

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

Jennifer Coates, Elizabeth Kegode, Tina Galante, and Alexander Blau, of the Gerald J. and Dorothy R. Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy at Tufts University

This brief summarizes the approach to and findings and recommendations of the sustainability and exit strategies study in Kenya. Additional findings from the Kenya 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 in 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 2016.

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 Kenya, the FFP development projects were implemented by three organizations—Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), CARE, and Food for the



A mother carries her child on her back as she walks to a health dispensary. (Source: Karolina Lagiewka/Photoshare)

Hungry (FH)—in the technical sectors of maternal and child health and nutrition (MCHN), water and sanitation (W&S), agriculture and natural resource management (NRM), livestock, and microfinance.

Objectives

- Determine the extent to which the activities, outcomes, and impacts of FFP development projects 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.

- 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

To understand the implementation of each project's exit strategy and the dynamics of sustainability in the years after the organizations had withdrawn, three rounds of qualitative data collection were implemented about 1 year apart, starting at the time of each project's exit in 2008 and 2009. In particular, the study team conducted key informant interviews and focus group discussions with project participants, as well as with service providers and other stakeholders.

To quantify the extent to which impacts achieved during the project period had been maintained, the study team implemented a quantitative follow-up survey in 2011 that replicated the projects' endline evaluation surveys, comparing indicators of project outputs, outcomes, and impacts at endline with the same indicators at follow-up. The follow-up quantitative survey also included (1) a "participation module" tailored to each project's activities and sustainability plan to collect information on respondents' participation in project-related activities during and after the project period and (2) a service provider questionnaire to ask each type of community-based resource person/group trained during the project about its level of service delivery during and after the project. Primary data collection was complemented by information from baseline and midterm evaluation reports, as well as from other project documents.

Results

As successive rounds of data collection were implemented, the study team identified three factors that appeared 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 from a community health worker to the Ministry of Health, and/or horizontal linkages, such as among local committees), was also essential to consider. Appropriate linkages were important for the sustainability of 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 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 studied in the FFP development projects in Kenya supported the importance of these factors.

Sustainability was judged in terms of the continuation of service delivery and service use, the adoption of practices promoted by the projects (through service providers), and the maintenance or further improvement of project impacts. One of the key results applicable across the FFP development projects' technical sectors in Kenya was that evidence of impact at the time of project exit did not necessarily predict sustainability 2–3 years later. Although there were some examples of project impacts that were substantial and positive at exit that were maintained or even improved at follow-up, there were more examples of positive impacts at exit that were not sustained and, in some cases, declined to baseline levels or below at follow-up. A synopsis of findings by technical sector for the Kenya study follows.

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH AND NUTRITION

During the implementation phase of the projects in the MCHN sector, ADRA and FH trained volunteer community health workers (CHWs) to encourage beneficiary mothers to adopt preventive health, hygiene, and nutrition-related behaviors through regular mothers' group meetings. At monthly growth monitoring sessions, the CHWs distributed recuperative rations to mothers of children found to be growth faltering and emphasized the importance of feeding the full rations to the faltering children. In contrast, CARE trained volunteer CHWs to focus on promoting safe water systems and hygiene practices rather than on primary health and nutrition

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, outcomes, 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.

education. CARE CHWs' services did not include growth monitoring or food ration distributions.

The implicit sustainability strategy for MCHN sector interventions across all three FFP development projects in Kenya was that mothers would be motivated to continue to practice recommended behaviors once they had seen the positive impacts of these practices firsthand. The projects intended to phase over responsibility for CHW oversight and support to local Ministry of Health facilities at the end of the projects, and it was expected that, with this oversight, volunteer CHWs would continue actively reinforcing positive practices after the projects ended.

The sustainability results for this sector's interventions were mixed. The majority of CHWs interviewed during the 2011 follow-up survey (2–3 years post-exit) reported that they continued to serve their communities, although there was a significant decline in the amount of time CHWs from all three projects reported spending on service delivery after the projects ended. Quantitative and qualitative data suggest that the decline in time spent on service delivery following the projects' exit was related to a deterioration in CHW resources (e.g., availability of materials and transportation to perform tasks), capacity (e.g., access to refresher training and new information), motivation (e.g., availability of incentives to encourage continued performance of responsibilities), and linkages (e.g., connections with the Ministry of Health for supervision and replacement resources) after the projects ended. Declining beneficiary demand for CHW services post-project, once the CHWs had no new information or food rations to offer, further exacerbated this deterioration.

