

COMMUNITY EXIT



Because the community land protection process is not a simple “project” but rather an ambitious, long-term engagement aimed at improving community members’ day-to-day use, management and governance of their local lands and natural resources, it may be difficult for facilitators to know when to consider the work “complete.” Various factors may complicate facilitators’ decisions of when to “exit” a community, including:

1. Government delays in issuing titles or registration certificates that leave the process “unfinished” but out of the control of the facilitating organization;
2. Requests for community land by investors and government agencies, during which communities call for advocates’ counsel or presence before and during negotiations;
3. The open-ended nature of Stage 5: *“Preparing the Community to Prosper,”* which includes long-term goals, such as livelihood diversification and ecosystem regeneration;
4. Failed or slow implementation of community by-laws, requiring advocates’ long-term support to ensure that adopted by-laws are implemented and enforced (particularly for by-laws related to women’s rights, to participatory decision-making by all community members, and to transparent management of community finances); or
5. Flare-ups of old, boundary disputes along harmonized boundaries, among other reasons.

Experience has shown that communities need periodic, ongoing support after the community land protection process is over. However, **it is necessary to choose a discrete moment to mark the work as “complete,” at which point facilitators can clearly “exit” a community and make plans for follow-up “check in” visits.**

There are also sometimes instances when facilitators must leave a community before the community land protection process is complete, such as when a community repeatedly breaks the agreed “Terms of Engagement,” becomes stuck in conflict or inaction, threatens the facilitators with violence, and other situations. It is therefore necessary to have a clear plan for when to leave a community that will not successfully complete the community land protection process and is simply draining facilitators’ time and energy.

In all situations, **when exiting a community, facilitators should meet with local and regional government officials and customary leaders to report on the outcomes of the community’s land protection efforts.** This will help to ensure that leaders and officials understand the community’s successes and challenges. It may also motivate them to provide ongoing support to the community after the facilitating organization has left.

HOW BEST TO EXIT A COMMUNITY WHEN THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION IS COMPLETE?

1. In consultation with the community, decide on a fixed set of “outcomes” that, when accomplished, will mark the work as “complete.” This is best done at the initial “Terms of Engagement” meeting, and should be put into writing in the Terms of Engagement. During this discussion, facilitators should describe the entire arc of the community land protection process, including all aspects of the “Preparing Communities to Prosper” stage of the work, then support the community to decide what they want to complete before facilitators exit.¹

It may be best to make two lists: an “absolutely necessary activity” list and a “wish list” of additional activities that the community will undertake if the “necessary activities” are completed in good time. These additional supports may be used as an incentive for the community to make progress through the land protection process.

The community should also set a clear date by when they expect to complete the “necessary” activities. A comfortable end date might be one year from the signing of the Terms of Engagement.

2. Routinely remind the community of the desired timeline and “necessary activities” list. Periodically reminding the community of how much work they have completed so far, what work they have left to do, and how much time they have left until their expected completion date can help motivate progress. Frequent public, participatory “temperature checks” of how well the community is progressing toward its goals – linked with reminders that the facilitators will at some point leave the community to go help other communities – may be necessary to motivate a “stuck” community.

3. When the “necessary activities” have been achieved, meet with the community and agree on a clear exit date, and well as what “wish list” activities can be completed before community exit. If the community has completed the activities before the expected end date, support for additional activities on the “wish list” can be offered. If the community has not met its original expected end date, facilitators must ultimately decide how much more time and energy they can afford to give to the community.²

4. Train the Land Governance Council and all relevant community leaders in good governance and by-laws implementation skills before exiting the community. In order to ensure proper implementation and enforcement of by-laws, facilitators should hold a specific “good governance” training for Land Governance Council members and all relevant community leaders, including elders who mediate conflicts. Such trainings should include instruction in technical skills, as well as review of the by-laws and how they will be implemented and enforced. Experience has shown that **such a training must be done before facilitators formally exit** a community.

EXAMPLE ACTIVITY LISTS TO INFORM COMMUNITY EXIT

Necessary Activities:

- Harmonize boundaries with neighbors and sign MOUs documenting boundary agreements.
- Adopt community by-laws.
- Make a digital GPS map of community lands and natural resources.
- Elect and train a Land Governance Council.
- Create a financial management plan.
- Set up an Early Warning System.
- Receive government documentation of the community’s land claims.

“Wish List” Activities:

- Community trained in how to best prepare for potential interactions with investors.
- Community trained in ecosystem regeneration practices.
- Community supported to undertake a basic community development planning process.
- Community linked to organizations providing micro-credit and livelihood skills training.

