

Part of the Process: Transitioning HIV Program Management from U.S.-based to Local Partners  
in Zimbabwe

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Public Health

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Health Services

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**Abstract**

Part of the Process: Transitioning HIV Program Management from U.S.-based to Local Partners  
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**BACKGROUND:** Despite the history of U.S.-based partners leading global health programs in low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries, sustainable models of health care rely on local country partners leading the way. Transition is the process of shifting funder-led programs towards country ownership, where local stakeholders plan, manage, deliver, and finance their health sector. However, transition also encompasses earlier steps where local organizations lead and manage programs but still rely on U.S.-based funding. This phase is scarcely described yet threatens long-term program sustainability if navigated too quickly or with poor outcome.

**METHODS:** This qualitative study examines the transition of Zimbabwe's voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) services and HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services (C&T) programs from management by a U.S.-based organization, the International Training and Education Center for Health (I-TECH), to Zimbabwean management under a new local organization, the Zimbabwe Technical Assistance, Training and Education Centre for Health (Zim-TTECH). The primary objective is to explore challenges, successes, and lessons learned during transition to guide future non-governmental organizations (NGOs) entering similar processes. We conducted sixteen key informant interviews among transition team staff from I-TECH and Zim-TTECH who are based in the U.S. and Zimbabwe, respectively.

**RESULTS:** Findings suggest five major themes to guide the process of transition: 1) Develop a vision and empower leadership for change; 2) Plan and strategize for transition; 3) Communicate

with and inform stakeholders; 4) Engage and mobilize staff; 5) Define short-term and long-term success. Additional sub-themes capture the role of local context in mediating transition processes, transition perceptions and their role in mediating transition-related communication, and development of critical infrastructure and staff capacity.

**CONCLUSION:** Local country context, short transition timelines, and indicators of transition success challenged the transition process whereas strong local staff capacity and a synergistic partnership between Zim-TTECH and I-TECH supported success. Change management frameworks suggest transition is not complete when success is defined, but once the organization consolidates gains from the change process and anchors changes in the culture. Funders, international partner organizations, and local organizations should consider their role in enabling a smooth transition process and empowering greater country ownership in the long term.

## Introduction

Despite the history of largely U.S.-based partners overseeing global health programs in low- and middle-income (LMIC) countries, sustainable models of health care depend on local partners in LMIC countries leading the way. Country ownership is critical for efficient coordination of resources, optimized return on investment, and long-term sustainability; and is a commitment increasingly recognized by major global health funders like the U.S.-based President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (1,2). As the funding environment from bi- and multi-lateral organizations prioritizes moving greater shares of resources to partners based in the country where programs operate, funder pressures highlight the urgency of transitioning programs historically led by U.S.-based partners to local, in-country partners.

The concepts of country ownership and transition, however, are variably defined in the literature (3). Per the Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness of 2005 and the Accra Agenda for Action of 2008, country ownership involves local partners leading the definition, design, and implementation development priorities (4). Collins and Beyrer (5) add financing of health programs as an additional role, while the Global Health Initiative summarizes country ownership as “the continuum of actions taken by political and institutional stakeholders in partner countries to plan, oversee, manage, deliver, and finance their health sector” (6). The term “local ownership” is also sometimes used instead of “country ownership” to describe the same concept. For the purposes of this paper, we reference the Global Health Initiative terminology and definition of country ownership (6).

Transition generally describes the process of shifting funder-led programs towards country ownership (7). Transitions that are disruptive or too rapid may impact program and data quality, access to services, and risk the long-term sustainability of health programs (5,8). Here, we focus on the process of transition to country ownership, specifically the handover of health programs or services to local organizations based in the country of program operation. An intermediate step in the process, where local organizations lead and manage programs but continue to rely on U.S.-based funders or other external sources, is little described in the literature or funder technical guidance. Yet, this phase of transition poses similar threats to program sustainability if navigated poorly, particularly if local organizations fail to compete for continued external funding following this step.

Several existing frameworks are useful to structure this process, including Bennett's (8) five themes to support smooth handover of programs to local organizations and Vogus' (6) six key steps in planning an effective transition to country ownership. Because both frameworks deal with transition to country ownership overall, as opposed to the intermediate step of transition we discussed, we also consider a change management model to offer a complementary perspective that provides practice-based insight to the fundamental steps any organization may face when navigating a change process (9).

**Table 1: Frameworks for Transition**

<b>Vogus’ Key Steps in Transitioning to Country Ownership (6)</b>	<b>Bennett’s Five themes to support orderly program transition (8)</b>	<b>Kotter’s 8-Step Process for Leading Change (9)</b>
1. Develop a roadmap	1. Develop a vision, and mobilize commitment and leadership for change	1. Establish a sense of urgency 2. Create a guiding coalition
	2. Craft an implementation plan or strategy	3. Develop a vision and strategy
2. Invest in stakeholder participation	4. Communicate and inform stakeholders	4. Communicate the change vision
3. Communicate the plan through high-level diplomacy		
5. Provide technical assistance throughout the process; and	3. Engage staff	5. Empower broad-based action
4. Support midterm evaluations	5. Generate short term wins	6. Generate short term wins
6. Provide long-term monitoring and evaluation (M&E) support		7. Consolidate gains and producing more change
		8. Anchor new approaches in the culture

*Footnote: The order of steps in each process is not explicitly addressed in Vogus (6) and Bennett (8) but is critical in Kotter’s (9) 8-Step change management process.*

In this study, we focus on the transition of the PEPFAR-funded HIV programs in Zimbabwe from U.S.-based management by the International Training and Education Center for Health (I-TECH) to management by a local organization, the Zimbabwe Technical Assistance, Training and Education Centre for Health (Zim-TTECH); and assess factors that facilitated or impeded the transition by applying change management models and lessons from past global health program transitions. Outcomes from this study will inform transitions of other programs managed by I-TECH and provide guidance for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are entering similar processes.

