rapid shuttering of a project.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROJECT CLOSURE

Humanitarian organizations have responsibilities toward communities with whom they have been working. The nature of these responsibilities varies due to the significant diversity in projects, contexts and communities. However, the extent of these obligations are generally greater the more comprehensive the services provided, the longer the duration of the project, and the higher the degree of reliance of the community upon the project. Here we describe five ethical considerations for humanitarian project closure.

A. BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS & ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Working collaboratively to harmonize approaches and minimize disruptions is important for supporting a successful transition. Input solicited from all stakeholders (across all phases of the project) should inform decisions in moving toward closure. Out of concern for fairness and equity (i.e., avoiding unjustified exclusion of relevant perspectives) ethical closure calls for thoughtfully attending to who is involved in the decision-making process. Prerequisites to effective partnerships and participation are critical self-awareness and a capacity among humanitarian actors for engaging with the "social fabric of action."[1]

▹ Have stakeholders' input been elicited and taken into account?
▹ Do opportunities exist for creating or enhancing partnerships with local actors, governments, other organizations?
▹ Are there opportunities to better understand and take into account the perspectives of others?
▹ What compromises or trade-offs should be anticipated and worked through?

B. MINIMIZING HARM

A key concern is avoiding or minimizing harms for populations receiving assistance (e.g. loss of services, feelings of abandonment, heightening of tensions, misuse of project data). Risks of harm may also arise for wider communities (e.g. economic disruption, insecurity), local staff (e.g. loss of employment, distress) or the organization (e.g. reputational harm). Robust planning and ongoing risk analysis are essential for purposes of identifying, avoiding, minimizing or mitigating potential harms. Minimizing harm above all, entails an active engagement to identify possible outcomes, forecast contingencies, and be diligent in planning continually, during each phase of a project: practicing foresight. Organizations and teams should also apply what has been learned in previous closures to mitigate harms.

▹ What potential harms are associated with different models of project closure?
▹ Who will experience them? How will they be distributed?
▹ How are/will risks and benefits be identified and by whom? Analyzed? Perceived?
▹ How can risks be avoided, minimized or mitigated for this project, especially as circumstances change? For future projects?

C. CLEARLY COMMUNICATING REASONS AND PROCESS

To reduce uncertainty, process and timelines for project closure should be clearly communicated to community members, project staff and partners. The rationales supporting the decision to close ought to be well justified and communicated forthrightly.

▹ Have steps and timing of project closure been communicated in ways that reflect fair participation and enhance understanding and predictability, and demonstrate respect?
▹ Has the rationale for the decision been communicated to all stakeholders?

1. Springer, E. (2013). *Communicating Moral Concern: An Ethics of Critical Responsiveness*. MIT Press. p.9

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR PROJECT CLOSURE

D. DEMONSTRATING IMPARTIALITY

Impartiality entails that services are provided in ways that are non-discriminatory and based on need alone.[2] As projects are phased down or over, attention should be given to how services and resources are apportioned, as well as the distribution of risks of harm. Particular attention is required to address the needs of marginalized and especially vulnerable groups. These commitments are linked to the concepts of distributive and social justice.

> ▹ *How can fairness in the distribution and access to resources for all persons and groups be promoted?*
> ▹ *Are social or institutional norms, unquestioned assumptions, stereotypes, or inequitable processes shaping thinking and decisions around closure?*
> ▹ *How might the consequences of project closure uphold or challenge the principle of impartiality?*
> ▹ *How should we respond to the needs of people who are especially vulnerable?*

E. PROMOTING SUSTAINABILITY AND CAPACITY-BUILDING

Project closure should take into account a longer-term view: the legacy of the project. Handover and transition present opportunities to increase the likelihood that quality services will be accessible after the project ends. Key to sustainability are efforts to build capacity amongst local staff and project partners, and to design the closure process in ways that are likely to lead to a viable phase over or hand over of programs. Attention should be paid to funding the transition, harmonizing processes, calibrating standards, and maintaining access for local populations.

> ▹ *How can closure be organized in ways to optimize continued services for the community in ways that match local priorities?*
> ▹ *How can project closure be better tailored and responsive to the local context, including capacities, resources and coping strategies of local communities?*
> ▹ *How can closure occur in ways that enable local communities to build on existing strengths and resources and enhance their capacities to ensure health services for all people over time?*

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FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE 'ETHICS OF CLOSING PROJECTS' STUDY:

Further outputs from this project and an extended version of the guidance note are available at www.humanitarianhealthethics.net/ethics-and-the-closure-of-humanitarian-healthcare-projects/. Feel welcome to send questions or any feedback to matthew.hunt@mcgill.ca

DEVELOPMENT

We drew on three sources to develop this guidance note: interviews with humanitarian workers with experience of project closure; a review of articles and reports related to closing humanitarian projects; and broader scholarship in bioethics, humanitarian ethics, political philosophy and political science.

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2. ICRC: https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/resources/documents/misc/fundamental-principles-commentary-010179.htm