1. During these conversations, facilitators should make clear that the facilitating organization is not able to promise that the government will issue a title document or registration certificate, and that while facilitators will work hard to help the community secure documentation, they may “exit” a community before the community gets its title/certificate.

2. Government failure to issue formal documentation of community land rights may impede a community from achieving its “necessary activities” list within the expected time. In this instance, facilitators have two options: 1) Support the community to undertake certain “wish list” activities while waiting for formal government recognition of community land claims; 2) End community-based fieldwork, but remain engaged in tracking and pushing forward the community’s government documentation process, returning to the community once the document has been issued.

5. Celebrate the community's successful completion! Once the community has completed the activities on its “necessary list” and all other agreed additional “wish list” activities, facilitators should encourage the community to celebrate its successes. At the celebration, the community may choose to prepare food and showcase local singing, dances, or theater.

It may be useful to have a neutral person, such as a respected higher-level customary or state leader, chair the “Community Exit Celebration.” This can help to ensure that local officials are aware of the community's progress and the facilitators' exit, and may motivate their ongoing support for the community's land rights once the facilitating organization has left.

6. Ensure the community has all the information it needs to go forward. At the community celebration, or at another time before exiting, facilitators should:

- **Make sure that the community has a copy of all important community land protection-related documents.** If possible, facilitators should put all of these documents into a durable, protective binder and ceremonially hand this binder over to the Land Governance Council and relevant community leaders. Work with the community to determine a safe place for leaders to keep these important documents. (See a description of how to keep documents safe in the chapter on *Completing Formal Government Registration*.)
- **Set a plan and schedule for facilitators to “check in” with the community to offer support as needed.** Such “check-ins” work best when they occur on a scheduled, periodic basis, such as every three to six months. Alternatively, the community may prefer that facilitators return to the community only when asked to.
- **Provide a phone number that the community may call at any time with questions, concerns or requests for support.** Providing community members with a way to contact facilitators after they have exited the community can help the community to address challenges related to corrupt leadership, violations of the land rights of women and minority groups, land conflicts, and investor requests for land. The community should also designate a specific contact person that the facilitators can call periodically to check in with.

- It may also be helpful for facilitators to **create a small, community-specific “self-help toolkit”** and give it to the community when they exit. This toolkit might include important government phone numbers to call for help, informational brochures, copies of relevant laws, etc.

7. Visit the community periodically to check in and provided additional support. Experience has shown that communities may need help “living” their by-laws. Facilitators should check in with the community according to the agreed schedule, during which time they should meet with the Land Governance Council, community leaders, and the entire community. Facilitators should use these “check-ins” to:

- **Assess how well the community is implementing its by-laws,** managing its finances transparently, protecting the land rights of women and minority groups, giving actual voice and power to the women and youth on the Land Governance Council, and using its by-laws in land conflict resolution processes. Any governance or leadership gaps should be addressed with refresher trainings or suggestions for improvements to the by-laws.
- **Ensure that the agreed boundaries are holding strong** and offer conflict resolution support if they are not.
- **Ensure that the community is discussing and amending their by-laws annually** (to ensure continual improvement).
- **Ensure that the community is not unjustly restricting their neighbors' historical use rights,** and, if neighbors report that they are being unfairly excluded, support the community to create better systems to allow users with historical rights continued access.
- **Ensure that local, district and provincial government leaders are respecting the community's land rights.** If community rights have not been respected, facilitators may need to support the community to advocate that their rights are protected.

If possible, facilitators should take time to talk privately both with leaders and with regular community members, who may have a different experience of how well the community lands are being governed.

8. Seek funding for long-term “impact assessments.”

Facilitating organizations may want to seek funding to assess the long-term impacts of their efforts (ideally one to three years after leaving a community). Impact assessments can help facilitating organizations understand what aspects of the community land protection process have impacted the community positively, and which aspects have not brought about the desired results. The impact assessment can be used to improve programming and may help with fundraising.

HOW BEST TO EXIT A COMMUNITY THAT HAS NOT COMPLETED THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROCESS?

It is not uncommon for communities to begin the community land protection process and then be unable to complete it. While the “Community Application” process and “Terms of Engagement” signing components of this work are designed to help avoid community “failure,” it is not always possible to foresee challenges that have the potential to fully block community progress. In such instances, facilitators must find a way to exit a community gracefully. The following suggestions may help to bring clarity and ease to such situations.