## **Transition of the I-TECH Zimbabwe program**

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) awarded two 5-year cooperative agreements for I-TECH to expand its training, mentorship, and work to support Zimbabwe’s HIV epidemic-control efforts in 2013 (10). I-TECH partnered with local organizations to implement voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) services and HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services (C&T). Over the course of these awards, I-TECH formed two consortia, ZAZIC for VMMC (2013) and the Zimbabwe Partnership to Accelerate AIDS Control (ZimPAAC) for C&T (2018), and successfully competed for the follow-on award in 2018 as local consortia with I-TECH as Prime i.e., the prime recipient of pass-through funds (11). I-TECH has a strong commitment to sustainability and works to capacitate local partners.

In 2013, when the program work transitioned from providing technical assistance to the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) and other local partners to full-fledged cooperative agreements, I-TECH assessed the best strategy for program implementation that best fit with a sustainable model and opted to keep a very small footprint. Rather than establish a traditional I-TECH country office to manage administrative functions of the VMMC and C&T awards, I-TECH partnered with the University of Zimbabwe College of Health Sciences Clinical Trials Research Centre (UZCHS-CTRC) to be the local hub for financial, administrative and some programmatic needs, and called the scope housed under UZCHS-CTRC “I-TECH Zimbabwe”. Funding for VMMC and C&T was thereby directed via subaward to UZCHS-CTRC.

In July 2018, recognizing that programs are more sustainable if locally led, PEPFAR set targets for directing 40 percent of PEPFAR funding to local organizations based in the countries where programs are operating within 18 months; and 70 percent of funding in the ensuing 30 months (12,13). Subsequently, CDC realigned the criteria for local organizations, disqualifying I-TECH Zimbabwe’s consortia from being considered a local organization (14,15). In addition to being in alignment with I-TECH’s own model for sustainability, I-TECH also realized future funding opportunities for VMMC, C&T and other health-related activities under PEPFAR would award strong preference points for local organizations; making it further evident that I-TECH Zimbabwe would be better served by becoming financially and administratively independent.

By fall of 2018, I-TECH began the process of capacitating Zim-TTECH as an independent, autonomous organization with the eventual goal of transitioning management of the VMMC and C&T awards to them as a local organization (See Appendix A). This transition would create a new NGO, the Zimbabwe Technical Assistance, Training and Education Centre for Health (Zim-TTECH), to assume administrative operations for the awards and to continue service delivery for the VMMC and C&T programs. Between September 2018 and June 2020, the transition team developed needed infrastructure for Zim-TTECH to function as an independent NGO, increased Zim-TECH’s readiness to compete as Prime, and negotiated a new structure for sharing award management functions between Zim-TTECH as Prime and I-TECH headquarters (HQ) (See Appendix B). The transition team was composed of staff from I-TECH HQ and UZCHS-CTRC “I-TECH Zimbabwe”, who subsequently became Zim-TTECH staff.

## **Methods**

### **Study Design and Participants**

We conducted a qualitative study based on 16 video conference interviews. We selected participants using purposeful sampling, as informed by the lead program managers who oversaw the transition team (16). Eligible participants included transition team members involved in leadership, administrative, financial, or human resources roles. Sample size was determined by saturation for respondent roles with balanced representation from both I-TECH HQ and Zim-TTECH counterparts. We followed the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) to describe our methodology (17).

## **Data Collection**

An interview guide was developed in collaboration with I-TECH HQ and Zim-TTECH transition staff, using Bullock and Batten's (18) change management framework as a basis to ensure interview prompts touched on key change processes. The interview guide covered the following topics: the participant's role in I-TECH HQ or Zim-TTECH, decision to transition, transition planning, transition implementation, technical support for transition, transition advice, ethics of transition, and defining transition success. A senior researcher (study principal investigator) and junior researcher conducted interviews over Zoom video conferencing between June-July 2020. Both researchers are based in the U.S. and identify as cisgender women. The study principal investigator had direct experience as a manager within the transitioning VMMC program and pre-existing relationships with the participants. The junior researcher was external to both programs and had no prior relationships with the participants.

