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Responsible exit of humanitarian aid agencies at the end of programs: a scoping review protocol

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Responsible exit of humanitarian aid agencies at the end of programs: a scoping review protocol

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Abstract

Introduction: In humanitarian settings, aid agencies are constantly challenged by difficult decisions such as when and how to terminate the aid without harming the aid recipients, local institutions, staff members and the organization. Despite important efforts devoted to responsibly leaving a setting, hurtful exits are still common in contemporary relief aid. Moreover, debates on how humanitarian aid agencies exit is believed to be limited with no previous comprehensive evidence synthesis on the concept of “responsible exit”.

Objective: The objective of this scoping review is to map evidence and knowledge gaps, identify and describe concepts, theories and existing frameworks related to “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies

Methods and analysis: we will first search the following bibliographic databases: CAB Direct (including Global Health), Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Secondly, we will carry out manual searches of specific journals. Third, grey literature will be retrieved through search on organizational websites, direct contact with experts and organizations. Finally, reference tracking will provide additional sources. To be included, published or unpublished papers must explicitly or implicitly discuss the exit of humanitarian aid agencies from humanitarian settings and be accessible. We will exclude all exit related to military and governmental humanitarian operations, business, education, development, employment, and business sectors. Only papers written in English and French will be considered. Three reviewers will conduct the selection process against the pre-defined criteria. Data will be extracted in an iterative process following a pre-established items in an excel spreadsheet and the results will be presented in PRISMA-ScR flowchart, tables and/ or graphs, and descriptive formats.

Dissemination and Ethics: The results will be disseminated through publication in a scientific open access journal, scientific conferences, workshops, and certain humanitarian aid agencies to facilitate further research and possible practical translations of generated knowledge.

Being a review, conducted on publicly available information, no ethical approval is required.

Strengths and limitations of the study

- To our knowledge, the present scoping review is the first one comprehensively looking at the diverse aspects of “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies
- This review adheres to the JBI’s scoping review guidance, ensuring systematisation, traceability, and reproducibility of the process
- To enhance transparency, the current project has been registered with Open Science Framework
- Although no time limitation will be applied for paper inclusion, limiting the screening to papers published in English and French is the major limitation to the project

INTRODUCTION

Amid the increasing funding gaps, the global humanitarian aid system struggles to effectively respond to crises. Although the funding of humanitarian action has doubled in the last decade, it reached a ceiling in the past four years while the global humanitarian needs have risen steadily. (3) Moreover, this trend is expected to worsen in a context of increasing conflicts and political instability, pandemics, climate change, and reversed development gains in employment, food security, education, and healthcare. (1-3) Furthermore, the above factors, in an intersectional fashion, can weaken health systems in humanitarian settings in all their building blocks. (4,5) Consequently, humanitarian aid agencies, designed to deploy temporary interventions, are challenged with difficult decisions concerning when to prolong or terminate projects. (6-8) Exiting from humanitarian settings is known to be a challenging and highly complex process, influenced by a wide range of factors, since contemporary relief aid can be considered as a complicated set of operations undertaken in an often highly politicized and insecure context, and involving multiple actors with diverging interests. (6)

Unsuccessful exits are common and often find their root causes in poorly planned and implemented processes. This can lead to a range of detrimental outcomes for the aid recipients, the local health system, the national staff, the departing organization, and other partners. (2,7,9-11) Several international initiatives, toolkits, and guidance documents, such as the “*Sphere project*” and “*The Agenda for Humanity*” (2,6,12,13), emphasize that strategic planning as essential to ensure positive long-term effects and to reduce the risk of dependency. Yet, exiting responsibly from humanitarian settings is not straightforward. (6)

Although the exit strategies have been increasingly recognized as an important topic in the humanitarian sector since the beginning of the twenty-first century (2), Bolt K et al argue that the debate on how humanitarian aid agencies leave at the end of the program is much smaller compared

to other stages of the project cycle in the humanitarian literature. For instance, projects evaluations tend to focus on other phases of the project cycle (starts, monitoring...), their efficiency, the logistics of the aid delivery. (8) Even though Pal et al have synthesized the evidence on the ethics of closing humanitarian projects (2), to our knowledge, there is no comprehensive evidence synthesis on the so called “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies.

