



# LEARNINGS FROM SRI LANKA

**An independent review of Plan  
International's exit from Sri Lanka**

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## **Foreword: Reflections and learnings from the International Board**

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In 2019 we made the difficult decision to close the Plan International office in Sri Lanka. In the 80-plus years that Plan International has been working to advance children's rights and equality for girls, it has been extremely rare for us to decide to close one of our country offices.

As an organisation we are truly sorry to the children, families, communities, staff and volunteers affected by our exit. We spent 38 years in Sri Lanka supporting more than 500,000 children with their families and communities, to promote children's rights and equality for girls. Through grants and the generosity of sponsors, we implemented community and school projects that have made long-lasting improvements in early childhood care and development, inclusive quality education, access to clean water and sanitation, healthcare and nutrition, disaster risk reduction, child protection, as well as skills and opportunities for youth entrepreneurship and employment. The work to advance children's rights endures today as government and civil society continue the work and are providing services to children, especially girls. Local NGOs are focused on giving opportunities, such as scholarships and livelihoods, for girls and young women in our former sponsorship areas.

While we believe our decision to stop working in Sri Lanka was the best course of action given our understanding of the circumstances at that time, we continue to reflect and learn, including from sector peers and other experts. We acknowledge that we could have done better for the children and communities we worked with at the end of our time in Sri Lanka.

Following questions raised in media reports over the summer of 2021 and the surfacing of new information about Plan International's departure from Sri Lanka, we commissioned this independent After Action Review ("the review") in August 2021 to better understand where we fell short and how we can do better in future.

In line with our commitment to being transparent and accountable to the children and families we work with, our partners and donors, and to the public, we are sharing this independent review, including our key learnings and the actions we are taking to implement the review's recommendations.

### **Purpose of sharing the review**

The independent After Action Review was conducted by Wolfgang Jamann, Executive Director of the International Civil Society Centre, and Neelima Khetan, Partner with Nous Consultants, based on their research and interviews conducted in August and September 2021.

We are grateful to all those who contributed to this review. It has enabled us to further reflect on the impact of our exit on children and communities in Sri Lanka and examine the adequacy of the changes that were implemented as a result of the first internal review. Nearly two years after taking the difficult decision to leave Sri Lanka, it is a good moment for Plan International to reflect further on shortcomings, improvements already made and areas yet to be addressed.

Some redactions have been made to protect the identity of participants, and to avoid assertions that it has not been possible to objectively verify being taken as fact.

### **Key learnings**

We are committed to learn from this chapter in our history so that we can best support the children and young people we work with globally.

The review found that before, during and after Plan International's exit from Sri Lanka, there were weaknesses in six key areas:

- There was a lack of oversight and poor internal systems within Plan International Sri Lanka operations.
  - The organisational culture in Plan International Sri Lanka sometimes led to a lack of accountability, performance management and clear and transparent communications.
  - The use of non-local leadership in Sri Lanka and how this may have impacted the understanding of the local socio-economic context.
  - Inadequate preparation for the exit from Sri Lanka. Although no formal breach of governance protocols was found, occasions were missed to better prepare for exit, including by involving governing bodies.
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- How the exit was communicated to children, communities and other stakeholders.
- With hindsight, a lack of clear evidence to suggest security concerns in Sri Lanka were severe enough to justify the speed of closure.

## **Recommendations and actions being taken by Plan International**

The recommendations made by the review focus on four key areas set out below. While it is important to state that the review covers a very specific period of time and is limited to our operations in Sri Lanka, Plan International will use these recommendations to inform and continue to improve the way we operate globally. The following actions are already underway.

### **1. Institution building and standardised structures**

**ACTION WE ARE TAKING:** We are already undertaking more regular risk analysis and strengthened financial and administrative oversight. Since our exit from Sri Lanka, we have agreed a revised Financial Authorities Policy and Scheme of Delegation and more transparent reporting procedures and performance reviews.

In addition to quarterly performance reviews, we have introduced monthly dashboard reporting to more easily ensure funds are being used efficiently and effectively.

### **2. People**

**ACTION WE ARE TAKING:** Whilst over 98% of our staff and 38% of our country directors work in their home country, we are focused on continuing to develop more staff in every country to become leaders while making sure we always assess the local context and recruit the best person for the role.