Only a small percentage of CHWs received support from the Ministry of Health during or post-project in Kenya. Linkages to the Ministry were tenuous and had not become fully operational by the end of the projects. As such, fledgling connections that had been made during the projects often dissolved upon project exit. Another reason for the breakdown of this linkage was that the Ministry, still centralized during the FFP project period studied here, lacked the resources (e.g., staffing and finances) and capacity at the local level necessary to take on the CHW oversight role.

While declines in CHW service provision and reduced incentives to use these services (lack of

new information and food rations) led to declines in use of these services, use of other services (e.g., taking children to health facilities for treatment of illness and growth monitoring) for children under 5 years of age remained relatively high at follow-up. It should be noted, however, that some of this may be attributable to the presence of other projects that began implementation efforts in the former FFP development project areas, in particular in response to recurrent droughts that impacted the ADRA and FH implementation areas in the intervening years.

Accompanying these declines in service provision was a decrease in associated FFP development project-promoted practices. Sustainability of recommended health practices appeared to depend at least partially on whether external resources were needed to implement them. For example, exclusive breastfeeding of infants up until 6 months of age (essentially a “free” practice) remained prevalent among former participating mothers who had subsequent children, while other infant and young child feeding practices (some of which required accessing specific foods or supplements) showed less sustainable results. Relatedly, follow-up survey results suggest that CARE households, which were not directly impacted by the droughts and which had relatively better access to water, maintained many of the key hygiene behaviors the project had promoted, in particular water purification (the inputs for which were relatively low cost) at follow-up. By contrast, hygiene behaviors in former FH areas, which had scarce levels of water resources and were highly drought-affected, were not well maintained.

The sustainability of the projects' nutrition impacts was also mixed. Child stunting, wasting, and underweight deteriorated from endline to follow-up in former FH project areas. Again these areas were in the midst of a severe drought with commensurate declines in food security at the time of the follow-up study. The findings suggest little lasting resilience from the FFP development project to withstand the drought shock. In contrast, child stunting, wasting, and underweight showed some improvement from the time of project closure to follow-up in CARE areas. Such data was not collected in ADRA project areas.

WATER AND SANITATION

ADRA, CARE, and FH adopted a similar approach in their W&S sector interventions and sustainability strategies: they formed W&S management

committees, trained them in the technical and managerial maintenance of the water points constructed by the projects, and encouraged them to charge user fees for water consumption. CARE's W&S interventions also trained local artisan groups to build slabs for latrines and water tanks, as well as safe water vessels, for which they received either formal or in-kind payment. FH's W&S interventions included an NRM element, with W&S committees serving a dual role managing the water points and the natural environment around them.

W&S committees were to be formally registered with the Government of Kenya and were to develop constitutions to govern their operations as a means of creating sustainable institutional capacity. In addition, ADRA and FH planned to link the W&S committees to relevant government offices for ongoing training and technical advice following project closure, while CARE assumed that the W&S committees would be technically and managerially self-sufficient following their exit, given the intensive capacity strengthening CARE provided the committees during project implementation. Across all three projects, the expectation was that water user fees would cover committee operating costs and infrastructure maintenance, thereby sustaining the infrastructure investments.

The study's follow-up data indicated that W&S committees continued to deliver services post-project. With few exceptions, W&S committee members reported that the technical and managerial training they received through the FFP development projects in Kenya was sufficient for the committees' continued, independent operation after the projects withdrew. Committee members' motivation was largely sustained through their sense of obligation to the community, given the importance of water resource stewardship in the more arid areas in which most of the projects worked. However, there were reductions in the amount of resources and external assistance available to many of these committees at follow-up. In former ADRA and FH areas, rising salinity levels in the water affected W&S committees' ability to continue to regularly deliver quality services as well as communities' willingness to pay for the poorer supply and quality of the water that was available.

In terms of external assistance, the status of W&S committee linkages with the Government of Kenya varied between the ADRA and FH projects. In ADRA areas, no W&S committees reported receiving

support from the government post-project, while in FH areas, linkages with the Ministry of Water remained at roughly project levels at follow-up and linkages with the National Environmental Management Agency increased, given the W&S committees' additional NRM responsibilities.

Across all three projects, W&S committee participation dropped slightly from endline to follow-up. Participation in water-related infrastructure construction and maintenance (e.g., latrines, water points, and handwashing stations) declined significantly post-project, due in part to the continued functioning of existing infrastructure or, in some instances, a lack of service availability (water), resources (time and finances), and capacity (technical know-how) to create new infrastructure or engage in repairs of existing infrastructure.

