

PEER REVIEW HISTORY

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ARTICLE DETAILS

TITLE (PROVISIONAL)	Responsible exit of humanitarian aid agencies at the end of programs: a scoping review protocol
AUTHORS	Bahati, Djoki; SY, HOUSSYNATOU; Kalhor, Aram; Marchal, Bruno

VERSION 1 – REVIEW

REVIEWER	Hunt, Matthew McGill University, School of Physical and Occupational Therapy
REVIEW RETURNED	22-Feb-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>I'm pleased to read about the plans for this literature review on 'responsible exit strategies' of humanitarian organizations. This is an important topic and an ongoing source of interest and concern for operational humanitarian agencies. The protocol is well organized, clearly articulated, and provides a solid logic for the review. I look forward to reading the results of the review once it is completed.</p> <p>Here are some suggestions and questions for the team to consider as they move forward with their project:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. A main question when reading the protocol related to the role of 'responsible' within the framing of the review:<ol style="list-style-type: none">a. Is it necessary to establish an operational definition of what counts as "responsible exit" for the purposes of this review? The authors may wish to keep this open to learn what others are saying about this concept, however this will make it harder to decide/justify when to include related concepts such as "accountable exit strategy" (used in some IFRC discussions) or "ethical exit strategy". I would think these are near-neighbour concepts that would provide insight around responsible exits, but how wide should the net be stretched? For example, the authors specifically distinguish their review from the Pal 2019 review focused on ethical project closure.b. Since all other aspects of the protocol (from the title forward) set 'responsible exit (strategies)' as the primary focus, it was surprising to me that the main review question doesn't include the notion of "responsible" but rather asks what is known about exit strategies generally, which is a much wider scope of inquiry. Currently, "responsible exit" only appears in the secondary questions. Are there ways to increase alignment?2. Will the review include literature on both international and national non-governmental organizations' exit strategies? There are likely varying considerations regarding responsibility depending on how these organizations are situated, including in relation to notions of locally-led humanitarian action.
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	<p>3. "Exit strategy" remains a widely used concept in the field. On the other hand, some commentators have expressed that focusing on "exit strategies" unduly emphasizes the point of organizational departure and downplays other steps needed to close projects with due care and diligence. I would suggest acknowledging this critique of the term 'exit strategy.'</p> <p>4. The grey literature search is less clearly spelled out. In particular, the steps of an open google search and targeted website searches are presented as one action. I would suggest presenting these as distinct steps and providing further details on how they will be operationalized.</p> <p>5. The analysis process for the extracted data is also described in a very limited manner. Further detail on how the narrative summaries will be created would be useful.</p>
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REVIEWER	Chung, Ryoa University of Montreal
REVIEW RETURNED	07-Jun-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS	<p>This research protocol aims to produce a scoping review on the notion of 'responsible exit' of humanitarian aid agencies at the end of programs. It is a highly topical and important research project. The research team is undoubtedly qualified to complete this project. The strengths and limitations of the study are well identified, the methodology appears rigorous, and the selection and exclusion criteria are well explained. The bibliography identifies the major references on the subject.</p> <p>Although this evaluation favours the publication of this research protocol, two minor revisions would be necessary to flesh out the study's theoretical framework and contribution.</p> <p>Firstly, more substantive definitions are needed to orient the research perspectives and objectives properly. We may intuitively understand what constitutes a good or bad, successful or unsuccessful exit, but we still need to define these normative notions. Indeed, do the researchers intend to pursue a purely descriptive analysis of the negative empirical consequences of a program closure? Or is it more about an ethical reflection on what constitutes the wrongs done to the individuals or communities suffering from such an exit considered a moral failure? Should that be the case, how do the researchers define the nature of the "responsibility" of humanitarian aid agencies? In this respect, the "Introduction" and the "Review Question and Objectives" sections seem lacking.</p> <p>Secondly, it would be worthwhile to specify the originality of this research project compared to the work of Pal et al., which the authors cite in passing to contrast their research goal. There is no doubt about the importance of the authors' contribution to this field of research, which indeed deserves to be developed further. However, the nature of the contributions expected from this research project should be clarified at greater length.</p> <p>These two requests for clarification are suggested as opportunities to enrich the research protocol. This research project deserves to be pursued and published in BMJ Open.</p>
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VERSION 1 – AUTHOR RESPONSE

Reviewer: 1

Dr. Matthew Hunt, McGill University

Comments to the Author:

I'm pleased to read about the plans for this literature review on 'responsible exit strategies' of humanitarian organizations. This is an important topic and an ongoing source of interest and concern for operational humanitarian agencies. The protocol is well organized, clearly articulated, and provides a solid logic for the review. I look forward to reading the results of the review once it is completed.

General comment

We thank you for these comments and we look forwards to improving the quality of the manuscript and sharing the results of the review.

Here are some suggestions and questions for the team to consider as they move forward with their project:

1. A main question when reading the protocol related to the role of 'responsible' within the framing of the review:

a. Is it necessary to establish an operational definition of what counts as "responsible exit" for the purposes of this review? The authors may wish to keep this open to learning what others are saying about this concept, however, this will make it harder to decide/justify when to include related concepts such as "accountable exit strategy" (used in some IFRC discussions) or "ethical exit strategy". I would think these are near-neighbor concepts that would provide insight around responsible exits, but how wide should the net be stretched? For example, the authors specifically distinguish their review from the Pal 2019 review focused on ethical project closure.