We have recently launched a comprehensive People and Culture Strategy to strengthen all our people processes. This includes building deeper and more diverse talent pools across all areas of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and enhancing our Employee Relations service.

### **3. Purpose and impact**

**ACTION WE ARE TAKING:** Striving for lasting impact is one of our core values. The end-to-end annual portfolio review process to analyse potential country entry or exits is being reviewed. This means that in the rare event that Plan International decides to leave a country, a phase-out would begin two years in advance and would be accompanied by clear expectations and communications to all stakeholders.

In other very rare instances, the politically unsettled nature of some of the countries where we work means that at times a rapid withdrawal may still be necessary in the interests of safety or where the licences of INGOs to operate are terminated. We now ensure we are always well prepared in advance for that emergency, and wherever possible we will involve children, communities, staff and partners in the emergency preparedness to empower them once we have left. We have already been implementing such preparedness in some countries.

### **4. Values and culture**

**ACTION WE ARE TAKING:** We have strengthened organisational and personal accountability for all Plan International staff with the introduction of a more rigorous performance management framework that will enable issues to be identified and resolved more quickly and for best practices to be shared more openly across the organisation.

We are also improving the definition of roles and responsibilities to streamline operations and strengthen capabilities. We understand the need to be a fully trusted organisation and are committed to improving how information is shared with all our stakeholders, with a focus on open, detailed and transparent communications.

As a learning organisation we will continue to reflect and learn to continually improve.

## **Our mission to ensure a sustainable and lasting impact**

Plan International's programmes are designed to make a lasting change which advances children's rights and equality for girls whilst avoiding a model of dependency on aid. While we believe our decision to stop working in Sri Lanka was the best course of action given our understanding of the circumstances at the time, we deeply regret any pain or difficulty that may have occurred for those impacted by our departure.

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We regret the manner of our leaving Sri Lanka but we are grateful that during our 38 years there we could support our Plan International Sri Lanka colleagues to impact the lives of over 500,000 children, young people and adults. In 2019 alone, Plan International Sri Lanka worked with 740 communities, 122 local organisations and 12 government institutions to directly benefit 24,264 girls and 19,402 boys.

Our legacy in Sri Lanka continues through the work of local government authorities and civil society organizations who work tirelessly to advance children's rights and equality for girls. We look forward with hope that the many children, young people and adults who were impacted through the generosity of sponsors over the years are continuing to flourish, contributing to the development of Sri Lanka.

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# Sri Lanka After Action Review

Report of an external review commissioned by  
the International Board, Plan International Inc

External consultants –

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Partner Nous Consultants

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## **Foreword and Caveat**

The observations and remarks contained in this report are those of the two responsible consultants only. We have tried to derive constructive reflections and considerations from the many discussions we had, and the material we could study. The input we received was sometimes crystal clear, and sometimes confusing. It was collected in the context of the Sri Lanka exit decision and process, and we cannot draw robust conclusions for other contexts within PII, other than pointing out areas that might suggest deeper reflections. Plan International is a complex and complicated organisation in a highly transformative context. We therefore do not claim absolute truth in our observations, and may sometimes have misinterpreted facts and inputs. However, we hope that the report is helpful for the improvement of systems and processes in the organisation.

We were particularly impressed by the openness and remarkable constructiveness of the people we spoke to. Staff members, governors and employees demonstrate an incredible commitment to the cause of Plan International, to its aims and to the children it serves.

Lastly, we want to thank the Plan International Board and interim CEO for entrusting us with the exercise, and taking the courage to learn from the past.

## Executive Summary

It is commendable that the International Board and Senior Management of Plan have commissioned a second and independent After Action Review (AAR) of the decision-making, management, communications and learnings from the Sri Lanka exit in 2019. The first AAR was conducted internally by the board, with the independent external support and oversight of Kevin Jenkins, CEO of World Vision International until 2019. Almost two years after the difficult move, and having faced a more recent media exposure over the case, it is a good moment to reflect further on shortcomings, improvements already made and areas yet to be addressed.