Interviews were not attended by anyone else besides the participants and researchers. Participants were provided with a brief introduction describing the purpose of the study at the outset of each interview. Participant demographics of interest included organization affiliation (I-TECH HQ vs. Zim-TTECH), organization role, and years of experience with the program. Interviews were semi-structured and questions were tailored based on the participant's organization affiliation and role to enrich responses on topics that aligned with the participant's knowledge areas. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded, and ranged from 30 to 75 minutes in duration. Reflexivity statements were noted prior to each interview to record the researchers' experiences, assumptions, and beliefs that could influence the research process. Field notes were recorded during the interviews. Transcripts were auto-generated using Zoom's built-in transcription function. Subsequently, each transcript was verified for accuracy by two U.S.-based I-TECH HQ staff who listened to the recordings and manually corrected any text misinterpreted by Zoom's auto-transcription. Early themes were presented to study participants to verify the findings.

## **Data Analysis**

Two researchers coded the interview transcripts in Atlas.ti 8.0 using a hybrid inductive and deductive approach based on topics captured in the interview guide (19). Codes were cross-checked across researchers for consistency. Key themes were developed using a thematic analysis approach, originally guided by Bennett's (8) framework for program transition then evolved to fit findings specific to this study.

## **Ethics Statement**

This study was conducted with the approval of the University of Washington institutional review board. The written informed consent process was approved as part of the ethical review and implemented by the study team. As part of this written consent, all participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Video and audio recordings were deleted once data were transcribed and verified. Names were excluded from the final transcripts used for analysis.

## Results

### Develop a vision and empower leadership for change

#### Develop a vision

Though many respondents reported that the sponsor mandate to direct funds to local organizations prompted the transition, local ownership and management of programs was long nurtured as a core value of I-TECH. One I-TECH HQ member describes:

*“This term local ownership, or who is the principal recipient and who is the driving force of a program is an issue. Within I-TECH, transition to local ownership has been a principle...As a high-level philosophy, it is something we all think is important and need to aspire to and move towards...We're not supposed to be keeping ourselves going. Our intent is to strengthen local organizations and the way you strengthen is by giving them opportunity to have more responsibility and more autonomy.”*

Both the VMMC and C&T programs practiced this intention by directing program administration through UZCHS-CTRC as a local sub-award partner, rather than through the standard mechanism a standalone I-TECH office. As a result, the majority of funds were directed to existing Zimbabwean organizations, effectively minimizing the relative footprint of both programs in terms of specially constructed administrative space, infrastructure, and non-local personnel. In the context of transition, one respondent implied an advantage to this arrangement, as *“those offices where they have been wholly our [I-TECH] country office...one of the challenges is trying to foster that sense of ownership and end initiative on areas we've [I-TECH HQ] typically maintained control.”*

#### Empower leadership for change

In the transition, roles were intentionally distributed between I-TECH HQ as the project coordinators, ideologic champions, and support staff while I-TECH Zimbabwe staff held decision-making authority and led implementation on the ground. Doing so helped local actors accept the transition, as one Zimbabwean respondent describes:

*“What I liked about it is that they [I-TECH HQ] did not take ownership of it...Unlike if they had owned the process and then throw it back to us, there would have been some resistance...In terms of policy making, they would also say, ‘but in our setup, in our kind of situation, in our kind of environment, this would work.’...there's more of a guiding approach to everything which I thought was a very good thing because then we also took ownership of the process.”*

Zim-TTECH respondents noted the need for having I-TECH HQ *“play the control function”* during the transition, particularly as in-country staff balanced the dual burden of day-to-day program operations and transition activities. This function is explained by one participant as:

*“Focusing everybody on the goal that needs to be done...I think the problem is that we are so much of an implementer that we don't have in our system that role of someone who steps back and says, “Guys. This is our timeline. There are other things we need to be doing. And [name], you're doing this. Let's get it done.”*

## **Plan and strategize for transition**

### Plan for transition

Transition planning was kicked off by a week-long meeting that included representatives from the I-TECH executive team, I-TECH HQ, and Zimbabwe organizational managers. This meeting yielded an opportunity for the transition team to assess the situation, identify critical transition infrastructure, specify timelines, delegate roles, and generate a tangible transition plan referred to as the ARCHI chart (See Appendix B). Staff also broached the new organizational relationship between Zim-TTECH and I-TECH HQ. Beyond the logistical value in determining the fundamental steps needed to establish Zim-TTECH as an organization and transition Prime for the VMMC and C&T awards, the planning meeting provided motivational value too as an attendee reflects:

*“I could have just been swallowed by the fear, by the lack of faith, and the doubt that was around me locally...That week I spent in Seattle was really a boost as well. We sat down with the team and people were just ready to do it.”*

Early, in depth planning was key to successfully navigating the transfer of employment contracts and other documentation from UZCHS-CTRC to Zim-TTECH. One respondent specializing in human resources noted:

*“You need to have roadmaps on what exactly you intend to achieve within what time because, especially from an HR perspective or from a contracts dimension, it's a highly legal area. If you muddle around with it, you drag the company into a huge financial liability.”*

### Supportive context in Zimbabwe

The plan to establish Zim-TTECH as a locally registered entity was laid within the groundwork of a high-capacity workforce, strong local leadership, and supportive relationships with in-country stakeholders. Numerous respondents remarked on the capabilities of the Zimbabwean team, particularly the high level of technical expertise and full understanding of the complex political and regulatory environments the VMMC and C&T programs operated in.

