Sustaining Development: Results from a Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects–Honduras Country Study

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This brief summarizes the approach to and findings and recommendations of the sustainability and exit strategies study in Honduras. Additional findings from the Honduras study and other country studies are available at www.fantaproject.org.

Background

To be effective, development projects must result in lasting change. Projects may meet their objectives by improving economic, health, or social conditions while they are operating, but genuine success is achieved only through sustained change that does not depend on continued external resources. To assess the effectiveness of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Food for Peace (FFP) development food assistance projects' sustainability plans and exit strategies for achieving sustainable impacts after the projects exited their implementation areas, the Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, a partner on the USAID-funded Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA), conducted a multi-country study of project activities, outcomes, and impacts from 2009 to 2013.

Twelve FFP development projects in four countries (Kenya, Honduras, Bolivia, and India) were included in the study. Funding for these multisectoral projects ended between 2008 and 2009, providing the study team with an opportunity to observe how their activities, outcomes, and impacts evolved over the 2–3 years after the projects exited. In Honduras, three organizations—Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), Save the Children (SC), and World Vision (WV)—implemented development FFP projects in the technical sectors of maternal and child health and nutrition (MCHN); water and sanitation (W&S); and agriculture, income-generating activities (IGAs), and natural resource management (NRM). These organizations also implemented cross-cutting infrastructure projects.

A girl carries her brother in the Maya-Chortí village of Estanzuelas. (Source: Sean Hawkey/Photoshare)

Objectives

- Determine the extent to which the activities, outcomes, and impacts of FFP development projects in Honduras were sustained after the withdrawal of FFP funding.
- Identify project and non-project factors that made it possible to sustain project benefits after the projects ended.

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- Assess how project design, sustainability plans, the development of exit strategies, and the process of exit affected sustainability.[1]
- Provide guidance to future project implementers and funders regarding how to improve sustainability.

Methods

Qualitative data were collected at the time of the projects' exit, 1 year later, and 2 years later (2009, 2010, and 2011). In 2009, qualitative data were collected through phone interviews with project staff and other stakeholders, as a political crisis made it impossible to conduct fieldwork. In 2010 and 2011, the study team conducted key informant interviews and focus groups discussions in the field with project participants and non-participants, as well as with project staff, service providers, and other stakeholders. The study team also visited and observed farmers' fields, production facilities, and infrastructure created by the projects. In 2011, 2 years after the projects exited, the study team also conducted quantitative follow-up surveys that replicated the projects' endline evaluations to permit statistical comparison of key indicators at the time of exit and 2 years later. Primary data collection was complemented by information from baseline and midterm evaluation reports, as well as from other project documents.

Results

Sustainability was judged in terms of the continuation of service delivery and service use, the adoption of practices promoted by the projects, and the maintenance or further improvement of project impacts. As successive rounds of data collection were implemented, the study team identified three factors that it considered to be critical to sustainability: an ensured source of **resources** to sustain the activities that contribute to sustainable impact, sufficient technical and managerial **capacity** on the part of project participants and service providers to continue implementing activities independent of the projects, and **motivation** on the part of service providers and project participants to continue engaging in these activities post-project.

The study team also found that a fourth factor, **linkages** (including vertical linkages, such as between community health workers and the Government of Honduras health system, and/or horizontal linkages, such as among local committees), was also essential to consider, and appropriate linkages were critical to sustainability for most technical sector interventions. In addition, the study team found that the process of exit affected sustainability. **Gradual exit**, with the opportunity for project participants (individuals and organizations) to operate independently prior to project closure, made it more likely that activities would be continued without project support. The results from each technical sector supported the importance of these factors.

One of the key results applicable to all technical sectors was that evidence of the sustainability of activities, outputs, and impacts at the time of project exit did not necessarily predict sustainability 2 years later. Although there were many examples of project impacts that were substantial and positive at project exit that were maintained or even improved 2 years later, there were also many examples of positive impacts at exit that were not sustained and, in some cases, declined to the project's baseline levels or below. Further, the provision of free resources threatened sustainability by, in some instances, creating unrealistic expectations that could not be met once these resources were withdrawn. Withdrawal of free resources sometimes also reduced the motivation of beneficiaries and service providers. A synopsis of findings by the technical sectors implemented in Honduras follows.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH AND NUTRITION

In the MCHN sector, community health workers (CHWs) provided growth monitoring and supplementary food rations, health talks, and home visits to mothers, and were expected to transition to being supported by the Government of Honduras health system when the project exited. Linkages to the government health system were effective in some cases, but in others, financial constraints meant that CHWs did not consistently receive continued government support (e.g., in the form of training or supplies). Nonetheless, 2 years after project exit, more than two-thirds of former FFP communities still had at least one working CHW,

[1] This study defines *sustainability plan* as a plan describing those elements of a project that incorporate sustainability concerns and increase the likelihood that project activities and impacts will continue after exit. *Exit strategy* is defined as an operational plan for withdrawing from target communities without jeopardizing progress toward project goals.

supported either by a Government of Honduras health system service provider or by another nongovernmental organization (NGO).