While the consultants have seen a significant number of management and oversight failures and underlying issues over the Sri Lanka exit, we also note improvements both in terms of governance systems and processes, accountability frameworks, decision-making practices, and most importantly, an improvement in the organisational atmosphere. Formal and informal ways of working with each other, the understanding of each other's concerns seem to have improved, and so has transparency and openness. The interim CEO commands a high level of confidence by most parties, and some new bodies (like the 'Global Team', introduced by the previous CEO) seem to make a real difference in collaborative approaches. A number of other policies, programs and initiatives continue to be introduced, around financial sustainability, people and culture, and anti-racism. The consultants have not been able to assess their impact as these are relatively new, but it is worth mentioning those as an indication for the collective will to improve some suboptimal systems organisation-wide.

The 'organisational culture' across some of the Plan entities, appears affected by past experiences of mistrust, suspicion, sometimes toxic interrelations and a notion of 'us vs. the others'. This notion, though less dramatic than it might have been in the past, seems to be still significant and possibly contributed to the fact that so many parties wanted 'to be heard' by the consultants on the Sri Lanka case. It is not possible for the consultants to assess the depth of problems related to this underlying tension, but we suggest the organisation to consider investing resources, time and commitment into creating a culture that reflects the values of the organisation truly. PII's values at work are openness and transparency, working well together, being inclusive and empowering, and striving for lasting impact. There is room to deepen these values further, in order that they become a strong binding glue for an organisation which appeared to us to have a notable segmentation among entities.

In our assessment, the following areas are on a significant path for improvement:

- **Performance Accountability:** A new, sophisticated and more robust PA architecture is in place and is being exercised including one-to-one meetings with direct involvement of the CEO.
- **International Board-Global Hub relations:** IB takes broader interest and responsibility, and the mechanisms they now employ are more inclusive. [REDACTED] The new CEO who comes in will need to continue to build on these and strengthen the accountabilities, controls and the culture.
- **Global Hub-National Offices relations:** since the exit from Sri Lanka, various internal communication and coordination mechanisms have been established and are highly valued, such as Global Team meetings, weekly National Directors Team Co-Chair / PII CEO meetings, Advisory Group, etc. Some of these were initiated by the previous CEO in response to the earlier Sri Lanka learnings.
- **Crisis Management Protocols and Risk Management Practices** have been updated as a direct learning from the first AAR report. They are yet to stand the test



of the next crisis, though, and should be monitored when effected in critical situations.

Several other areas need attention or are being addressed, like global communications protocols, sponsorship principles and internal communications.

The observations and reflections in this report, deriving from a large number of intense and insightful interviews, could add to the understanding of the deeper issues that contributed to the Sri Lanka situation and which need to be considered in PII's future improvement ambitions.

## Terms of Reference and Methodology

The second (and external) After Action Review of the Sri Lanka exit was commissioned by the International Board of Plan International Inc in August 2021. The terms of reference of this assignment were as follows.

*“The Sri Lanka After Action Review is made up of two elements:*

### **1. Management and governance assurance frameworks**

*The purpose of this element of the review is to:*

- i) Identify opportunities to strengthen the Client’s operations management, accountability, and assurance framework – early detection systems, to detect worsening of conditions over time that can lead to a situation where an exit or an accelerated exit is the only feasible course of action.*
- ii) Identify improvements to effectively communicate and engage governors on material operations issues and evaluate why governors did not appreciate the significance of the deteriorating operating environment in Sri Lanka.*
- iii) Complete an assessment of the adequacy of the implementation of the March 2020 After Action Review.*

*Taking into consideration the above, this element of the review will therefore focus on the ability of the Client’s management, accountability, and assurance framework to identify a deteriorating management and operating environment in a timely manner.*

### **2. Handling of media crisis by the Client and impacted National Organisations**

*The purpose of this review is to examine the interaction between the Plan International entities involved in the “Sri Lanka media crisis” to determine:*

- i) if it enabled an effective organisational response to the crisis which best mitigated entity level and aggregate organisation wide PR risk and,*
- ii) the extent to which it was hampered by a lack of an agreed narrative and alignment on cost definitions. This review will be aligned with ongoing work relating to alignment of sponsorship messaging following a review undertaken by Global Assurance.*

*This element of the review will therefore focus on the ways of working and decision-making between the Plan International entities involved in the “Sri Lanka media crises” and the availability of timely, reliable data to support the organisational media response.”*

Given the prevailing pandemic conditions, the consultants worked through virtual mediums. Extended video/audio (and in one case, in person) interviews were held with a wide range of stakeholders including representatives of select National Offices (both executive and governance), some of PII Board Members, cross section of staff members of PII (from the Global Hub and the Regional Office), four former Country Directors of Sri Lanka, five former staff members of Plan International Sri Lanka, and one representative of another INGO working in Sri Lanka. A total of 33 people were interviewed (full list is placed at annexure 1). Almost all of these were people who had been connected with the Sri Lanka situation, in one way or another.