REVIEW QUESTION AND OBJECTIVES

Using the Participant-Concept-Context (PCC) framework (11) (referred as PCC in Table 1), we formulate the review question as follows: *What is known from the literature on the exit strategies of non-governmental humanitarian organizations.* More specifically, this review aims at answering the following questions:

- What are the characteristics of the exit strategies of humanitarian aid agencies?
- What are the knowledge gaps concerning the exit strategies of humanitarian aid agencies?
- What are the attributes and guiding principles of ‘responsible exit’ strategies of humanitarian aid agencies?
- What “responsible exit” frameworks exist and/or are being used by the humanitarian aid agencies?

We aim at mapping the existing evidence regarding exit strategies and the knowledge gaps. We will identify and describe the core concepts, theories and existing frameworks related to “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies.

Table 1 PCC framework - Attributes & rationale

PCC framework	Attributes	Rationale
Participant	Non-governmental organizations	Highly debated notions of “sustainability”, “relief-development nexus” and the “do no harm” principles in humanitarian operations
Concept	Exit strategy	Complex phenomenon and challenging process for humanitarian aid agencies

Context	Humanitarian settings (natural & man-made disasters, conflicts, post-conflict, epidemics, forced displacement)	Natural scene of humanitarian aid agencies
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METHODS

The proposed project will be conducted in accordance with the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) methodology for scoping reviews. (16) More specifically, this section firstly details the processes of identifying and selecting relevant studies and reports. It then looks at the data extraction methodology and finally it presents how the findings will be analysed and presented.

Identifying relevant studies and reports

Types of Sources

This scoping review will consider both bibliographic databases and grey literature databases with no limitations to study designs. Literature reviews meeting the inclusion criteria will be considered.

Search strategy

Using the above PCC frameworks, an initial limited keywords search of CAB Direct (including global health) and PubMed was undertaken to identify articles on the topic. The text words contained in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, keywords and the subject headings used to describe the articles were used to develop a full search strategy (see examples in Tables 2 & 3). The last was reviewed by a librarian. The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, will be adapted for each selected database. Backward and forward reference tracking will allow to search for additional sources.

Table 2. Search strings in CAB Direct (including global health) on 5th December 2022

Search #	Query
1	((title:("emergency relief" OR "Oxford Committee for Famine Relief" OR "relief" OR "disasters" OR "natural disasters" OR "non-governmental organization" OR "non-governmental agency" OR "humanitarian aid") OR ab:("emergency relief" OR "Oxford Committee for Famine Relief" OR "relief" OR "disasters" OR "natural disasters" OR "non-governmental organization" OR "non-governmental agency" OR "humanitarian aid")) AND (title:("exit " OR "closing" OR "withdrawal strategy" OR "withdrawal" OR "phasing" OR "handover" OR "transition") OR ab:("exit" OR "closing" OR "withdrawal" OR "phasing" OR "handover" OR "transition")

Table 3. Search strings in PubMed on 5th December 2022

Search #	Query
3	(#1) AND (#2)
2	(((((exit [Title/Abstract]) OR (closing [Title/Abstract])) OR (withdrawal [Title/Abstract])) OR (phasing [Title/Abstract])) OR (handover [Title/Abstract])) OR (transition [Title/Abstract]))
1	((("Disasters"[Mesh]) OR "Natural Disasters"[Mesh]) OR "Relief Work"[Mesh] OR "Non-governmental organization" OR "non-governmental agency" OR "humanitarian aid")

Following discussions with the librarian and using the above keywords and subject headings, we will search the following bibliographic databases: CAB Direct (including Global Health), Web of Science, PubMed and Google Scholar. Moreover, we will carry out manual searches of specific journals, such as the Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, the Journal of Humanitarian Aid, and the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance. To identify grey literature, we will firstly search humanitarian organizational websites through google, using the following syntaxes such as *emergency OR relief OR humanitarian OR disaster OR non-governmental organization AND "Exit strategy" site:.org*. Only the first ten google pages will be screened for relevant documents. In a second stage, we will directly contact major organizations and expert authors in humanitarian sector for relevant grey literature. Furthermore, the reference list of relevant studies and report will be searched for additional sources.

