

Sustaining Development: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects

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

Overview

To be effective, development projects must result in changes that last beyond the duration of the projects themselves, without the continued provision of external resources to sustain benefits. In 2006, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Office of Food for Peace (FFP) began requiring that all development food assistance projects include explicit explanations of how projects intend to ensure the sustainability of activities and benefits after each project's end. From 2009–2016, FFP, through the USAID-funded Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance Project (FANTA), provided support to Tufts University to conduct a multi-country study to assess the effectiveness of FFP-supported projects' sustainability plans and exit strategies.¹ The objective of the study was to determine what factors enhanced the likelihood of sustained project activities and benefits in order to

¹ A sustainability plan represents all elements of project design that take sustainability into account; an exit strategy is an explicit plan guiding the process of withdrawing resources from beneficiary communities. Sustainability plans are based on assumptions (which may be implicit or explicit) about mechanisms by which project activities and benefits will be sustained; the validity of these assumptions is a determinant of the success of a sustainability plan.



Source: Anil Gulati/Photoshare

Food for Peace's Work

FFP supports projects that work across sectors using various tools and approaches, including food assistance and cash resources, to reduce hunger and malnutrition and ensure that all people at all times have access to sufficient food for a healthy and productive life.

provide guidance to future FFP development food assistance projects, with implications for other development projects as well, on how to ensure sustainability.