The consultants also reviewed close to 60 documents that had been made available to them.

## Exit from Sri Lanka

Plan International announced closure of its Sri Lanka operations at a staff meeting called in Colombo on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2019. The decision had been approved by the Leadership Team of PII on 11<sup>th</sup> December 2019. All the staff of the two Program Units in which PISL was working at that time had been called to the respective PU offices, and everyone joined over a video call as the Regional Director made the announcement in Colombo. At the end of the meeting, staff was asked to handover laptops, and separation letters were handed to each. The skeletal closure team that remained then informed concerned government officers, partners, suppliers, vendors, etc. Subsequently, goodbye cards were made for approximately 20,000 sponsored children in Sri Lanka. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The sudden closure took most people by surprise, leading to (still) continuing speculation in Sri Lanka (in media and in government) whether Plan has actually totally exited.

A planned follow-up ‘farewell’ project proposed by various entities at Plan is yet to materialise, partly due to the difficulties of the Corona pandemic which came into force from April 2020 and partly because of difficulties remaining from the imperfect closure process. A proposal has been agreed upon internally with on-going discussions with the DG NGO Secretariat in Sri Lanka on finalising the “school portfolio”, the local NGO and the oversight mechanisms.

### Reasons for the exit

The first public (and internal) reason given for exiting Sri Lanka was the improved HDI status of the country, and the need for Plan to move to more low-income geographies. In subsequent communications, following additional reasons were provided – operating and management failures, inability to transform into a rights-based development organisation and rapidly increasing operating costs. While these reasons explain why Plan exited Sri Lanka, they do not seem to explain the very hasty and almost unplanned exit that happened. Everyone at senior leadership levels (including the regional teams) mentioned safety and heightened security concerns as the main driver for the emergency exit.

During our review, while we found ample evidence pointing to management challenges, we did not find sufficient evidence to substantiate the perception of an acute safety risk that would justify such a rapid closure. We acknowledge that safety and security is difficult to assess and carries a subjective dimension, particularly when faced with an emotionally laden and rapidly evolving situation. However, our assessment of this safety risk, based on extensive discussions with a cross section of people, is as follows.

1. **Security risks to staff:** we found evidence of safety risk to the then Country Director, but we did not find evidence of a generalised safety risk to staff. Could it be that the risk to one individual grew in perception as being a generalised security risk? In any case, the said Country Director had already resigned [REDACTED] well before the exit decision was taken.
2. **Security risks to key documents and establishment:** we heard this risk mentioned by some of the senior staff in PII. However, given the fact that all the sensitive PISL documents had already been moved to a safe location in Colombo in late September/early October 2019 (and digitisation of the same was also underway), well before the Sri Lanka exit decision was taken, we were unable to understand the source of this risk.
3. **Reputational concerns:** we heard PII staff members speak of increasing reputational risks if they stayed longer. There was apprehension that disgruntled staff may write to government or talk to media, or that sponsored communities may be instigated to public protests. While we are unable to comment on the likelihood of these, but disgruntled staff sending petitions to government and others was not anything new for Plan International Sri Lanka (PISL). Government

officials and others in the INGO system all knew that PISL was having trouble with some staff members, and the petitions etc were understood as a manifestation of the same. Nothing concrete was mentioned to us that would suggest that there was the likelihood of a sudden and sharp worsening of situation on this count.

The exit decision seemed to have been made as a response to various difficult or insurmountable challenges that had either escalated or surpassed the capacity and capability of decision makers to resolve them. These were, amongst others, the all-round management failures (also confirmed by the Control Framework Audit in November 2019), high operating costs, worsening management-staff relationships in Sri Lanka, low interest by most Plan entities in funding the country program. This was confirmed by the perception of many stakeholders within Plan.

### **Process of exit**

The timeline of exit, starting from March 2018, as given in the first After Action Report describes the factors that built up and eventually led to a rather abrupt closure decision in December 2019. It is almost ironic that the timeline commences with one of the few, if not only, occasions when all PISL staff came together in a workshop over the new transformation process. It seems as if an opportunity was missed to build from this workshop into an inclusive process that could have avoided the eventual escalation.