Owing to resource limitations, only studies published in English and French will be included. No time limit (i.e., year of publication) will be applied.

Selecting relevant papers

Selection process

Firstly, all identified citations will be collated and uploaded onto Rayyan.ai (17) and deduplicated. Secondly, titles and abstracts will be independently screened by DB, HS, and AK for assessment against the eligibility criteria (Table 2). Finally, against the same criteria, the full text of selected citations will be assessed in depth. All reasons for exclusion of sources of evidence will be recorded and displayed in the final report. Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers at any stage of the selection process will be resolved through discussion and if no agreement can be reached, BM will step in.

Eligibility criteria

To be included in this review, the paper must explicitly discuss the exit of non-governmental humanitarian aid agencies and be available in full text online or through direct contacts. Since we aim in focusing on non-governmental humanitarian organizations, we will exclude all papers focused on military-humanitarian aid, governmental humanitarian aid, development aid, and papers that discuss studies from business, employment, and education sectors, as well as papers presenting exit strategies related to COVID-19 measures.

The “exit strategy”, the concept of concern, is understood as the organizational management practice of how an agency leaves a community after implementing a program. (15) We will include situations where a project was closed completely or handed over to another organization or entity, phased down or transitioned to recovery or development agencies.

The context is humanitarian aid settings, defined by natural and man-made disasters, armed conflicts, post-conflict settings, epidemics, situations of forced migration and fragile settings.

Further details of eligibility criteria are presented in the table 4.

Table 4. Eligibility criteria

Criteria		
Domains	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Participants	Non-governmental humanitarian agencies	military-humanitarian aid, governmental humanitarian aid, development aid, business, employment, and education sectors, COVID-19 control measures
Concept	Exit strategy (phase out, phase-down, phase-over, camp closure, transition from relief to rehabilitation)	None
Context	Humanitarian settings (natural and man-made disasters, armed conflicts, post-conflict settings, epidemics, forced migration and fragile settings)	Others

Language	English and French	Others
Time restriction	None	None
Type of source	Published and unpublished papers without methodological limitations (journal papers, reports, guidelines, conference proceedings, magazines, newspaper, strategy papers...)	None

The results of the search and selection process will be fully reported in the final scoping review and presented in a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews extension for scoping review (PRISMA-ScR) flow diagram. (18)

Data Extraction

Building on research questions, a draft extraction form is provided in Table 5. It includes bibliometric parameters (Authors, types of paper, year of publication or production, country of focus, context, organization) and thematic items regarding “exit” and “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies. The initial data extraction form will be subject to modifications, in an iterative fashion, during the data extraction process. Any modification will be reported in the scoping review report.

Table 5. Data extraction form

Domains	Sub-domains	Description
Bibliometrics	Author (s)	Last name, First name or name of the organization
	Year	Year of publication or production (grey literature)
	Type of paper	Journal, Book, Book section, reports, guideline, conference proceedings, opinion paper...
	Country	Country of focus if any
	Context	Protracted crisis, natural disaster, displacement, pandemic...
	Organization	Organization of Focus
Thematic items	Definitions	Related to exit
	Exit categories	Types of exit strategies
	Decision-making	Concepts and theories in exit decision-making
	Challenges & outcomes	Challenges to successfully strategize & impacts of unsuccessful exits

	Responsible exit	Key characteristics of responsible exits (definition, goal, attributes, and guiding principles)
	Frameworks	Existing or used “responsible exit” frameworks
	Knowledge gaps	

After piloting the above form on five randomly selected relevant papers, DB and NS will extract data from selected papers. Extracted data will be extensively and iteratively discussed with all authors and any unclear findings will be subject to further analysis and discussion.

Data Analysis and Presentation

Extracted data will be collated, analyzed, and summarized in an iterative manner. First, the identification and selection processes will be summarized in a PRISMA-ScR frame, along with a tabulated and/or graphic summaries of the included references. Subsequently, in a narrative format, we will summarize the extracted data and report on them according to the review objectives. We anticipate a four-month timeline to finalize the present review (Table 6).