With respect to leadership, several respondents noted that a local leader was vital to champion the transition, interface with in-country I-TECH partners and connect with stakeholders when transition-related issues arose. That leader's reputation was important for mediating how stakeholders perceived the transition, as one respondent described *“the reputation of the leadership plays a critical role because it influenced the way people interpret delays that invariably come along the way.”*

In addition, a seven-year history of collaboration between the Zimbabwe team and I-TECH HQ developed strong relationships and a sense of mutual trust noted by many of the respondents. This helped to facilitate ease in communication, staff mobilization, and jumpstarted several transition processes. The growth of the Zimbabwe program since its beginnings in 2013 was a natural progression, as one respondent says:

*“The good thing is over the years, I-TECH and I-TECH Zimbabwe were growing. We were kind of already setting a transition in motion because we are now recruiting almost parallel systems with what existed in the parent administration organization, UZCHS-CTRC...So we were drifting towards our own independence. I think that's what made it easier to transition, not by design but because of the nature of increasing amount of work and amount of funding.”*

## **Communicate with and inform stakeholders**

### Understand transition perceptions

Reactions to the choice to transition spanned from supportive to reluctant, some “*excited about the change because it meant more independence and freedom to run the programs exactly as they felt were necessary*” while others “*felt the current model was effective, advantageous and had worked well and resulted in program success*”. Among Zimbabwe staff, apprehensions arose due to some associating transition with downsizing, reduced funding, and potential job loss. While not entirely unwarranted, one individual noted, “*When they see staff going, they may attribute it to transition by itself. But, it's a direct result of a cut of funding, which could have occurred even if we had stayed as an international organization.*” I-TECH HQ staff also had concerns about roles declining or going away, and around employee morale if “*by doing this [transition]...am I basically working my way out of a job?*”

Risks and benefits of transition are also seen at the employee level and institution level. At the employee-level, several Zimbabwe staff felt more confident working under I-TECH as an established, international organization with a track history of mobilizing resources; versus working under a new local organization, Zim-TTECH, where there was uncertainty around job stability, stability of remuneration currency, Zim-TTECH’s ability to maintain quality recruiting and staffing standards, and Zim-TTECH’s susceptibility to Zimbabwe’s political and economic environment. At the institutional level, a couple of I-TECH HQ respondents noted the loss of supplementary charges previously applied to the VMMC and C&T awards that supported salaries for a few HQ staff. I-TECH HQ respondents also noted the risk of losing locations for additional program implementation, research, and layering on of work in Zimbabwe, fears about the loss of relationships with in-country partners, and loss of control over the operations and success of the programs, specifically over employee contract compliance, sponsor reporting, budget reporting, efficient use of funds, and procurement.

Yet, by one respondent’s assessment, the benefits to establishing a new, locally based organization outweighed the risks associated because “*Zim-TTECH is able to have two things: greater access to local funding opportunities and greater autonomy from the University [of Washington] system.*” Multiple respondents perceived local institutions to have more flexibility, as regulations on funds and resources are determined by the type of organization created (ex. a trust or private voluntary organization) and country laws rather than the regulations governing U.S.-based partner organizations like I-TECH and their affiliated academic institutions. Fewer restrictions may yield greater responsiveness to dynamic changes in the local environment, as described by one I-TECH HQ respondent:

*“We do the best we can, but when we are 9-10 thousand miles away and have a nine hour time difference...it's hard for us to really get a sense of what's happening*

*there...Even in a target oriented world like PEPFAR, it's important to think about the institutional capacities, building local capacity, and doing whatever you can to move that forward so that organizations can respond to threats."*

### Communicate with stakeholders

Reassuring staff and providing them what they needed to have confidence that the transition would be successful was critical, especially considering staffs' expressed uncertainties over job stability and personal risks. Transparent communication up and down the chain of command was emphasized by several respondents as important for creating open feedback channels, and quelling fears by clarifying decisions, reasons for changes, expected milestones and timelines, implications for different stakeholders, new processes, and difficulties encountered in the transition process. One respondent in a management role explains:

*"That hearts and minds component, and making sure that people are really on board is the difference between teetering on success and failure...At some stage, you can see that some statements are causing people to doubt themselves and doubt you in turn in. Relationships are challenged in such periods and there you are. You've got to move with the transition process in play...I had to sit down with the team afterwards and say, 'Look guys, it's okay...Let's focus on the things that we have to do...Let's have our dignity around the fact that we completed the task to the fullest."*

Though some saw the transition as common knowledge due to shifts in the funding environment towards local organizations, leadership on the transition team saw *"a role for having an organized deliberate approach and one that is clear on the direction with all the stakeholders, donors, staff, and boards"*. Engagement of key stakeholders targeted the Zimbabwe Ministry of Health and Child Care (MoHCC) leadership, including the permanent secretary at the national level and provincial medical directors at the subnational level, ZAZIC and ZimPAAC consortium partners, and VMMC and C&T program funders to bring awareness of the transition to Zim-TTECH. Preexisting working relationships facilitated confidence and trust among MoHCC partners in the idea that the transition would advance the interests of people living with HIV, as opposed to self-interest. Though Zim-TTECH staff led communications to Zimbabwean stakeholders, one respondent felt that supportive messages coming from international partners would have aided their efforts: *"For the ministry partners to hear from CDC and from I-TECH HQ, 'Yes, of course, we want to transition. They're ready'...would ease the process...So that they also understand it's what is required by the donor."*