Many interviewees dated the Sri Lanka 'problems' further back [REDACTED]. We ask below why a 'problematic' situation could not have been addressed much earlier, with more consequence and creativity, like other INGOs working in Sri Lanka had done.

Decision making over the exit was not optimal. In addition to the lack of preparation and exit strategy, the decision was at the end of the day made [REDACTED] without proper consultation, during or even after the decision. It is notable, that several occasions to involve governance just prior to the exit decision were not taken. While we see no formal breach of governance protocols, one should expect a transparent conversation between senior management and governors in light of the significance of the situation. These shortcomings have been addressed partly in the first AAR of 2020 and in several board meetings thereafter and are contextual only to a certain extent. We try to address some structural issues contributing to this situation further below.

### **In hindsight**

With all the clarity that hindsight provides, it now seems that Plan missed the bus in Sri Lanka in many ways.

- a) **Not being proactive and prepared** – the legal teams of some other INGOs based in Colombo had raised red flags about issues arising from staff on permanent contracts as early as 2005 itself. Another INGO in Sri Lanka had moved its staff from permanent to short term contracts in 2007. And that was when PISL was still continuing with permanent contracts, in fact even converting short term contracts to long term contracts. It appears the last such conversion from short term to long term contract was done at PISL as late as maybe 2015. Not only had PISL not been proactive in spotting the problem with permanent contracts, but it was also not alert to what other INGOs were doing.

- b) Poor internal systems** – PISL’s systems and procedures come across as weak in ensuring internal checks and balances. For example, procurement and payments (finance) both reported to the same person. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] The same person also had HR and administration reporting to [REDACTED]. Further, people in sensitive roles such as procurement and in certain field functions had been in the same role profile and the same location for decades. There seemed to either not have been a staff rotation policy in place, or if it existed, it was not implemented. Not only does this kind of role stagnation not allow for people to grow, but it can provide greater opportunities for malpractices. Attending to these organisational hygiene issues in a timely manner could have prevented many of the operational problems that then led to the exit decision.
- c) Oversight failures** – the oversight failures in Sri Lanka seem to have been several. Both the problems mentioned above could have been nipped much sooner if there had been good oversight. The flaws in PISL’s organisation structure were particularly obvious and fundamental, and yet these were never spotted or corrected by any of the oversight layers in PII. There are several such examples that the consultants came across, and certainly the situation as presented in the Control Framework Audit report points to the problem of management and oversight failings.
- d) Generalisation** – at some point, especially in the one year preceding the exit decision, it appears as though a generalised clubbing began to happen in the perceptions of senior leadership in PII. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] This was unfortunate since, as in any organisation, there were all kind of staff in PISL – some good, some not so good; some cooperative, some resistant; some willing to change, some not so willing to change; and so on. In fact, some of the former Country Directors we spoke with specially underlined this fact. However, instead of building on the base of the supportive and competent staff members, the generalisation of all-as-one meant that PII lost an important opportunity for engagement and constructive cooperation.
- e) Cultural unfamiliarity** – towards the end, and given the somewhat difficult PISL situation, cultural unfamiliarity became an additional constraint for PII. The organisation could not read the socio-cultural context of Sri Lanka correctly, and could not pace itself in keeping with the same. Plan needs to be aware of the need to deploy experienced leadership [REDACTED] in turning around difficult situations complemented by relevant attention and good guidance from senior leadership.