Table 6. Anticipated timeline

The review stages	Month			
	Dec 2022	Jan 2023	Feb 2023	Mar 2023
Stage 1. Conceptualizing, clarifying review question and objectives	x			
Stage 2. Identifying papers		x		
Stage 3. Selecting relevant papers			x	
Stage 4. Data extraction			x	x
Stage 5. Collating, analyzing, summarizing, and reporting results				x

Patient and Public Involvement

No patient involved.

DISSEMINATION AND ETHICS

The findings of the review will be submitted for publication in a scientific open access journal. The outcomes of this scoping review will be disseminated through conferences, workshops, and certain humanitarian aid agencies to facilitate further research and possible practical translations of generated knowledge.

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3 Being a review, conducted on publicly available information, no ethical approval is required.
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6 **Author's Contributions**

7 Djoki Bahati and Bruno Marchal: Conceptualization

8
9 Dirk Schoonbaert (librarian from Institute of Tropical Medicine, Antwerp, Belgium): Inputs on
10 database selection, review of search strategy

11
12 Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy, Aram Kalhor: Search and Selection of relevant papers

13 Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy: Data extraction, analysis, and elaboration of the first draft report

14
15 Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy, Aram Kalhor and Bruno Marchal: Review and finalization of the report
16
17

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19
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21 profit sectors.
22

23 **Competing interest**

24
25 None to declare.
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Abstract

Introduction: In humanitarian settings, aid agencies are constantly challenged by difficult decisions such as when and how to terminate aid without harming the aid recipients, local institutions, staff members and the organization. Despite important efforts devoted to responsibly leaving a setting, hurtful exits are still common in contemporary relief aid. Moreover, debates on how humanitarian aid agencies exit is limited, with no previous comprehensive evidence synthesis on the concept of “responsible exit”. The objective of this scoping review is to map evidence and knowledge gaps and to identify and describe concepts, theories and existing frameworks related to “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies.

Methods and analysis: Our search utilises searches of several bibliographic databases (CAB Direct [including Global Health], Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar) as well as manual searches of specific journals and retrieval of grey literature through searches of organizational websites and direct contact with experts and organizations. Reference tracking will be used to identify additional sources. Searches will cover papers available up to the dates of the searches (December 2022 to January 2023), with no date restrictions applied to the literature search. To be included, published or unpublished papers must explicitly or implicitly discuss the exit of humanitarian aid agencies from humanitarian settings and be accessible. We will exclude all exits related to military and governmental humanitarian operations, business, education, development, employment, and business sectors. Only papers written in English and French will be considered. Three reviewers will conduct the selection process against the pre-defined criteria. Data will be extracted in an iterative process following a pre-established items and the results will be presented in PRISMA-ScR flowchart, tables and/ or graphs, and descriptive formats.

Ethics and dissemination: Being a review, conducted on publicly available information, no ethical approval is required. The results will be disseminated through publication in an open access journal, scientific conferences, workshops, and via humanitarian aid agencies to facilitate further research and possible practical translations of generated knowledge.

For a full review, visit <http://bmjopen.bmj.com/lookup/abstract/guidelines.xhtml>

Strengths and limitations of this study

- This review adheres to the JBI's scoping review guidance, ensuring systematisation, traceability, and reproducibility of the process.
- To enhance transparency, the current project has been registered with Open Science Framework
- Although no time limitation will be applied for paper inclusion, limiting the screening to papers published in English or French and publicly available or accessible to the authors through the Institute of Tropical Medicine's Library of Antwerp's library databases is a major limitation to the project.