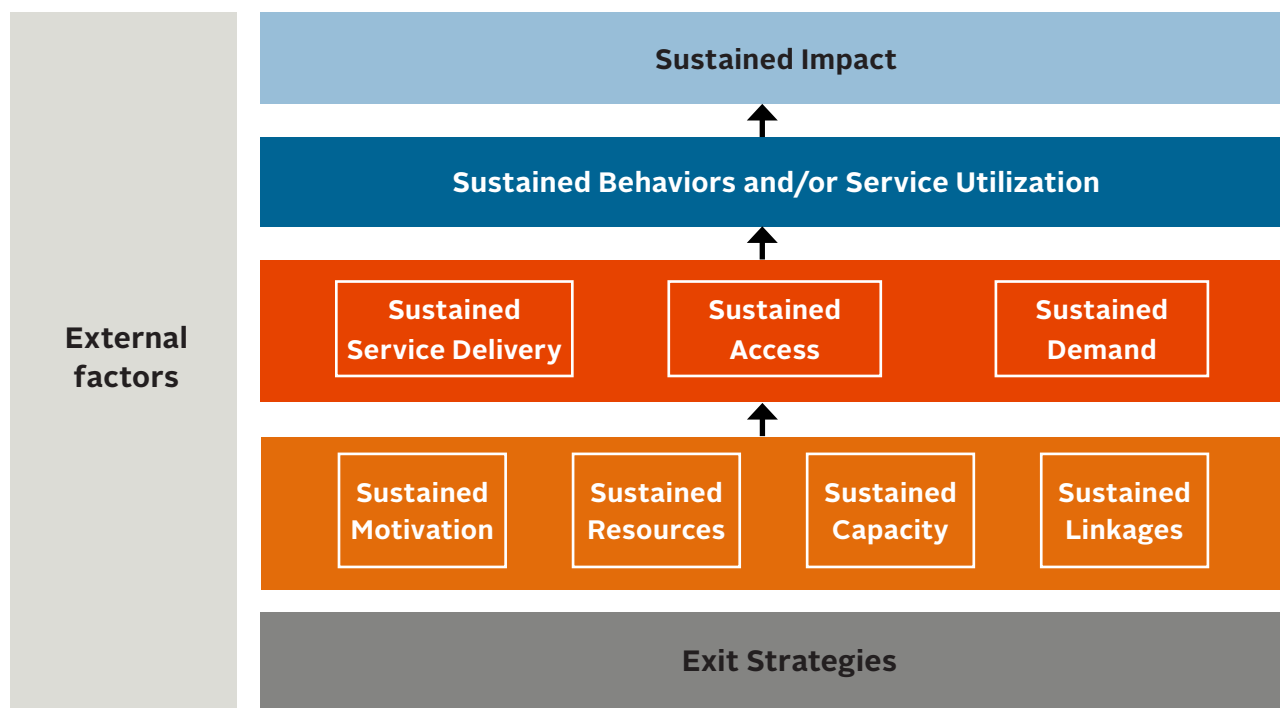
Conceptual Framework

Observations during the early stages of the study provided a framework for the study's main lines of inquiry. Briefly, these observations indicated that project activities fall into three main groups: (1) creation or strengthening of service delivery mechanisms, (2) assurance of beneficiary access to services, and (3) improvements in beneficiary demand for and use of services and adoption of behaviors promoted by the project (Figure 1). The study team hypothesized that sustained project impacts depend on the continued delivery of these types of services (of sufficient quality to be effective and valued) and/or the continued adoption and use of practices and behaviors promoted in the project. In addition, three factors emerged from analysis of the initial rounds of qualitative data collection that were

identified as critical to sustainability: (1) a sustained source of **resources**, (2) sustained **technical and managerial capacity**, so that service providers can operate independently of the project, and (3) sustained **motivation** (of beneficiaries and service providers) that does not rely on project inputs. The study identified a fourth factor that is also central to sustainability in many circumstances: **linkages** to governmental organizations and/or other entities that can augment resources, refresh capacity, and motivate frontline service providers and beneficiaries to provide and make use of services and continue project-promoted practices. The study assessed the role of each of these factors as it related to the projects' observed sustainability.

The study team expected that the same categories of factors needed to sustain service delivery would also be critical to sustaining demand for those services. Beneficiaries would require the resources, capacity, motivation, and linkages to demand, afford, and participate in services and to implement the behaviors that

Figure 1. Sustainability and Exit Strategies Conceptual Framework



Adapted from Coates and Kegode. 2012. "Kenya Exit Strategies Study Round 2 Report." Unpublished, submitted to FANTA April 8.

were promoted by the awardees. Sustained access is the confluence of supply and demand. It pertains to: the ability and motivation of beneficiaries to continue to avail themselves of services that might previously have been subsidized or free (demand), and the geographic and physical accessibility of the services (supply). Finally, the study team hypothesized that both the exit process and external/contextual factors (e.g., climatological, economic, political, and other common shocks and stressors, government structure, other projects operating in the area, and cultural beliefs) would play a critical role in determining the likelihood of sustainability.

Methods

The study assessed 12 projects in four countries: Bolivia, Honduras, India, and Kenya. The FFP development projects in those countries had recently closed (in Kenya) or were in the process of doing so (in Bolivia, Honduras, and India) as of 2009, providing an opportunity to study the process of exit from the time of close-out through the next 2–3 years. In addition, projects in each of these countries exhibited attention to sustainability and exit in their applications and subsequent plans. Projects implemented activities in the following technical sectors: maternal and child health and nutrition; water and sanitation; agriculture, livestock, and rural income generation; natural resource management; school feeding; and micro-savings and loan (not all sectors were addressed in every country).

The study used a mixed methods approach in which three rounds of qualitative data collection were conducted 1 year apart (at the time of exit, and 1 and 2 years later) to understand the implementation of the exit process and the evolution of the sustainability dynamics over time. In addition, researchers conducted a quantitative survey (referred to as the follow-up survey) between 2 and 3 years after exit. This survey replicated each project's endline evaluation survey to quantify the degree to which outcomes and impacts achieved at the time of project exit were maintained. The research examined project baseline and midterm



Source: Karolina Lagiewka/Photoshare

evaluation reports, when available,² combined with endline and follow-up survey data to examine indicator trends over the course of each project period and beyond. To obtain additional background information on the projects' design and implementation, researchers reviewed project documentation, including project applications, indicator performance tracking tables, endline evaluation reports, and any available exit strategy documentation. The review triangulated these information sources to assess the implementation and sustainability pathways of each project. The purpose of this triangulation was to ascertain the degree

² All of the projects in Bolivia, Honduras, and Kenya had baseline surveys, and all of them had midterm evaluations during the life of the project. The data sets from the baseline and midterm surveys were not available for analysis. In a few cases, the baseline reports were not available and baseline data used for this study were derived from the endline evaluation reports. FFP in India started operation in the 1950s, when baseline surveys were not routinely performed. In later years the endline evaluation reports for each project cycle served as the baselines for subsequent projects. The study team had access to these reports for the last two cycles (including the final cycle focused on phasing all project activities over to Indian government programs), and to the data from the endline evaluation.

to which project sustainability plans and exit strategies contributed to the sustainability of activities, outcomes, and impacts,³ and what elements were most important in achieving sustainability. The 2–3-year time horizon and lack of randomly assigned comparison groups represent study limitations.