## Media and Communications

1. While the exit decision and the closure of operations in Sri Lanka lie two years back, critical media reports (in Norway, the UK, Denmark) came up only in 2021. In 2019, while some initial media guidance was developed, the **hierarchy of considerations** in the crisis management process was security and staff safety, legal considerations, finances and assets, over internal and external communications. Internal media preparedness advice was overruled, and little facts were produced to prepare for critical media questions.
2. Recommendations to **get prepared for critical press** came from some NOs, and global communications but not responded to as the media stories did not develop or 'grow legs. **Little was done**, so the organisation was caught flat-footed two years later. "Journalists knew more than we knew". When critical media reports appeared in the above mentioned countries in 2021, NOs took on the responses in an **informally coordinated manner**. Communications directors worked rather well together, NDs proactively approached media, despite not having much to share. [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED].
3. The **Crisis Management Protocol was not effected**. It shall not be judged whether or not this decision was right, but the protocol would have mobilised additional resources. There should be a **lower threshold mechanism to prompt a coordinated media response** in all of Plan. Also, policies will have to be complemented by good plans of action, which seemed to be lacking.
4. There is a **disconnect over considerations that matter most for NOs** (sponsors communication, fundraising being affected, reputation in a national context) and the capacity and focus that the Global Hub Leadership Team brings to those matters.
5. There was the notion amongst some that **too much was made over a relatively small number of media articles**, and that Plan is unduly conservative, risk-averse and must learn how to take such things in its stride. Fundamental differences persist in that bad PR matters far more to the fundraising offices and far less to the implementing arms. There need to be effort to find ways to keep reducing this gap.
6. **Internal and external communications go hand in hand**. The former sometimes seems to be suffer from lack of trust, power hierarchies, and clandestine behaviour. The latter cannot work, if the former is not addressed. Even the strictest crisis communications protocol will only work if staff of different entities within Plan International share information with each openly and comprehensively, across functional (or section) divisions. The lack of objective and reliable 'data' was also quoted as an impediment, though it was difficult to assess [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## Specific suggestions for the International Board to consider

Plan is an 85 year old organisation, and one that has done enormous good across the globe. Given the deep goodwill it enjoys worldwide, and its committed band of sponsors, supporters and governors, there is every reason to believe that Plan will continue to make a difference to children's lives wherever it works.

However, there is a lot that has changed in these 85 years, and Plan is today at a juncture which calls for deeper stock-taking – the Sri Lanka episode highlights that need. Hence we feel that it would be a missed opportunity if the issues around the exit are only dealt with at the level of the exit and not converted into a chance to address the underlying reasons. **The preceding sections touch upon some of those underlying areas (which are not all repeated here) and addressing these disconnects is a pressing need and recommendation from our side.**

We have identified four major areas where the leadership of Plan should invest in improvement and possible transformations, and we would invite the Board to consider those. We also encourage Plan to seek more systematic exchange over how other, similarly structured organisations deal with the challenges that are often common to the sector. In the Sri Lanka context there was much to learn from peers in the development space, and reformed and people-centred Governance models are being discussed intensely throughout the sector, in the context of localisation and power shift. There is plenty of opportunity to learn from best practices and ambitions, through exchange with others.

### 1. Institution and organisation building

From our review of the Sri Lanka exit, we would strongly suggest that PII needs to focus more on housekeeping and institution building matters. PII has been pushing for standardised development strategies across countries in socially diverse situations. However, more than that, PII needs to work on some standardised, [REDACTED] structures and processes across its operations – at least that is what emerges from the Sri Lanka case.

- a. **Develop standardised organisation structure templates** – which build in mechanisms for checks and balances (for example, procurement and finance should not be reporting into the same person) and ensure all country offices follow that. There can be some variations and localisation to suit a country specific context but there should be no compromise on the core principles of putting in place organisation structures that have inbuilt checks and balances.
- b. **Standardised HR processes** – it is noted that under the previous CEO Plan had developed and has now launched a new People and Culture 2-5 year Strategy which is addressing basic things like SOP and job rotation (specially for sensitive roles like procurement, sponsorships, etc). The effectiveness and impact of this strategy should be monitored closely, as some of our findings identified weaknesses around the time of the SL exit.
- c. **Legal risks assessment** – does PII undertake a periodic risk assessment from a legal perspective? PII needs to ask why other INGOs and their legal teams had identified the risks of permanent contracts in Sri Lanka at least 10 years before them? What is PII missing in its approach or systems?
- d. **Delegation of financial and administrative powers** – it would be useful for PII to do a comprehensive review of the delegation matrix, to identify areas of improvement and also to strengthen its internal due diligence systems.
- e. **Delaying** – over the years PII has acquired multiple layers within its organisation structure. The value addition of every layer needs to be objectively

assessed. Many of the middle layers seemed to have functioned more as extended arms for top-down implementation (in the Sri Lanka context), rather than as representatives and aggregators of the country offices' contexts and concerns. Plan would do well to boldly question the utility of these multiple layers [REDACTED].