The sustainability of targeted W&S practices—including use of latrines and improved water sources and payment of water user fees—varied. Latrine access declined in FH areas but was sustained in CARE areas; use of improved water sources was sustained in ADRA and FH areas but decreased in CARE areas; and payment for water from a community source increased in ADRA areas but decreased in CARE areas. However, achievements toward the overall goal of the FFP development projects' W&S interventions in Kenya—to reduce the incidence of diarrhea and morbidity from waterborne infections in children—were broadly sustained at follow-up.

AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

The agriculture and NRM sector interventions of the three FFP development projects in Kenya were designed to increase crop yields, overall agricultural income and, ultimately, food security. ADRA and FH employed similar models to promote the sustainable adoption of the practices needed to achieve these goals, namely training community-based extension farmers to demonstrate to other farmers the feasibility and benefit of applying new technologies to improve yields, post-harvest storage, and marketing. CARE did not explicitly select model farmers, but expected that improved agricultural practices would be organically disseminated from farmer to farmer.

In addition to the diffusion of improved agricultural practices, ADRA's and CARE's agriculture and NRM sector interventions emphasized the creation and

strengthening of producer associations and worked to link them with the Ministry of Agriculture for technical assistance. CARE also worked to link producer associations with input suppliers and contract buyers. Farmers were expected to pay dues to sustain producer association activities, under the assumption that the relatively greater profits from cooperative sales would cover these costs and incentivize continued participation.

The three FFP development projects in Kenya also worked to improve NRM (e.g., establishing tree nurseries and terracing) as part of their broader strategy to sustainably increase agricultural production. NRM activities were typically incentivized with project-provided food-for-work rations, although it was assumed that once farmers gained the capacity to maintain these activities, they would be motivated to continue to maintain them without the ration incentive given the benefits from the activity itself. ADRA also identified and trained community-level seed multipliers and tree seedling producers to improve community access to these inputs.

The implicit sustainability pathway across all three projects was that beneficiary farmers who experienced increases in yields and income resulting from these practices would be motivated to continue using them post project. As with CHWs in the MCHN sector, ADRA and FH also assumed that project-trained extension farmers would continue to reinforce recommended practices and disseminate them to new beneficiaries post-project. ADRA instructed its extension farmers to begin charging fees for their services once the project closed, while FH expected its extension farmers to continue this work on a voluntary basis. ADRA's seed multipliers and tree seedling producers were expected to sustain (and motivate) themselves by charging a small fee for their products. ADRA intended to link these producers with the Ministry of Agriculture for continued support post-project.

The post-project success of ADRA's and CARE's producer associations varied widely between and within the two projects. CARE's project participants sustained a high level of participation in the producer associations, while participation in ADRA areas declined. In both cases, farmers reported feeling that participation often yielded fewer benefits relative to individual operation. In addition, unreliable revenue streams and a lack of reliable sources of market information posed constraints to the sustained

function of producer associations during the post-project period, particularly in the ADRA areas. Part of the resource challenge for producer associations in ADRA areas may be attributable to the fact that ADRA producer associations received financial support from the project until it ended, whereas CARE used a graduated cost share approach that prepared its producer associations for independent operation. In addition, as previously noted, ADRA areas were impacted by recurrent droughts in the post-project period.

While former ADRA project areas reported receiving no government support post-project, Ministry of Agriculture support to producer associations increased in CARE areas during this period. The difference in these government linkage results appears to have been affected at least in part by how and when the linkage was created. ADRA included government agricultural officers in trainings and other sector activities in ceremonial, rather than substantive, roles and was less explicit about how it intended the Ministry of Agriculture–producer association relationship to continue post-project, whereas CARE engaged the Ministry of Agriculture and private sector entities throughout its implementation process.

Despite weak linkages with the Ministry of Agriculture, ADRA-trained seed multipliers and seedling producers saw continued consumer willingness to pay for their products post-project, although this demand was negatively affected by recurrent droughts in the former project area. In CARE areas, linkages to other entities, such as suppliers and buyers, decreased, mostly from a lack of producer association resources and capacities to negotiate contracts and meet contractual requirements.

Although use of agricultural services and activities declined post-exit in all project areas, the study showed overall improvements in beneficiaries' use of the improved agricultural practices promoted by the FFP development projects in Kenya at follow-up, although which practices were sustained varied by project. However, despite improvements in yields across the life of the projects and the persistence of many recommended cultivation and NRM practices post-project, yields in ADRA and FH areas declined significantly post-project, likely due at least in part to the droughts that affected these areas during that period. In CARE areas, which were not affected by drought, yields declined for two crops, but were

maintained for four others. Following this trend, household food security had improved in CARE areas between the end of the project and the follow-up survey, while it had deteriorated in ADRA areas. A similar indicator was not measured in FH areas.