When communicating to ZAZIC, ZimPAAC, and other Zimbabwean collaborators, several respondents remarked that the transition was simply a change in name and not in scope of work:

*"For the program directors out in the field, things haven't changed that much. I mean their identity has changed from UZCHS-CTRC to Zim-TTECH...The most significant changes were for the central staff to manage the finances, scan for opportunities, and create collaborations to allow discovery of funding opportunities. Stakeholder confidence in the transition came in once this was understood, and with reminders from Zim-TTECH that we were still the same organization."*

## **Engage and mobilize staff**

### Construct necessary systems and infrastructure

The process of establishing Zim-TTECH as an independent, local organization required legally registering with the government of Zimbabwe, creating an advisory board for the organization as required by the terms of a registered trust, and developing administrative systems, policies, and procedures for the organization. Many respondents reinforced the significance of finding a local legal team to guide Zim-TTECH through these processes. One Zimbabwean respondent illustrates the need as such:

*“Get a lawyer, you can work with...a lawyer who's open enough to tell you that, ‘Look, the system takes forever. But we're nearly there and I'm holding your hand’...Don't take this person on board because [they are] from our circles, we've heard they're linked to such and such political party; ordinarily that causes problems in this country. You want a lawyer who's advisory and not a lawyer who just bills the hours.”*

Determining how to register Zim-TTECH as an organization was described by many as complex and time-consuming. Despite preference for registering as a private voluntary organization, the timeframe granted for this transition of the VMMC and C&T awards to a local organization—2 years—limited the pathways by which Zim-TTECH could immediately establish itself as an independent organization to that of a trust. Numerous respondents commented on needing a longer timeline for the transition process to allow a more gradual migration to becoming a local organization.

A small part of the transition process involved accounting for the volatile banking situation in Zimbabwe and establishing a new bank account, which involved identifying account signatories and authorizing an account sponsor. The transition team paid significant effort towards setting up a robust fiscal system for Zim-TTECH as well, one that resolved any deficiencies found in past financial processes and minimized exposure to potential fiscal waste, fraud, and abuse. Various models for transactions and reimbursement were considered to balance fiscal system pressures against staff capacity for implementing fiscal processes with due diligence.

### Build capacity

Throughout the transition, I-TECH HQ offered high-level technical assistance that drew on past transition experiences from Haiti, India, and other partners within the I-TECH network. Staff capacity building for transition addressed key operational responsibilities of an award Prime, including applying for awards and navigating U.S. funding requirements. One Zimbabwean respondent noted:

*“The actual applying, filling in those CDC forms—none of us have ever done that before. And those forms came out to 800 pages for the full submission. So that was a culture shock for us...because there is so much language around American forms or American processes that we would not ordinarily have known.”*

Substantial effort was put towards grants management, including compliance checks, financial reporting, budget forecasting, transaction management, and fund management. In retrospect,

several respondents from both I-TECH HQ and Zim-TTECH highlighted the need for Zim-TTECH to take a more front-facing role when it came to communications with U.S.-based CDC representatives and for Zim-TTECH staff to learn how to manage direct interactions with the funder. This, along with understanding funder roles from an international perspective, and developing expertise, staffing, and systems to fulfill complex financial reporting requirements were noted areas Zim-TTECH could benefit from strengthening.

Several respondents remarked on the value of in-person interaction as a means to transfer experience. In-person interactions increased rapport and clarity of instructions, as some mechanics did not translate well over email or video conferencing. One respondent adds, *“usually the impression that you get from virtual support is not necessarily what you find on the ground. Most of it is not deliberate but may mostly do with perception. What we are calling X, is it really X or to someone who can see it is it Y?”* Some respondents felt implementation could have moved faster if I-TECH staff were able to provide on-the-ground consultation to their counterparts in Zimbabwe, partly because *“the ability to be there in-person demands some attention so people shift their time to it.”* Though virtual contact could not replace physical presence, virtual channels could supplement the support typically given during on-site visits and provide a mechanism for long-term mentorship or one-on-one development.

### **Define short term and long-term success**

The primary marker of transition success was Zim-TTECH winning and receiving funding. One Zimbabwean respondent feared that Zim-TTECH’s ability to attract funds could be influenced by negative misperceptions some international funders may have about other local organizations, and the idea that *“local institutions sometimes fall victim to resources, deficiencies in corporate governance, corruption and even theft...If we are painted with the same brush, people may assume every local institution has no capacity to operate independently.”*

Beyond this immediate target, multiple respondents spoke to a new vision for the organization characterized by name recognition and high performance. One Zimbabwean respondent shared,

*“My vision is an established organization that is known for what it does...Zim-TTECH will house ZAZIC, it will house ZimPAAC, it will be the health powerhouse...It's going to be a self-sustaining organization that has the capacity to do research.”*

Another said, *“through our policies, we are expecting the best of behavior, the best of performance, the best impact on the ground”*. Though there is a vision of sustainability, other respondents foresaw challenges with navigating the ups and downs of the funding environment and raised concerns around the impact funding volatility would have on employee morale, recruitment, and staffing quality in the long term.