The majority of mothers continued to make use of growth monitoring services 2 years after project exit, but many shifted from growth monitoring provided in the community by the CHW to growth monitoring provided by public health centers (typically outside the community) or other NGOs. This decline in demand for key CHW services meant that some CHWs stopped working, and almost all stopped making home visits to monitor and encourage good health and hygiene practices. Although mothers cited health benefits as the motivation for participating in growth monitoring, both mothers and CHWs cited the withdrawal of FFP project-provided food rations as one reason for the shift away from CHW-provided growth monitoring. Mothers largely chose to use other growth monitoring services where material benefits, including meals and food rations, were provided.

In addition, the practice of exclusive breastfeeding until 6 months of age was well maintained 2 years after exit, but most other health practices (e.g., continued feeding during episodes of diarrhea, timely introduction of complementary feeding, and handwashing) declined, in some cases dramatically. Declines in the prevalence of stunting between project baseline and endline, though, were maintained or improved 2 years after exit.

WATER AND SANITATION

The FFP development projects in Honduras worked with existing community-based water committees or created new ones to provide, maintain, and manage piped water to households and to promote the construction of latrines or toilets. Projects provided high-quality materials for construction and repairs and trained water committee members in the technical and administrative aspects of managing the piped water systems, including how to set fees at a level that would sustain the systems. Project sustainability plans for this intervention were based on collecting household water fees that would provide the resources to maintain and repair the systems when needed. This plan worked, as households were motivated by the tangible benefit of having access to piped water in the home. Projects also planned to establish linkages between water committees and the municipalities to provide ongoing training and resources, but these linkages were not generally implemented, as water committees preferred to manage their budgets independently. Households' access to piped water was well maintained, and the great majority of piped water systems were maintained at the community level by the water committees 2 years after the projects exited.

Water quality testing and water purification were less well maintained: few water committees were arranging for water quality testing 2 years after exit or were applying chlorine at the water tank, as the project had encouraged. One reason for this is that motivation was lacking, since households objected to the taste of chlorine. In addition, because project staff took responsibility for arranging for water quality testing up to the time of project exit, water committees had not taken on this responsibility and had no independent experience managing water quality testing prior to exit.

The provision of piped water demonstrates that the convergence of three critical factors (resources, capacity, and motivation) and a process that allowed water committees to operate independently for extended periods of time before project exit contributed to the largely successful sustainability of the project-provided piped water systems 2 years after exit. The case of water quality testing and purification demonstrates how the lack of a critical factor (motivation) and absence of a period of independent operation can be detrimental to sustainability.

AGRICULTURE, INCOME-GENERATING ACTIVITIES, AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The goal of the agriculture, IGA, and NRM components of the FFP development projects in Honduras was to improve household income and food security by teaching farmers to apply productivity-enhancing agricultural practices, encouraging them to produce non-traditional crops, and promoting sales of crops and processed products. The basis for the sustainability of these interventions was that profits would provide the resources for the inputs needed to continue applying the practices farmers had learned, farmers' capacities would be maintained through continued application of the learned practices, and farmers

would be motivated by increased production and associated income.

Project staff taught model farmers to train other farmers in improved practices. The model farmers were given free inputs to use on their own land as an incentive throughout project implementation, but the study results show that model farmers stopped providing training once the project-provided inputs and incentives were withdrawn. Two years after exit, the percent of farmers applying the improved practices taught in the projects fell in all project areas, although this decrease was less pronounced in project areas where exit was more gradual. Farmers who owned their own land were more likely to continue using project-supported improved practices, as were farmers trained by the projects. Similarly, NRM practices, such as reforestation and terracing, which were intended to improve productivity as well as resilience to climate and other shocks and stressors, declined when inputs (such as seedlings) and training were no longer provided.

Integral to all of the projects' implementation strategies was the formation of producer associations that were intended to be a mechanism for sharing information and for collective marketing to obtain better prices for products. Two years after the projects exited, farmer participation in producer associations had declined. Farmers cited the cost of membership and an inability to produce a sufficient quality and quantity of products to participate in collective marketing efforts as inhibitors to engagement in this activity. Farmers also expressed reluctance to engage in collective marketing and a preference for selling independently. Indeed, the follow-up survey found that most farmers were marketing their crops as individuals, and this fraction had increased since project exit.