Response 6

The above comment is of great importance. As you state, there are several concepts and terms, which are sometimes interchangeable, having some common elements as well as some differences in terms of attributes and guiding principles. Exactly because of this risk of conceptual confusion, we opted for starting with a definition. As discussed by authors such as Pett et al. 2011 and Bader et al. 2021, we understand a "responsible exit" as "ensuring that the process of leaving aid recipients, communities, staff, and other stakeholders is conducted in a transparent, respectful, and accountable manner" with the overall objective of "ensuring continuity of access to quality services." That said, in the analysis, we will not restrict ourselves to a narrow interpretation, but we will rather consider related concepts such as "ethical", "successful", "good", "accountable", and "viable" exit, "closing well".

b. Since all other aspects of the protocol (from the title forward) set 'responsible exit (strategies)' as the primary focus, it was surprising to me that the main review question doesn't include the notion of "responsible" but rather asks what is known about exit strategies generally, which is a much wider scope of inquiry. Currently, "responsible exit" only appears in the secondary questions. Are there ways to increase alignment?

Response 7

Thanks for this pertinent remark and we have aligned the text accordingly (see page 3, lines 28-54)

2. Will the review include literature on both international and national non-governmental organizations'

exit strategies? There are likely varying considerations regarding responsibility depending on how these organizations are situated, including in relation to notions of locally-led humanitarian action.

Response 8

We appreciate these remarks, and we acknowledge that this was not made clear in our exclusion criteria. Our intention is to focus on international humanitarian aid agencies. This is now explicitly clarified in the manuscript (see Table 1, eligibility criteria on page 5, lines 52-60, and page 6, lines 3-7)

3. Exit strategy” remains a widely used concept in the field. On the other hand, some commentators have expressed that focusing on “exit strategies” unduly emphasizes the point of organizational departure and downplays other steps needed to close projects with due care and diligence. I would suggest acknowledging this critique of the term ‘exit strategy.’

Response 9

We Agree and it is done (see page 6, Lines 19-23)

4. The grey literature search is less clearly spelled out. In particular, the steps of an open Google search and targeted website searches are presented as one action. I would suggest presenting these as distinct steps and providing further details on how they will be operationalized.

Response 10

We clarify that we did not do an open Google search. Our Google search targeted organizational websites by using the syntax keywords + site:.org. This retrieved documents from organizational websites having the concerned keywords. We have clarified the steps of the search accordingly (see on page 5, lines 14-25)

5. The analysis process for the extracted data is also described in a very limited manner. Further detail on how the narrative summaries will be created would be useful.

Response 11

We agree and have provided more details (See on page 8, Lines 28-43)

Reviewer: 2

Dr. Ryoa Chung, University of Montreal

Comments to the Author:

This research protocol aims to produce a scoping review on the notion of the 'responsible exit' of humanitarian aid agencies at the end of programs. It is a highly topical and important research project. The research team is undoubtedly qualified to complete this project. The strengths and limitations of the study are well identified, the methodology appears rigorous, and the selection and exclusion criteria are well explained. The bibliography identifies the major references on the subject.

General comment

We thank the reviewer for these comments, and we look forwards to improving the quality of the manuscript and sharing the results of the review.

Although this evaluation favors the publication of this research protocol, two minor revisions would be necessary to flesh out the study's theoretical framework and contribution.

1. Firstly, more substantive definitions are needed to orient the research perspectives and objectives

properly. We may intuitively understand what constitutes a good or bad, successful or unsuccessful exit, but we still need to define these normative notions. Indeed, do the researchers intend to pursue a purely descriptive analysis of the negative empirical consequences of a program closure? Or is it more about an ethical reflection on what constitutes the wrongs done to the individuals or communities suffering from such an exit considered a moral failure? Should that be the case, how do the researchers define the nature of the "responsibility" of humanitarian aid agencies? In this respect, the "Introduction" and the "Review Question and Objectives" sections seem lacking.

Response 12

- Thanks for these remarks and questions, there are quite important for refocusing the perspectives of this research.

- We do not intend just to describe the negative impact of the so-called “bad exit”, but we aim at identifying responsibilities or ethical elements throughout the project cycle (not only the actual exit phase) that may foster “responsible exit.

- Accordingly, we have added a paragraph in the introduction section for further clarification of the debate. - Diverse definitions and terminologies are used by organizations and academics to define what means “good exit strategy”. There is no unique way of defining “good exit” since different meanings may arise from diverse perspectives. Furthermore, different terms are interchangeably used to indicate "success". For example, while Hunt et al. and Pal et al. use “ethical exit”, Tull, the British Red Cross, and Rachel et al. use the term “responsible exit”. Lee promotes the term “viable exit”. Despite various terms used, some common elements have been associated with the term, such as sustainability, inclusive participation, effective coordination, right timing, responsible planning, and capacity building. For consistency, the term “responsible exit” will be used in this study. (See on pages 2, lines 51-60, and page 3, lines 3-7)

- We have explicitly added the notion of responsibility to our main question to align with the main topic of concern. (See on page 3, lines 30-54)

2. Secondly, it would be worthwhile to specify the originality of this research project compared to the work of Pal et al., which the authors cite in passing to contrast their research goal. There is no doubt about the importance of the authors' contribution to this field of research, which indeed deserves to be developed further. However, the nature of the contributions expected from this research project should be clarified at greater length.

Response 13

- Thanks for this pertinent remark and we agree that it should be further clarified. We have provided in the last paragraph of the introduction section more clarification of the expected contribution of the present project. (See on page 3, lines 17-26)

These two requests for clarification are suggested as opportunities to enrich the research protocol. This research project deserves to be pursued and published in BMJ Open.

Final comments

Thanks again for all the questions, remarks, and suggestions, we hope the above answers and amendments have added value to the present review.

VERSION 2 – REVIEW

REVIEWER	Chung, Ryoa University of Montreal
REVIEW RETURNED	15-Aug-2023

GENERAL COMMENTS

Many thanks to the Author(s) for acknowledging all previous comments. This final version is ready to be published.