LIVESTOCK

ADRA's and FH's livestock sector interventions were designed to reduce the number of livestock deaths from disease by making veterinarian services more accessible to households with livestock holdings. Both projects shared a common implementation model and sustainability strategy: projects identified community members to serve as community-based animal health workers (paravets); these paravets were trained in business and animal health and provided with kits of essential drugs and basic equipment; and the paravets charged a small fee for their services to cover the cost of supplies and generate a profit sufficient to motivate their continued work. To ensure that the paravets had the technical support and supervision needed to continue to provide quality services after project exit, linkages were made with the Government of Kenya's district veterinary offices. FH also linked its paravets with the management committees of the livestock markets that it developed so that the animal health workers could offer services during market days.

The self-financing paravet model was largely sustained—paravets maintained service delivery after the projects exited and community demand for these services continued. Project-provided training, on-the-job experience, and occasional linkages with the government increased paravets' capacity and confidence, and the fee-for-service model enabled access to needed resources, although paravets in both former project areas noted some resource constraints in the post-project period, particularly those associated with transportation and access to specific tools. The droughts that occurred in these implementation areas post-project had a particular impact on paravets' resource base, as livestock owners lost significant portions of their herds and sometimes defaulted on payments. Despite this, the paravets largely reported continued motivation to engage in their work given the sense of duty to their community to provide these important services and the income they received for these services during non-shock periods. Paravet linkages with the Government of Kenya were mutually beneficial—the government was strapped for resources and could not provide adequate veterinary extension

services themselves, while the paravets benefited from access to government technical expertise and equipment. In addition, the government–paravet linkages were established early in the project cycle and ADRA and FH ensured that appropriate government staff were included in paravet training sessions. In terms of impact, overall, livestock deaths (due to disease) fell among former ADRA and FH households between endline and follow-up.

MICROFINANCE

CARE's FFP development project in Kenya included a community savings mobilization activity (called COSAMO) to give community members access to loans and secure savings that they could use to invest in productive activities. CARE trained existing community-based organizations in all aspects of running a community savings group, including negotiation and conflict resolution related to financial transactions and investments. The community-based organizations were to register with the Government of Kenya and identify a community-based trainer who, once trained by CARE, provided technical support to the savings groups in exchange for a fee. Savings groups were started without external capital; instead, money for the loans came from the required regular savings contributions by group members.

The study found that microfinance activities continued to thrive after CARE's exit, with groups reporting high levels of sustained resources, capacity, motivation, and linkages. In terms of resources, the lack of dependency on outside financing—supported by strong bylaws that prevented default—was identified as a key factor in the sustainability of these groups. Community-based trainers were also able to continue training new groups because of the fee-for-service model they employed. To ensure capacity, CARE implemented an intensive, year-long, graduated training program for each COSAMO group. This training supported the groups in developing strong constitutions and bylaws that included regular rotation of group leadership. In addition, the process of graduated independent operation allowed for incremental independence to facilitate the groups' success. Motivation was also built into this approach, as benefits of participation grew with each financial cycle. As beneficiaries became more astute in their individual businesses, horizontal linkages among COSAMO groups expanded to the point that, in the post-project period, there was an increase in the number of group

leaders reporting providing training or support to other COSAMO groups.

The majority of original COSAMO activity participants sustained their participation in group savings and loan activities post-project and the rate of loan-taking increased post-project. COSAMO members' continued use of the group savings and loan services allowed them to make investments that substantially improved their lives, using loans as start-up capital to engage in income-generating activities, make upgrades to homes, pay for children's school fees, and access more diverse diets and health care.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study findings in Kenya demonstrate that evidence of impact at the time of project exit does not necessarily predict sustained benefit 2–3 years later. All three of the FFP development projects studied in Kenya demonstrated notable improvements in key impact indicators during their project cycle. Some of these achievements were maintained or improved 2–3 years post project, while many others deteriorated between the withdrawal of project support and the follow-up study. Declines were traced to factors including inadequate design and implementation of sustainability strategies and exit processes, as well as external factors such as drought. Relatedly, the study found that focusing only on achieving impact during the project period can compromise the potential for expansion of benefits to individuals not originally reached by the project, as it does not result in the durable systems needed to reach this broader group.