Projects also organized small enterprises to process agricultural commodities for sale. In addition, WV, which worked in a coffee-producing region, linked coffee farmers with exporters for long-term contracts that included access to technical assistance and credit. Two years after exit, the proportion of farmers engaged in agricultural sales fell in areas where marketing support had been provided by the project and without charge until project exit. The proportion of farmers engaged in sales was sustained in many areas where farmers had established and were independently nurturing links to commercial markets at the time of exit. The change in yields for project-targeted staple crops was inconsistent, in part due to climate shocks over the 2-year period. Nonetheless, household food security as measured by months of adequate household food provisioning was sustained or improved 2 years after exit in all three project areas and dietary diversity was sustained or improved over the same period in two of the three project areas.

Among the key lessons learned for this sector were that withdrawal of material incentives threatened the sustainability of service delivery and other activities, and sustainability was greater when withdrawal of support was gradual so that individuals and organizations could develop independence in applying practices and implementing activities (e.g., commercialization) prior to project exit. The critical factors of resources, capacity, and motivation were essential. Vertical linkages to market institutions and buyers were also key for this sector.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The results of the study support the conclusion that the three critical factors—resources, capacity, and motivation—are all essential to the sustainability of project activities, outcomes, and impacts, while the fourth factor, linkages, must also be considered in project design and implementation. Sustainability is more likely when project withdrawal is gradual, and when beneficiaries, both individuals and organizations, have an opportunity to operate independently while project staff are still available to offer guidance.

In addition, the study found that indications of impact at the time of exit do not necessarily assure that those impacts will be felt after exit. Impact and sustainability are distinct achievements, and an exclusive focus on impact at exit may jeopardize sustainability over the longer term. For example, providing free resources (such as food or agricultural inputs) may maximize short-term impact, but their withdrawal may jeopardize sustainability if no provision has been made for these resources to be replaced. Providing free resources itself poses risks for sustainability, as these may lead to unrealistic expectations that cannot be met after project exit.

The results of the study in Honduras led to the following recommendations for project designers and managers, donors/funders, and for future research.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT DESIGNERS AND MANAGERS

- Explicit sustainability plans and exit strategies should be incorporated into development project plans from the beginning.
- Assumptions underlying sustainability plans should be realistically assessed, taking into account the time horizon, contextual factors, and available resources; projects based on unrealistic expectations (or hopes) should be adjusted accordingly.
- Exit strategies should clearly allocate responsibilities for phase-over.
- Project exit should be gradual; support should be progressively withdrawn so that organizations and individuals (and associated linkage partners) have a significant period of independent operation before project exit.
- Sustainability strategies should incorporate clear and realistic plans for continued access to resources, capacity, and motivation over the long term.
- Plans for linking project activities to external entities should consider carefully whether the institutions involved in these planned linkages have the resources, capacity, and motivation to sustain them.
- Linkages should be established early so that linkage partners (including commercial entities) have time to develop relationships and procedures and have time to test and modify them before project exit.
- Provision of free resources should be avoided, or should be structured as a one-time donation that will result in ongoing service delivery or service use without further free resources. If free resources are provided, projects should identify locally available replacement resources and build in a shift to cost-sharing these resources and, ultimately, to full beneficiary payment for any goods and services prior to project exit.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS/FUNDERS

- Criteria for project success should incorporate indicators for sustainability, not only impact indicators, possibly by means of staged evaluations with indicators adjusted for the stage of implementation.
- Progress toward sustainability should be monitored throughout the project cycle (e.g., at baseline, midterm, and endline) so that identified modifications can be implemented as necessary in ongoing and/or future projects.
- The project cycle should allow sufficient time to build capacity and have a period of independent operation of activities and linkages prior to project exit.
- Projects should be required to maintain archives of baseline, midterm, and endline evaluations, as well as associated data, along with information derived from routine project monitoring and associated reporting so that these are accessible for learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Incorporate into sustainability studies, when possible, a control (randomly assigned) or comparison group to permit an experimental research design in order to strengthen conclusions.
- Collect information on outcomes and impacts at the level of the target communities and beyond, rather than focusing only on the intended direct beneficiaries. That is, design sustainability studies to capture not only direct, but also second- and third-order indirect effects (for example, project impact not only on agricultural income, but on household income from all sources, and not only on agricultural households, but on all households in the target communities).
- Consider studies to compare the long-term impacts on low-income communities of targeting project resources to the poorest of poor recipients versus targeting those with more resources.

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