## 2. People

People lie at the heart of any organisation, but far more so, at the heart of a development organisation. Their commitment, motivation and dedication can make all the difference to the work done by a non-profit. The Sri Lanka case suggests that there may have been missed opportunities towards the goal of building such a team. The people area is a vast area of work, and the considerations that we share here (flowing directly from the Sri Lanka exit) are probably just a small part. We were made aware about the launch of a new People and Culture strategy, late in the process, and can therefore not comment on its content and potential impact. However, here are some ideas that may have to be (or may already be) considered.

- a. **Expats as Country Directors:** towards the end, what aggravated the Sri Lanka situation was PII's inability to fully understand the cultural context, and forge bonds of trust within its team. As an INGO, Plan needs to think about the relative value of placing expats as Country Directors, especially when they are not familiar with the language and culture. Developing strong local talent pipelines is really important, especially for a development organisation such as Plan.
- b. **Deputation:** one suggestion that came up for improving empathy and understanding across different parts of the organisation was to encourage staff to go on deputation from PII to NOs and vice-versa. Several people seemed to be in favour of the same.
- c. **Investments in trust and team building:** We suggest that PII may bring in a trained Organisation Behaviour (OB) expert and do some dedicated work on building stronger teams where each member feels valued and heard.

## 3. Purpose and impact

- a. **Impact frameworks, both long term and short term** – we suggest that PII further invest in building comprehensive and clear outcomes and impact parameters (both long term and short term) for assessing its work – at the level of countries and at the level of communities and individuals. There is significant learning available from other organisations that have long-term sponsorship funding available for area or community development programs, and invest in elaborate MEAL frameworks, indicators for success and intentional handover-strategies to communities and exit plans.
- b. **Entry- or Exit- protocols** – it has now been almost two years since Sri Lanka, and in the light of that experience it would be useful to re-examine its exit strategies, protocols or policies. Along with the change already made in decision-making authority (over exit) to the International Board/Members' Assembly, there should be investment in the MA's capacity to grasp and support such long-term strategies. The regular portfolio reviews might provide for a process of purposeful entry- or exit-decisions, but the consultants have not had a chance to assess the adequacy of this. Also, a 'hotspots' report by the CEO to the Program committee was recommended as well as other tools to strengthen board oversight and assurance and cut through the information overload.

An important point is the linkage of 'entry' decisions to the current sector debates around localisation and equitable partnerships. It was mentioned that entry criteria of Plan International are relatively high and rather formalistic to consider changed realities in the



contexts we work in, and may have to be revised.

- c. **Personal and organisational accountability** – the organisation has introduced a new performance accountability architecture in July 2021, which complements the existing performance appraisal system. It consists of four major elements of which only one ('one to one regional performance discussions') seems to be a more robust discussion over individual performance, while the other quarterly and monthly meetings are meant to build trust, give space for reflection, exchange of good practices and challenges, and aim at improvement of operations performance. It is too early to assess the effectiveness of the new system, but it seems well appreciated and a welcome step away from 'activities reporting' into more collaborative approach to assess impact and success (or failure) of operations at Plan. Given the massive impacts of the transformational change that was instituted in 2020, it is commendable to take such an inclusive approach. What needs to be developed are clearer objectives, criteria for success, and a more intentional reward (and sanctions) regime.

The ambition to put country offices (and regions) into the centre of Plan's planetary system is implicit to the new system, but has not been instituted in formal accountability measures. They do not appear in the new architecture and should become stronger actors who can demand accountability for performance of other Plan entities, as proxies and on behalf of the communities they serve on the frontline.

#### 4. Values and culture

- a. **Communication:** the principles of truthful, trusted and transparent communication inside the organisation needs to be lived and exercised by all layers of the organisation, starting with the tone from the top, and clearly rewarding or sanctioning such values and behaviour. A strong Board needs to welcome 'bad news' and continually learn, creating a 'no blame culture' when searching for opportunities to improve the organisation. During our review, some of the interviewees felt they had not always been informed, and people felt that at times they had not been heard or consulted (sometimes irrespective of their formal positions and authorities). It may help if PII were to make a communications flow diagram. Work more with RACI matrixes, and similar formalised processes, but also invest in informal, un-authoritative communication channels where people can air their opinions fearlessly. We assume that the COVID pandemic has already created several of those, WhatsApp groups, watercooler sessions etc. – could they become the 'gold standard' of how Plan communicates internally?
- b. **Revisiting the organisational values:** Current important sector discussions over INGOs' roles in the system, their colonial heritage and their inherent power imbalances provide an excellent opportunity for self-reflection. They should be utilised to give room for internal reflection on how Plan feels for its staff and partners, and in undertaking a critical assessment of how PII is true to its values.
- c. **Accountability:** While there is a new, ambitious performance accountability architecture, one wonders how this will be internalised and lived [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