## **Discussion**

In this paper, we explore factors that challenged and facilitated the transition of the Zimbabwe VMMC and C&T programs from U.S.-based management by I-TECH HQ to local management under a new organization, Zim-TTECH. This step, where local owners manage health programs

funded by U.S.-based or other external funders, is a significant component of larger transitions to country ownership that should be navigated with care, as processes which are disruptive, expeditious, or end in local organizations failing to compete for continued funding may threaten program and health service sustainability in the long-term. This study suggests three factors—local context, transition timelines, and indicators of transition success—as challenges and two factors—local capacity and synergistic partnership—as facilitators to success in the transition process. In addition to these key outcomes, we reflect upon the utility of applying existing transition frameworks to transition in this short-term context; apply a change management lens that suggests there are two additional steps left in the transition; and call on funders to evaluate their role in facilitating transition processes.

With regards to local context as a challenging factor, coordinating partners like I-TECH HQ cannot ignore the prevailing political, economic, and social conditions in-country that directly and indirectly impact transition. Several respondents alluded to increased exposure to local country politics as a risk, specifically identifying the banking system and remuneration currency as pain points that added months to the transition timeline and delayed dependent steps. The leadership challenge of cultivating staff support for transition while easing concerns around the transition's impact on employment stability is amplified locally, considering the economic reality Zimbabwean staff would face compared to their U.S. counterparts. While organizations can pursue workaround measures to alleviate risks caused by the larger country environment, transition teams must recognize the immediate and long-term conditions in which programs will operate; assess readiness with consideration for the enabling environment; and mitigate risks accordingly (6,7).

Second, funders and coordinating partners should consider the minimum time needed to achieve the goals of each transition phase. Other papers have indicated that an extended and sequenced transition timeline is key for success (7,20,21). For Zim-TTECH, the major milestones for transition are: 1) Zim-TTECH is established as a trust; 2) I-TECH HQ, as Prime, sub-awards to Zim-TTECH; 3) Zim-TTECH is established as a private voluntary organization; 4) Zim-TTECH is Prime and sub-awards to I-TECH HQ for technical assistance. While the transition followed a phased timeline that moved through each of these major milestones, multiple respondents reported that the time allotted for establishing Zim-TTECH initially was too short. Each phase of the Zim-TTECH transition is highly complex, involving numerous prerequisites to achieve, and was largely supported by pre-existing organizational capacity, staff capacity, technical proficiency, and stakeholder relationships built before the timeframe for this transition was set. Funders and coordinating partners should therefore not underestimate the time needed to prepare organizations for successful transitions or overlook the risk that accelerated timelines poses to both the transition process and program operations.

A third challenge is the defining marker of success for transition, which, according to Zim-TTECH staff and I-TECH HQ, was winning U.S. grants to continue funding VMMC, C&T, and potentially other health programs in the future. This milestone was presented as a dichotomy: they win (Zim-TTECH lives) or they don't (Zim-TTECH ceases to exist). This is a major risk to the existence of the programs that should seem alarming and underscores the caveats around what Zim-TTECH must accomplish. Once a Prime grant is won, further capacity building and mentorship related to prime responsibilities on awards from the U.S. federal government is

essential to ensure Zim-TTECH can manage significant external funding in amounts that may in fact be greater than what was previously sub-awarded to the organization (22). However, writing a successful grant comes first and, according to some respondents, is far more nebulous and onerous a skill to cultivate. One-on-one mentorship and other tangible steps should be pursued to support Zim-TTECH's capacity for successful grant writing.

In terms of facilitators of successful transition, high capacity among the Zim-TTECH team aided transition processes both technically and interpersonally. Though capacity is frequently cited as helpful to overall transition processes, perhaps overlooked is its role in minimizing consequences of transition activity on HIV service delivery (8). Local staff effectively dedicated themselves to two jobs, simultaneously managing both daily program delivery and transition efforts. This dual duty may not have been as effective or even possible in the absence of the extensive history of training and capacity building partnership. In addition to leading the transition process itself, strong leadership capacity meaningfully improved stakeholder perceptions of the transition and ensured local leaders are prepared for the ways their roles would change as executive leaders of an independent NGO. Looking at multiple domains of capacity is important to ensure transition does not disrupt existing program operations and that individual staff and leaders are ready for the prospective changes to the organization. Local organizations and affiliated partners contemplating transition would benefit from applying organizational assessment tools or contextual analyses to highlight areas of strength and/or weakness with respect to capacity development before moving forward.

The second facilitator of success is the synergistic partnership modelled between Zim-TTECH staff and I-TECH HQ. Many respondents recognized that ownership for the transition was held by Zim-TTECH as the final decision-makers and leaders of the process; whereas I-TECH HQ played a consultative, advisory role that leveraged the knowledge and experiences from other countries within the I-TECH network. Considering the cumulative workload transition places on local partners, plus the absence of dedicated funds or new staff to support the process, such partnerships and delegated roles have practical advantages for helping alleviate the load on local implementing partners. However, U.S.-based partners in similar roles as I-TECH HQ must be mindful to not encroach upon the jurisdiction or autonomy local actors have in the transition process. Intentional, synergistic partnerships may also help set the stage for how a future peer-to-peer relationship between the two organizations might look, offering the opportunity for both organizations to evaluate what they are best poised to bring to the table during and beyond the transition process.