Results and Lessons Learned

Evidence of project success at the time of exit did not necessarily imply sustained benefit over time.

Across countries and across the organizations implementing FFP projects (awardees) in each country, there were cases of endline impacts that were sustained, improved, or deteriorating over the 2–3-year period following project exit. Moreover, the study found that focusing exclusively on demonstrating impact at exit, as assessed by impact indicators, may jeopardize investment in longer-term sustainability. For example, awardees providing services to farmers to market their products up until the time of project exit were able to maximize farmer income from agricultural commercialization at the end of the project, but farmers' lack of experience negotiating independently for transportation or sale of their products appeared to reduce their ability to continue commercializing their products on their own after the projects ended.

Study results demonstrated that all three hypothesized factors—resources, capacity, and motivation—were critical to achieving sustainability.

These factors are interrelated and synergistic; no project in this study achieved sustainability without all three of them in place before the project ended. Project provision of piped water



Source: Sean Hawkey/Photoshare

in Bolivia and Honduras provides an example of the convergence of these factors: user fees generated needed resources; beneficiaries valued piped water and were therefore motivated to pay for it; and water committees received both technical and managerial training which was maintained through continued application.

Linkages, especially vertical linkages, such as those between community-based organizations or individuals and existing public or private sector institutions, were usually critical for successful phase-over of responsibilities formerly supported by the FFP projects.

For example, the absence of effective vertical linkages between community health workers and the public health system in Kenya jeopardized the continued role of the community health workers because they lacked supervision and support (motivation), refresher training (capacity), and replacement supplies (resources) to do their jobs. By contrast, vertical linkages of farmers to buyers in Bolivia and in Kenya provided resources and training (through an assured market), as well as motivation (from the income received) for farmers to continue applying improved practices and commercializing crops.

³ The following definitions are from USAID's *Glossary of Evaluation Terms* (Planning and Performance Management Unit Office of the Director of U.S. Foreign Assistance Final Version, 2009): *Activity*: A specific action or process undertaken over a specific period of time by an organization to convert resources to products or services to achieve results. *Outcome*: A result or effect that is caused by or attributable to the project, program, or policy. Outcome is often used to refer to more immediate and intended effects. *Impact*: A result or effect that is caused by or attributable to a project or program. Impact is often used to refer to higher-level effects of a program that occur in the medium or long term, and can be intended or unintended and positive or negative.

In the exit process, a gradual transition from project-supported activities to independent operation was important for sustainability.

Sustainability was more likely when projects withdrew gradually, allowing community-based organizations to develop the capacity to operate independently. Micro-savings and loan organizations in Kenya continued to operate, and even expanded after project exit, in part because the majority were operating independently well before exit, having been “graduated” to independent operation once they had completed pre-defined milestones that included a process of initial mobilization and training. In contrast, water committees did not continue quality testing post-project in Bolivia and Honduras, at least in part because the awardees arranged for this service to be provided until the project ended. Although awardees communicated the importance of water quality testing, the water committees themselves did not have the experience of making these arrangements independently prior to exit, and did not start to make these arrangements after exit.

The study showed that providing free resources can threaten sustainability, unless replacement of those resources both as project inputs and as incentives has been addressed.

Provision of resources (such as free supplementary food in maternal and child health and nutrition projects or free marketing services in agriculture projects) created expectations in many projects that could not be sustained once resources were withdrawn. In Kenya and Honduras, participation in growth monitoring fell significantly after food supplements were withdrawn; in Bolivia, government provision of conditional cash transfers (which were implemented independently of the FFP projects) replaced food supplements as an incentive, and growth monitoring participation was better sustained. In the agriculture sector, model farmers in Bolivia, Honduras, and Kenya largely stopped offering training when they no longer received the incentive of free agricultural inputs.

