

Fostering Values-Driven Sustainability Through an Ex-Post Evaluation Capacities Lens

Jindra Cekan/ova

Founder of Valuing Voices at Cekan Consulting LLC

Background: Ex-post evaluation of sustainability has been done for 40 years in global development. However, it has been done far less than 1% of all global development projects, for there is little proof that “sustainable” development is or is not. Similarly, foreign aid projects are implemented to foster sustainability, but without the benefit of evidence from ex-post evaluations of what drove it and limited research on the benefits of robust exit strategies.

Purpose: Transparency in values we hold, and evaluative capacities’ best practices that we bring to our evaluations inform how they are done, with whom, and for what. Using the evidence base from ex-post evaluations and exit strategies led to these nine checklists. Professionals in monitoring and evaluation should use them to foster long-term sustainability and learning.

Setting: Drawing on primary and secondary research across 91 ex-post evaluations of foreign aid sustainability plus two major studies of exit strategies globally.

Intervention: Not applicable.

Research Design: The checklists were drafted based on sustainability and exit studies and then vetted with lead researchers of the two exit studies. They were revised, and additional research was done on both values-driven evaluation and evaluation competencies.

Data Collection and Analysis: Some primary data was collected during ex-post evaluations by the author, complemented by secondary research.

Findings: Sustained exit commitments and conditions checklists can build evaluator capacities in evaluating sustainability. Several have been used by Tufts, USAID, the GEF, and the Adaptation Fund and verified actual sustainability and its prospects.

Keywords: *ex-post evaluation; sustainability; monitoring and evaluation; values; competencies; M&E checklists*

This paper explores a range of values and capacities needed to support the sustainability of foreign aid development projects. It draws on 12 years of Valuing Voices research.¹ This initiative, aimed to increase sustainable solutions for excellent impact through learning from ex-post project sustainability evaluations, also focuses on how evaluators can promote the design, monitoring, and evaluation of sustainability pre-closure and draw on germane evaluator competencies. This paper explores a range of evaluators' views on the values we bring as monitoring and evaluation experts, as well as the competencies needed to design, implement, monitor, and evaluate for long-term sustainability.

Both implicit and explicit values that donors, implementers, and M&E commissioners bring to global development work influence how that work is done. Evaluators need to be aware of and promote the explicit and implicit values that drive M&E work to build evaluation capacity that manifests evaluation values to ascertain which project results are sustainable, by whom, for how long, and why.

Sustainability, i.e., the long-term durability of project results, does not happen by itself; it needs to be fostered during the project, but more needs to be known about the conditions required for sustainability to take root after project closure and exit. Valuing Voices' founder, consultants, and clients believe that evaluating sustainability cannot be limited to desk studies; that eliciting the views of country-based former project participants and partners is key. Based on the lessons from 10 such ex-post sustainability and exit evaluations done by Valuing Voices and over 90 other studies that include participant responses from a variety of donors and implementers,² plus seminal studies of exit strategies from Lewis (2016) and CDA (2020), we found nine elements need to be monitored and evaluated from project design to the ex-post years after closure. Development practitioners, including evaluators, need to build their knowledge about what has been sustained in ex-post evaluations and have this inform how they advocate to include these nine elements in project design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. This will need equal participation by national partners and participants to be built in throughout to foster long-term results and for new emerging pathways to emerge.

The nine elements are presented below in the form of checklists, which function as evaluator capacities tools. For by identifying what elements are needed to foster sustainability in programming,

evaluators can inform clients and employers of what needs to be designed, implemented, monitored, and evaluated. The checklists cover two kinds of sustainability drivers: (a) commitments to sustainability, which includes designing beyond the project lifetime through a theory of sustainability, thinking about how to foster sustainability through the process of exit/handover, and considering risks and resilience; and (b) building conditions within the very project to foster lasting sustainability. This involves looking beyond resources as the only driver of durability, to seeing what makes local ownership of results robust. This includes considering several questions: How should equitable partnerships be fostered for long-term results? What capacities to keep disseminating behavior change exist? How adaptive are the timeframe and exit to foster sustainability? How accountable are projects in their communications to partners as they exit?