INTRODUCTION

Amid increasing funding gaps, the global humanitarian aid system struggles to effectively respond to crises. Although the funding of humanitarian action has doubled in the last decade, it reached a ceiling in the past four years while the global humanitarian needs have risen steadily. Moreover, this trend is expected to worsen in a context of increasing conflicts and political instability, pandemics, climate change, and reversed development gains in employment, food security, education, and healthcare. (1-3) Furthermore, the above factors, in an intersectional fashion, can weaken health systems in humanitarian settings in all their building blocks. (4,5) Consequently, humanitarian aid agencies, designed to deploy temporary interventions, are challenged with difficult decisions concerning when to prolong or terminate projects. (6-8) Exiting from humanitarian settings is known to be a challenging and highly complex process, influenced by a wide range of factors, since contemporary relief aid can be considered as a complicated set of operations undertaken in an often highly politicized and insecure context, and involving multiple actors with diverging interests. (6)

Unsuccessful exits are common and often find their root causes in poorly planned and implemented processes. This can lead to a range of detrimental outcomes for the aid recipients, the local health system, the national staff, the departing organization, and other partners. (2,7,9-11) Several international initiatives, toolkits, and guidance documents, such as the "*Sphere project*" and "*The Agenda for Humanity*" (2,6,12,13), emphasize that strategic planning as essential to ensure positive long-term effects and to reduce the risk of dependency. Yet, exiting responsibly from humanitarian settings is not straightforward. (6)

1
2
3 Diverse definitions and terminologies are used by organizations and academics to define what means
4 a “good exit strategy”. Consequently, there is no unique way of defining “good exit” since different
5 meanings may arise from diverse perspectives. Furthermore, different terminologies are
6 interchangeably used to indicate “success”. For example, while Hunt M et al., or Pal et al. use “ethical
7 exit”, Tull K., British Red Cross and Rachel et al. advance the term “responsible exit” and Lee promotes
8 the term “viable exit”. Despite various terms used, some commonalities have been associated with
9 the term, such as sustainability, inclusive participation, effective coordination, right timing,
10 responsible planning, capacity building (2,9,14,15,16,17). For consistency, the term “responsible exit”
11 will be used in this study.
12

13
14 Although the exit strategies have been increasingly recognized as an important topic in the
15 humanitarian sector since the beginning of the twenty-first century (2), Bolt K et al argue that the
16 debate on how humanitarian aid agencies leave at the end of the program is much smaller compared
17 to other stages of the project cycle in the humanitarian literature. For instance, projects evaluations
18 tend to focus on other phases of the project cycle (starts, monitoring...), their efficiency, the logistics
19 of the aid delivery. (8) Even though Pal et al have synthesized the evidence on the ethics of closing
20 humanitarian projects (2), their synthesis appears to solely focus on only two phases of the project
21 cycle, namely the exit decision-making and implementation. In contrast, this project aims to go beyond
22 these phases, from the assessment phases to the post-exit evaluation phases. Moreover, to our
23 knowledge, there is no comprehensive evidence synthesis on the so called “responsible exit” of
24 humanitarian aid agencies and the mapping of existing frameworks.
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27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 **Review question and objectives**

39
40 Using the Participant-Concept-Context (PCC) framework (18) (Table 1), we formulate the review
41 question as follows: *What is known from the literature on the “responsible exit” strategies of non-*
42 *governmental humanitarian organizations.* More specifically, this review aims at answering the
43 following questions:
44
45

- 46 - What are the characteristics of the exit strategies of international humanitarian aid agencies?
- 47 - What are the knowledge gaps concerning the exit strategies of international humanitarian aid
48 agencies?
- 49 - What are the attributes and guiding principles of “responsible exit” strategies of international
50 humanitarian aid agencies?
- 51 - What “responsible exit” frameworks exist and/or are being used by international
52 humanitarian aid agencies?
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We aim at mapping the existing evidence regarding “responsible exit” strategies and the knowledge gaps. We will identify and describe the core concepts, theories and existing frameworks related to “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies.

Table 1. PCC framework – attributes and rationale

PCC framework	Attributes	Rationale
Participant	International non-governmental organizations	Highly debated notions of “sustainability”, “relief-development nexus” and the “do no harm” principles in humanitarian operations
Concept	Exit strategy	Complex phenomenon and challenging process for humanitarian aid agencies
Context	Humanitarian settings (natural & man-made disasters, conflicts, post-conflict, epidemics, forced displacement)	Natural scene of humanitarian aid agencies

METHODS AND ANALYSIS

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Identifying relevant studies and reports

Types of sources

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Using the above PCC frameworks, an initial limited keywords search of CAB Direct (including global health) and PubMed was undertaken to identify articles on the topic. The text words contained in the titles and abstracts of relevant articles, keywords and the subject headings used to describe the articles were used to develop a full search strategy. The last was reviewed by a librarian. The search strategy, including all identified keywords and index terms, was adapted for each selected database.