Not all models for assuring sustainability are equally applicable to all technical sectors.

For example, fee-for-service models contributed to the sustainability of paravet services in Kenya. Similarly, a business model appeared to work well for agricultural commercialization in Bolivia, Honduras, and Kenya, and for micro-savings and loan activities in Kenya. However, the awardees providing maternal and child health and nutrition services did not test either of these approaches in any of the countries studied, in part because of what the study team found to be a strong cultural understanding across study areas that public health services should be provided without charge.

Most sustainability plans did not address predictable external shocks and stressors or articulate key aspects of the enabling environment.

The operating context and exogenous shocks (e.g., economic and climatic) also affected the sustainability of project benefits. For example, drought in Kenya affected both agricultural production and child nutritional status; economic shocks such as a decline in world coffee price threatened the income benefit of coffee commercialization activities in Honduras. Conversely, the Government of India’s long standing commitment to the provision of child health and nutrition services, along with a Supreme Court decision mandating food provision as part of these services, contributed to the sustainability of supplementary food and health activities in that country.

Conclusions

Project impact at the time of exit does not consistently predict sustainability, and the magnitude of the impact is not related to the probability of sustainability. Analysis of the experiences of the projects in these four countries suggests that incorporating the lessons for sustainability into project design may improve the likelihood that development projects continue to offer benefits after project completion. Awardees should base their sustainability plans and related exit strategies on clearly articulated theories of change. They need to assess carefully and realistically the assumptions underlying sustainability plans and reassess them continually to account for changes in the external environment.

Sustainability plans cannot be based on the hope that activities and benefits will continue in the absence of the key factors identified in this study. In addition to measuring impact, evaluations must incorporate indicators of sustainability—that is, evidence of continued resources, capacity, and motivation; establishment of appropriate linkages; and gradual transition to independent operation—in order to judge a project’s potential to achieve lasting change. Different strategies for sustainability are appropriate and feasible in different technical sectors: this applies to business and fee-for-service models, as well as to the potential for phase-over to government, commercial organizations, or nongovernmental organizations.



Source: Anne Tinker/Photoshare

Recommendations

The study findings led to the following recommendations intended to institutionalize sustainable approaches to project design and evaluation. These recommendations are specific to FFP, but the conclusions are likely relevant to other development projects, whether food-assisted or not.

- FFP should adjust the solicitation and application review processes to account for sustainability. Sustainability plans incorporating the critical factors of resources, capacity, motivation, and (often) linkages and explicitly describing the implementation pathway for these plans and the key assumptions on which the plans are based should be included in project design. Sustainability plans should clearly articulate the sustainability theory of change as part of project design.
- Project assessment should include indicators to measure not only impact but sustainability of change. Sustainability plans and exit strategies should contain clear timelines and benchmarks of progress toward sustainability that are separate from indicators of project impact.
- FFP should consider adjusting its evaluative processes and extending projects beyond the 5-year cycle when there is evidence of progress toward sustainable impacts and indications of potential for sustainability.
- FFP and its partners should strengthen their capacities, as necessary, to institutionalize sustainability in programming through training and improved knowledge management, as well as strengthened organizational commitment to look beyond immediate impact to sustainability.
- Projects should be designed with the local context (economic, political, and social/cultural systems) in mind, should take account of the need for resilience in the face of climate or other shocks and stressors, and should be updated in response to changes in the local context.
- Project design should incorporate strategies for sustaining beneficiary demand as well as supply of services.
- Project exit should be gradual, with a phased transfer of responsibility to the appropriate stakeholders; exit should follow a phase of incrementally independent operation, and project beneficiaries and beneficiary communities should be engaged in plans for sustainability and exit from the beginning of the project cycle.
- FFP should consider selecting a subset of projects for periodic assessment over a period of as long as 5 or 10 years after exit to track the evolution of activities and benefits and their persistence over time.
- FFP should ensure continued and consistent use of a system whereby awardees archive all baseline and evaluation reports including accessible and documented original data in order to enable post-project evaluations.



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