In comparing key transition steps from this study to those described in Bennett's (8) and Vogus' (6) frameworks for transition, similar key themes are identified but with varying degrees of importance. Communicating with and engaging stakeholders had lesser significance for Zim-TTECH relative to other steps, given the minimal effect this transition would have on partners in the field and their communities. In comparison, transitions that shift large portfolios of donor-supported programs to country governments require far more in terms of diplomacy, stakeholder engagement, and communication due to differences in scale, level of investment, and negotiation needed to change over to government management and financing at the national level (8). Separately, while the sequence of transition steps is not explicitly addressed by this study, change management literature asserts a strong case for a progressive transition process, and

suggests the process concludes not when short-term wins are created but after gains are consolidated to support further change; and approaches are anchored in the organization culture (9). In later phases of a change process, resistors to change, such as old organizational norms and obstructive interdependencies, present and threaten the sustainability of the change process. How this applies to I-TECH HQ and Zim-TTECH warrants consideration as Zim-TTECH moves forward and seeks to establish its independence, new processes, relationships, and vision. Regression is a risk should Zim-TTECH neglect to compound on the transition changes already laid, and to account for any inconsistencies between new practices and the foundational culture, values, and beliefs of the people who comprise the organization. For future transitions, a blended framework that integrates approaches from the international development literature with those from the change management field is recommended to capture the complete life cycle of the transition process.

## **Limitations**

There are several limitations that affect the application of this study towards future or similar transition efforts. The respondents selected for participation in the study were restricted to I-TECH HQ or Zim-TTECH staff, which may not be representative of all stakeholders involved the transition process including UZCHS-CTRC staff who were not transferred to Zim-TTECH, funders, and the Ministry of Health. Collecting information related to financial reporting systems, human resources processes, and administrative nuances is challenging in the interview format and subject to privacy and confidentiality considerations. As a result, this study cannot reflect the full intricacies of financial, legal, and administrative management and regulation in the transition process. Cultural bias also places this conversation about transition through a Western lens, and filters assessments of leadership and management practices for transition through frameworks developed by U.S.-affiliated authors.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this study highlight several considerations for organizations moving towards country ownership, namely to account for the larger country environment; assess capacity for transition before proceeding; provide ample time for transition processes; identify and build capacity for prerequisites key to success; and balance the partnership between local organizations and U.S.-based partners. Organizations may also benefit from applying transition and change management frameworks to help guide transition processes at a high-level.

While the immediate recommendations stemming from this paper target local organizations and their international or U.S.-based partners, we also must recognize the responsibility funders and governmental decision-makers have to enable smooth transition processes. Particularly as more funding shifts to local partners, funders must consider if the existing funding mechanisms, procedures, and requirements previously navigated by large, centralized international NGOs will support the same outcomes for many, dispersed local organizations competing as Prime for the first time. Specific to grant applications, funders should also consider whether processes are accessible, equitable, and do not impose unnecessary barriers to local applicants. One final lesson from Zim-TTECH comes from how both I-TECH Zimbabwe programs were initially

established as a sub-awards to local organizations, as opposed to freestanding I-TECH offices built for the purposes of VMMC and C&T. Doing so operationalized core values for locally led responses and directing funds to local partners early on, forecasting the inevitable transition that would come years later. In setting up future health programs, funders and global health leaders should consider who is best served by the organizational business models, policies, and practices we choose; whether our choices create the outcomes local countries need; and whether these systems will enable or impede our long-term goals for achieving more country-managed responses and ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

## Appendix A: Zim-TTECH Transition Milestones

Milestones	Transition Timeline																										
	2019			2020												2021											
	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Register Zim-TTECH as a Trust																											
Zim-TTECH key policies & SOPS completed																											
First Zim-TTECH sub drafted																											
Zim-TTECH Phase I																											
Zim-TTECH C&T RFP application (Prime)																											
Zim-TTECH all policies & SOPs completed																											
Zim-TTECH payroll systems configured																											
Zim-TTECH sub modification drafted																											
UZCHS-CTRC close out process																											
Zim-TTECH NIH application (subaward)																											
Transition from UZCHS-CTRC to Zim-TTECH																											
Zim-TTECH Phase 2																											
Zim-TTECH key staffing hired																											
Register Zim-TTECH as a PVO																											