The study results strongly support the importance of having all three critical factors—resources, technical and managerial capacity, and motivation—in place before project exit to improve the likelihood of sustainability. Many examples from the study demonstrated the necessity of all three of these factors and emphasized the likelihood that sustainability will not be achieved if any one factor is missing. In addition, linkages were almost always required throughout the delivery chain and were most successful when linkage entities were identified early in the project cycle and meaningfully integrated into project activities.

The findings also underscore the importance of building resilience to external shocks during project design and implementation. In the Kenya case, the sustainability of project impacts (and interpretation

of associated measures) was challenged by the droughts that occurred in 2008/2009 and 20011, as well as the other challenges noted above.

Interventions that were successfully sustained in the projects studied considered not only the supply of services but also demand for, access to, and utilization of those services. Beneficiaries, as well as service providers, must have the resources, capacity, and motivation to take advantage of the services offered. The study results suggest that demand was sustained when beneficiaries perceived that provided services meet a felt need and lead to notable improvements in their well-being.

In addition, the successfully sustained interventions generally did not use external resources or the projects gradually phased out their use prior to exit—practices that did not require continued external resources were more likely to be sustained than those that did. The study findings also show that beneficiaries were more willing to pay a fee for services when these charges were levied from the outset, rather than when the fee was introduced following project exit. Fee-for-service models were useful but not always sufficient to ensure sustainability unless the resource streams were complemented by capacity and motivation. Similarly, post-project declines in participation in activities that had used external resources (which disappeared at the end of the project) may have been averted had these resources been phased out earlier and alternative sources for the resource been identified.

The findings of the Kenya study suggest the following recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROJECT DESIGNERS AND MANAGERS

- During project design, consider the benefits the project would like to see maintained after its exit and work backward to determine the project strategies needed to achieve these aims, considering how the key factors of resources, technical and managerial capacity, motivation, and linkages will be sustained.
- Clearly describe sustainability plans and exit strategies in the project application and carefully operationalize them.
- Identify potential weak links in the sustainability chain and manage them (and any other weaknesses that become apparent) while implementation is underway.

- Ensure that user fees for services are introduced at the beginning of the project, as opposed to near or at project exit.
- Communicate plans for project exit to recipient communities as early as possible and design project activities to allow for a gradual exit after a phase of incrementally independent operation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DONORS/FUNDERS

- Incorporate indicators of sustainability into project monitoring and evaluation, in addition to conventional measures of project-level impacts. Sustainability indicators should include measures of resources, capacity, motivation, and linkages and should track progress toward benchmarks that signal when phase-out of an activity can begin (after a period of successful independent operation).
- Consider lengthening the typical 5-year project life cycle to facilitate achievement of sustainability benchmarks, as efforts to assess sustainability may need to transcend narrow project cycle time horizons.
- Require that project monitoring and evaluation data are well preserved to ensure that learning from project experiences can continue after a project ends.
- Require the incorporation of contingencies into sustainability planning to ensure that projects

have considered possible threats to the smooth execution of their sustainability plans. Ensure that projects identify and communicate contingency options to all stakeholders.

- Support and reward projects that strive for sustainability over shorter-term impacts, and incentivize project implementers to seek innovative and successful sustainability models for challenging sectors and contexts.
- Fund periodic post-project sustainability evaluations for critical projects or sectors.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

- Conduct sectoral landscape assessments to identify other potentially promising sustainability models for FFP contexts.
- Compare the relative sustainability of the wide range of social and behavioral change communication strategies used in the health and nutrition sector. An optimal study design would randomly assign households to different social and behavior change communication mechanisms and track them longitudinally.
- Develop a sustainability index comprised of indicators of motivation, resources, capacity, and linkages; validate its positive predictive ability through post-project assessments in a variety of FFP contexts.



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@FANTAproject

Contact Information:

Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA)
 FHI 360
 1825 Connecticut Avenue, NW
 Washington, DC 20009-5721
 Tel: 202-884-8000
 Email: fantamail@fhi360.org

Recommended Citation: Coates, Jennifer; Kegode, Elizabeth; Galante, Tina; and Blau, Alexander. 2016. *Sustaining Development: Results from a Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects—Kenya Country Study Executive Summary*. Washington, DC: FHI 360/FANTA.

This study was made possible by the generous support of the American people through the support of the Office of Health, Infectious Diseases, and Nutrition, Bureau for Global Health, and the Office of Food for Peace, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), under terms of Cooperative Agreements GHN-A-00-08-00001-00, AID-OAA-A-11-00014, and AID-OAA-A-12-00005 through the Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III (FANTA) Project, managed by FHI 360.

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