Following discussions with the librarian and using the above keywords and subject headings, we searched the following bibliographic databases: CAB Direct (including Global Health), Web of Science, PubMed, and Google Scholar. Moreover, we have carried out manual searches of specific journals, such as the Journal of Humanitarian Affairs, the Journal of Humanitarian Aid, and the Journal of Humanitarian Assistance. To identify grey literature, we first searched humanitarian organizational websites through google, using multiple phrases keywords + "site:.org ". Only the first ten pages, filtered by relevance were screened for relevant documents, uploaded on rayyan.ai. In a second stage, we directly contact major organizations and expert authors in humanitarian sector for relevant grey literature. Furthermore, the reference list of relevant studies and report will be searched for additional sources. Finally, backward, and forward reference tracking will be used to search for additional sources. The database searches were conducted between 5th December 2022 and 5th January 2023. The full search strategy in key databases is available as Supplementary Material.

Owing to resource limitations, only studies published in English, French and publicly available or accessible to authors through the Institute of Tropical Medicine of Antwerp's library databases will be included. No time limit (i.e., year of publication) was applied to the literature searches.

Selecting relevant papers

Selection process

Firstly, all identified citations will be collated and uploaded onto Rayyan.ai (19) and deduplicated. Secondly, titles and abstracts will be independently screened by DB, HS, and AK for assessment against the eligibility criteria (Table 2). Finally, against the same criteria, the full text of selected citations will be assessed in depth. All reasons for exclusion of sources of evidence will be recorded and displayed in the final report. Any disagreements that arise between the reviewers at any stage of the selection process will be resolved through discussion and if no agreement can be reached, BM will step in.

Eligibility criteria

To be included in this review, the paper must explicitly discuss the exit of international non-governmental humanitarian aid agencies and be available in full text online, in Library or through direct contacts. Since we aim in focusing on international non-governmental humanitarian organizations, we will exclude all papers focused on military-humanitarian aid, governmental humanitarian aid, local humanitarian aid agencies, development aid, and papers that discuss studies from business, employment, and education sectors, as well as papers presenting exit strategies related to COVID-19 measures.

For this review, first, the “exit strategy” is understood as the organizational management practice of how an agency leaves a community after implementing a program. (17) Second, “responsible exit”, the concept of concern, is understood as “ensuring that the process of leaving aid recipients, communities, staff, and other stakeholders is conducted in transparent, respectful, and accountable manner” with the overall objective of “ensuring continuity of access to quality services.” Moreover, literature on related concepts such as “ethical”, “successful”, “good”, “accountable”, “viable” exit or “closing well” will be included. However, although the term “exit” is widely used in the literature, it is believed to be misleading since it emphasizes one point in time, while “exiting well” is described as a mindset and a process. (11)

We will include situations where a project was closed completely or handed over to another organization or entity, phased down or transitioned to recovery or development agencies.

The context is humanitarian aid settings, defined by natural and man-made disasters, armed conflicts, post-conflict settings, epidemics, situations of forced migration and fragile settings.

Further details of eligibility criteria are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Eligibility criteria

Criteria			
Domains	Inclusion criteria		Exclusion criteria
Participants	International non-governmental humanitarian agencies		Military-humanitarian aid, governmental humanitarian aid, local humanitarian agencies development aid,

		business, employment, and education sectors, COVID-19 control measures
Concept	Exit strategy (phase out, phase-down, phase-over, camp closure, transition from relief to rehabilitation)	None
Context	Humanitarian settings (natural and man-made disasters, armed conflicts, post-conflict settings, epidemics, forced migration and fragile settings)	Others
Language	English and French	Others
Time restriction	None	None
Type of source	Published and unpublished papers without methodological limitations (journal papers, reports, guidelines, conference proceedings, magazines, newspaper, strategy papers...)	None

The results of the search and selection process will be fully reported in the final scoping review and presented in a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews extension for scoping review (PRISMA-ScR) flow diagram. (20)

Data extraction

Building on research questions and the pre-reading of 5 papers discussing extensively the notion of “responsible exit”, a draft extraction form is provided in Table 3. It includes bibliometric parameters (Authors, types of paper, year of publication or production, country of focus, context, organization) and thematic items regarding “exit” and “responsible exit” of humanitarian aid agencies. The initial data extraction form will be subject to modifications, in an iterative fashion, during the data extraction process. Any modification will be reported in the scoping review report.