## Appendix B: ARCHI Transition Trask Tracker

Type	Activity/Task	Priority (1,2,3)	Percentage Complete
	<i>Review of ALL administrative policies &amp; SOPs for Zim-TTECH</i>	1	
Legal	Ex. engage an attorney; develop legal counsel policy		
Trust Registration	Ex. create trust name; determine founders, trustees, board members, trust objectives		
PVO Registration & Board Development	Ex. determine board structure; develop bylaws; develop board capacity	1	
Organizational Development	Ex. develop vision, mission, organizational structure, management framework, strategic plan, and business plan for new entity; develop and issue Zim-TTECH subaward...	3	
Awards/Grants Management	Ex. develop policies, procedures, and SOPs for award management; identify authorizing official for new entity; register with Grants.gov, Sam.gov, DUNS	3	
Pre-Award	Ex. develop decision making process for pursuing opportunities, sub-award selection and cost reasonableness review, standard allocating method for costs across multiple awards and standard documented rates...	3	
Post Award	Ex. develop process for award review, negotiation and acceptance; identify staff and process for liaising with sponsor administrative arm and submission of prior approval requests, tracking and submission of programmatic activity reports and annual continuations...	1	
Subawards	Ex. develop subawards policy and SOPs, contract templates and flow down provisions for funding sources to align with local laws and US Uniform Guidance, management, monitoring & visit strategy and calendar...	3	
MOUs	Ex. develop MOU templates; identify persons authorized to sign MOUs on organization's behalf; identify situations where additional legal review of MOUs is required...	1	
Budget Management	Ex. finalize budget management policies and SOPs; implement budget management systems/templates/processes; determine standard reports and reporting dimensions for	1	

	budget management...		
Finance Organizational Model	Ex. determine finance team structure; determine fiscal year reporting period; contract with external audit firm; register with tax authorities; customize payroll software to entity needs...		
Funding	Ex. establish bank accounts with appropriate signatories and authorizations; set up petty cash account; identify mechanism for advance/working funds for prime and subs...	1	
Finance Operations	Ex. establish internal controls; set up financial record accounting systems; implement finance tasks such as posting transactions, paying vendors, invoicing, accounts review/reconciliation, depositing funds, closing fiscal periods, generating monthly and annual financial reports...	1	
Records Review & Retention	Ex. purchase fireproof safe for all official documents; purchase separate locking safe for petty cash; develop records retention policy...		
HR	Ex. establish HR policies, procedures and SOPs; establish salary scale, compensation philosophy, and procedure for reviewing and establishing benefit rates; create and implement recruitment plan to hire staff; train staff on Zim-TTECH HR policies/SOPs...	1	
Procurement	Ex. develop procurement policies and procedures; define roles and responsibilities ensuring separation of duties; establish procurement committee (bids above \$20k)...		
Travel	Ex. develop travel policies, procedures and SOPs and all forms; establish local per diem rates		
Vehicles	Ex. develop vehicle policies, processes, SOPs and forms; develop fleet management policies, procedures and system; purchase/transfer vehicle insurance...		
Safety & Security	Ex. develop Security, Safety & Emergency Policies and SOPs; transition vendor agreement with security firm to new entity	1	
Facilities	Ex. transition lease, utilities, phone service agreements, internet service, and guard service to new entity		
Equipment (> \$5,000)	Ex. verify current equipment and supply assets; determine country laws or partner expectations;		

	obtain funder prior approval for equipment with a current market value of \$5,000 or more that is being sold/donated/turned over...		
Insurance	Ex. survey market for insurance providers; identify & purchase mandatory and optional insurance, including employee medical and life, professional liability, facility and auto...		
IT	Ex. develop IT policies, procedures and SOPs; develop Knowledge Management, Back Up, Website Management, Change Management and User Account SOP's...	1	
Communications & Branding	Ex. develop communication policies and SOPs; identify communications point person; develop logo; assure new name and logo on communication materials, letterhead...	3	
Management of field Operations		1	
Consultants	Ex. develop a handbook for Consultants	1	

## Appendix C: Acronyms and Terminology

Acronym / Term	Definition
Award	Financial assistance that provides support or stimulation to accomplish a public purpose. Awards include grants and other agreements in the form of money or property in lieu of money, by the U.S. federal government to an eligible recipient. The term does not include: technical assistance, which provides services instead of money; other assistance in the form of loans, loan guarantees, interest subsidies, or insurance; direct payments of any kind to individuals; and contracts which are required to be entered into and administered under federal procurement laws and regulations (11).
C&T	HIV prevention, treatment, care, and support services
CORE-Q	Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research
HQ	Headquarters
HR	Human resources
I-TECH	International Training and Education Center for Health
LMIC	Low- and middle-income countries
MoHCC	Ministry of Health and Child Care
NGO	Non-governmental organization
PEPFAR	U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
Prime	“Prime awardee” or “prime recipient”. Refers to a recipient of U.S. federal awards.
PVO	Private voluntary organization
UZCHS-CTRC	University of Zimbabwe College of Health Sciences Clinical Trials Research Centre
VMMC	Voluntary medical male circumcision
ZAZIC	A partnership between I-TECH, the Zimbabwe Association of Church Related Hospitals, and Zimbabwe Community Health Intervention Research Project, and UZCHS-CTRC. ZAZIC supports VMMC services in 13 districts across the country (23).
ZimPAAC	Zimbabwe Partnership to Accelerate AIDS Control. A consortium that includes AFRICAID, Pangaea Zimbabwe AIDS Trust, UZCHS-CTRC that serves as an implementing and administrative management partner to I-TECH in Zimbabwe. ZimPAAC works in 372 facilities in 17 districts to provide HIV prevention services, testing, active case finding, and linkage to and retention in care and treatment (23).
Zim-TTECH	Zimbabwe Technical Assistance, Training and Education Centre for Health

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