It is clear that such accountability ambitions could be overstretching what Plan has been used to for years, but we would like to encourage the leadership of Plan to consider a robust, constructive critical, 360 degree of being held responsible and accountable for one's actions. The people Plan serves, deserve nothing less.

## List of interviewees

**[REDACTED]**

## Guiding Questions, a frame for conversations

### A. TOR Part 1: Management and governance assurance frameworks

The purpose of this review is to:

- Identify opportunities to strengthen PII's operations management, accountability, and assurance framework – early detection systems, to detect worsening of conditions over time that can lead to a situation where an exit or an accelerated exit is the only feasible course of action.
- Identify improvements to effectively communicate and engage governors on material operations issues and evaluate why governors did not appreciate the significance of the deteriorating operating environment in Sri Lanka.
- An assessment of the adequacy of the implementation of the March 2020 After Action Review.

Taking into consideration the above, the review will therefore focus on

- The ability of PII's management, accountability, and assurance framework to identify a deteriorating management and operating environment in a timely manner.

#### Questions for respondents:

1. How aware were the respondents about the situation in Sri Lanka? Capture specific times and moments: 'When did they first hear / realise its serious / felt they needed to get involved'.
  2. What is your understanding of the main reasons for the exit decision? And who made them, at the end of the day?
  3. Given that the point about 'may exit Sri Lanka' had been made in several IB meetings, how did that conversation percolate down your particular part of Plan? For example, as an NO, did it lead to any in-country discussions on preparing for the exit? Or as part of management, did it influence your investments (of time, money) in improving the situation in Sri Lanka? As part of management team, did you plan on any timeline or identify key critical areas (data protection, children, programs, etc). Or was the conversation on 'may exit' in the realm of a distant possibility, notrequiring any planning or action?  
At what point of time, did you hear about 'the escalating risks' such that you could support or initiate appropriate mitigating actions?
  4. How can the IB conduct its affairs differently to facilitate the presentation and support of difficult decision choices in the future? What management skills/processes do you believe need strengthening to better address such difficult situations in a timely fashion?
  5. With the benefit of hindsight, what should have been done differently in the case of Sri Lanka? Attempt to differentiate between Sri Lanka specific points, and what could be a Plan-wide structural or cultural issue to be resolved.
  6. In case of respondents from within PII, we would like to understand how they feel about sharing bad news in internal meetings? Are the meetings quite metrics driven or do they leave room for people to share their thoughts beyond the numbers? Overall sense of morale and engagement. Suggest asking about 'Governance' and 'Management' culture, by posing two questions: What kind of behaviour is a) rewarded and b) sanctioned?
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## **B. TOR Part 2: Handling of media crisis by PII and impacted National Organisations**

The purpose of this review is to examine the interaction between the Plan International entities involved in the “Sri Lanka media crisis” to determine i) if it enabled an effective organisational response to the crisis which best mitigated entity level and aggregate organisation wide PR risk and, ii) the extent to which it was hampered by a lack of an agreed narrative and alignment on cost definitions. This review will be aligned with ongoing work relating to alignment of sponsorship messaging following a review undertaken by Global Assurance.

This element of the review will therefore focus on the ways of working and decision-making between the Plan International entities involved in the “Sri Lanka media crises” and the availability of timely, reliable data to support the organisational media response.

**Key question is,** how is critical data and media messaging managed, so as to project a consistent and unified message to external world?

Sub questions:

1. How, in your perception, did Plan handle the media attention to the Sri Lankacase?
2. Where the media ‘Crisis management protocols’ adequate, and were they followed?
3. Did Plan have clear and consistent messaging, Q&A, and responsibilities in place, and were they useful and followed?
4. Did Plan and its various entities have the right capacities to handle the media attention?
5. A critical piece seemed to be the availability of essential facts and information. Whom would you have expected to provide those in a consistent manner?
6. What could be important learnings from the handling of the media attention?