Table 3. Data extraction form

Domains	Sub-domains	Description
Bibliometrics	Author (s)	Last name, First name or name of the organization
	Year	Year of publication or production (grey literature)
	Type of paper	Journal, Book, Book section, reports, guideline, conference proceedings, opinion paper...

	Country	Country of focus if any
	Context	Protracted crisis, natural disaster, displacement, pandemic...
	Organization	Organization of Focus
Thematic items	Definitions	Related to exit
	Exit categories	Types of exit strategies
	Decision-making	Concepts and theories in exit decision-making
	Challenges & outcomes	Challenges to successfully strategize & impacts of unsuccessful exits
	Responsible exit	Key characteristics of responsible exits (definition, goal, attributes, and guiding principles)
	Frameworks	Existing or used "responsible exit" frameworks
	Knowledge gaps	

After piloting the above form on five randomly selected relevant papers, DB and NS will extract data from selected papers. Extracted data will be extensively and iteratively discussed with all authors and any unclear findings will be subject to further analysis and discussion.

Data analysis and presentation

Extracted data will be collated, analyzed, and summarized in an iterative manner. First, we aim organizing the analysis of the findings by identifying key attributes and guiding principles throughout the project cycle, namely assessment and project design, project implementation and monitoring, exit decision-making, exit implementation and post-exit evaluation. Second, "responsible exit" frameworks (if any) will be analyzed for strength and weakness against the background of identified characteristics of "responsible exit." Third, the identification and selection processes will be summarized in a PRISMA-ScR frame, along with a tabulated and/or graphic summaries of the included references. Subsequently, in a narrative format, we will summarize the extracted data and report on them according to the review objectives. We anticipate a nine-month timeline, starting from December 2022, to finalize the present project.

Patient and public involvement

None.

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION

Being a review, conducted on publicly available information, no ethical approval is required. The findings of the review will be submitted for publication in an open access scientific journal. The outcomes of this scoping review will be disseminated through conferences, workshops, and via humanitarian aid agencies to facilitate further research and possible practical translations of generated knowledge.

Contributors

Djoki Bahati and Bruno Marchal: conceptualization. Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy, Aram Kalhor: search and Selection of relevant papers. Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy: data extraction, analysis, and elaboration of the first draft report. Djoki Bahati, Houssynatou Sy, Aram Kalhor and Bruno Marchal: review and finalization of the report.

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Competing interest

None to declare.

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		OR AB=("handover policy")) OR AB=("handover guideline")) OR AB=("transition strategy")) OR AB=("transition policy")) OR AB=("transition guideline"))		
Humanitarian organizations' websites	1	"Emergency relief" OR "disasters" OR "relief work" OR "humanitarian assistance" OR "Non-governmental organization" OR "Non-governmental agency" OR "emergency relief" OR "humanitarian aid" AND "exit " OR "closing" OR "withdrawal strategy" OR "withdrawal" OR "phasing" OR "handover" OR "transition" site:.org	10 th Dec 2022	193 (first 10 pages filtered by relevance)
Google scholar	1	"Exit strategy" OR "closing strategy" OR "closure strategy" OR "phasing strategy" OR "transition strategy" OR "withdrawal strategy" AND "humanitarian organization" OR "humanitarian assistance" OR "humanitarian aid" OR "relief aid" OR "disaster aid"	5 th Jan 2023	177 (first 10 pages filtered by relevance)
Direct contact with organizations (Médecins Sans Frontières)	NA	NA	11 th Dec 22	23

Total records = 4221

Records after deduplication = 4067