1. Create clear guidelines in the Terms of Engagement.

Facilitators and community members should work together to create a clear, specific list of circumstances that will lead facilitators to end the process.³

2. Give the community plenty of advance warning. As it becomes clear that the community is not upholding its responsibilities or is facing major obstacles that prevent the community from moving forward, facilitators should discuss the situation with community leaders and make clear what the community must do to address the problem.

3. Seek intervention by respected higher-level government and customary leaders. Before ending activities in a community, facilitators may want to seek outside help from neutral, respected regional leaders. At best, their intervention can help resolve challenges; at the least, their involvement may help to protect the facilitating organizations’ reputation in the region and decrease any community anger or disappointment directed toward facilitators.

4. Document the reasons for community exit. For internal record-keeping, facilitators should record:

- Which stage of the community land protection process the community stalled on;
- Reasons why the community failed to move through the process;
- Events that led to the stall of the community land protection work (descriptions of any conflicts, etc.);
- Facilitators’ efforts to address the challenges;
- Community members’ efforts to address the challenges;
- Advice and recommendations about how the community might address the problems; and
- Any plans or agreements made with the community about checking-in or restarting the process in the future.

POSSIBLE REASONS FACILITATORS MAY CHOOSE TO EXIT A COMMUNITY IN MID-PROCESS PROCESS

- 1.** Leaders fail to alert facilitators that a meeting has been cancelled more than four times, resulting in lost time and resources.
- 2.** Meetings are not well attended; four meetings have fewer than 15 people present.
- 3.** Community leaders are engaged in a power struggle that halts community efforts for more than three months.
- 4.** Despite reasonable efforts by neighbors, the community refuses to compromise on a disputed boundary for more than three months.
- 5.** Community members have threatened or attempted to physically harm facilitators or Community Land Mobilizers.

3. A similar list may be made detailing when the facilitating organization has failed to fulfill its responsibilities so that communities can also hold facilitators accountable.

- 5. Hold an “Exit Meeting” and make clear why the community will no longer receive support.** If, despite facilitators’ best efforts, a community has failed to fulfill its responsibilities or is unable to complete the community land protection process, facilitators should call a community meeting to formally end project activities. At this meeting, facilitators should:
- **Explain, with clear examples, the reasons why the facilitating organization is ending the work.** Give community members an opportunity to respond.
 - **Provide the community with written documentation of the reasoning behind the early exit.** If appropriate, it may be useful to give copies of this document to relevant higher-level state and customary authorities.
 - **Make sure that the community has a copy of all important community land protection-related documents.** Facilitators should put all relevant documents into a durable, protective binder and hand this binder over to relevant community leaders.
- **Create a list of conditions that must be met before facilitators will consider returning to the community.** Facilitators should make clear that time and resource constraints may prevent them from returning upon request. Any return should be made only after the facilitators assess their available time and resources *and* only if the community can demonstrate that the underlying reasons for early exit have been successfully addressed.

It may be useful to have a neutral person, such as a respected regional customary or state leader, chair the “Community Exit Meeting.” This can help to ensure that local leaders are aware of both the community’s failure to document their land rights as well as the facilitators’ exit. It can also help to diffuse anger and disappointment aimed at the facilitating organization.

WHEN COMMUNITY ELITES INTENTIONALLY SABOTAGE THE COMMUNITY LAND PROTECTION PROCESS

Experience has shown that when facilitators leave a community as a result of local elites’ efforts to intentionally undermine community land protection work, their exit can make the situation worse, leaving the community more vulnerable to a bad-faith land grab. For example, the Land and Equity Movement of Uganda (LEMU) has struggled with influential local elites who use their power to stall community land protection activities for months at a time or to fully sabotage community efforts. These elites are often trying to grab community land for themselves – against the expressed interests of the broader community. Although LEMU has no choice but to leave when asked (violence is often threatened), rejection by elite power holders has put LEMU in the position of ending work in the communities that are *most in need of its legal support*. Facilitators’ departure often emboldens elites and means that the community will ultimately lose its common lands to bad-faith elite appropriation. In such situations, the community land protection process – and facilitators – become pawns in intra-community conflicts.

In such instances, facilitators should try to address the underlying dynamics and local politics impeding community progress in the most appropriate way. For example, they may directly call the elites into a conflict resolution process that allows the community an opportunity to speak directly to the dynamic at play. Facilitators might also call in a respected higher-level government officials or religious leaders to address the conflict/dynamic and help the community find a resolution. However, given resource constraints and the large number of communities seeking community land protection support, it is not always appropriate for facilitators to become caught in complex power struggles within a community.

NOTES