One of the greatest shocks that threatens the sustainability of most global development aid investments is climate change, which is why the natural world and access to viable nature is part of both risks and resilience to shocks. It is discussed separately, given the urgency with which we need to monitor and evaluate its progression and effect on sustainability. Some evaluator competency-building resources that help to evaluate the natural world have been added (e.g., Brouselle, 2022; Rowe, 2019). This is because nature is assumed and often overlooked in much global development programming design and evaluation, as seen in the review of several hundred ex-posts, exit reports, webinars, and evaluations, including blog posts about sustainable development by Cekan (2020a; 2020b), and underscored by Rowe (2019). The natural world and its environmental sustainability are a missing link, while the oft-stated but rarely evaluated "resilience" is often unproven (except for new ex-post research by the Adaptation Fund (2022)). A viable natural world continuing to support lives and livelihoods underpins sustainability across so much of global foreign aid and urgently needs inclusion in all evaluations.

Defining Evaluation, Its Values, and Sustainability

Michael Scriven defined evaluation this way: "Evaluation determines the merit, worth, or value of things" (Scriven, 1991, as cited in Coffman, 2004,

¹ <https://valuingvoices.com/>

² <https://valuingvoices.com/catalysts-2/>

p. 1). “Valuation” (measurement, estimation of worth) is embedded in our work as evaluators. Increasingly, the field of evaluation is discussing the values that underpin the work of evaluators. Thomas Archibald notes in a book review, “Schwandt, House, and Scriven—call into question the dubious ‘value-free doctrine’ of the social sciences... [and] emphasize[s] the obvious yet frequently ignored primacy of values and valuing in evaluation” (2016, p. 448). Evaluation, from the perspective of Michael Scriven, is filled with values:

If evaluators cling to a values-free philosophy, then the inevitable and necessary application of values in evaluation research can only be done indirectly, by incorporating the values of other persons who might be connected with the programs, such as program administrators, program users, or other stakeholders. (Encyclopedia.com, 2018, para. 26)

This opens a door for participatory input from those most closely connected to projects—the partners and the participants.

Michael Quinn Patton highlights tensions between evaluations that seek independent definitive judgments versus those that honor diverse perspectives. He values work done via participatory cocreation by activist, interventionist, change-committed evaluators, where the evaluation itself engages in change. This paper explicitly encourages those involved in monitoring and evaluation to work through participatory cocreation, because sustainability can only be maintained if it is locally driven. Evaluation also needs change-committed evaluators who embrace long-term sustainability.

The Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD/DAC) defines sustainability as the basis for ex-post project evaluation. Their definition includes that same reference to long-term sustainability, and its evaluation is part of the change needed in our field—namely, a focus on longitudinal results: “the *continuation* of benefits from a development intervention after major development assistance has been completed... [and] [t]he probability of continued long-term benefits. The resilience to risk of the net benefit flows over time” (2002, p. 37). In OECD/DAC’s updated and detailed definition, evaluators are directed to consider sustainability

at each point of the results chain and the project cycle of an intervention. Evaluators should also reflect on sustainability in relation to resilience

and adaptation in dynamic and complex environments. This includes the sustainability of inputs (financial or otherwise) after the end of the intervention and the sustainability of impacts in the broader context of the intervention. For example, an evaluation could assess whether an intervention considered partner capacities and built ownership at the beginning of the implementation period as well as whether there was willingness and capacity to sustain financing at the end of the intervention. In general, evaluators can examine the conditions for sustainability that were or were not created in the design of the intervention and by the intervention activities and whether there was adaptation where required.... If the evaluation is taking place *ex post*, the evaluator can also examine whether the planned exit strategy was properly implemented to ensure the continuation of positive effects as intended. (2019 Sustainability, para. 3, 6).

These key elements, especially the “conditions for sustainability,” inform the checklists in this paper.

The OECD also differentiates between durability and ecological sustainability. With the latter being relegated to:

Confusion can arise between sustainability in the sense of the continuation of results, and environmental sustainability or the use of resources for future generations.... environmental sustainability is a concern (and may be examined under several criteria, including relevance, coherence, impact, and sustainability). (2019, Sustainability, para. 2)

Yet sustainability rests on our valuing the environment and planning for risks and resilience to sustainability (see Figure 8). As evaluators, we need to push donors and implementers to examine the natural system’s resilience, which supposedly unrelated sectors rely on. For instance, the environment affects sectors such as income generation (e.g., natural products being processed by people generating income) and education (e.g., the gardens that subsidize teacher salaries, or the farming, relying on rain, that supports parents to afford school fees). In “Planting Seeds for Change,” evaluator Brouselle (2022) reminds us of the primacy of climate values in *Evaluation’s* COP26 compendium:

We must challenge the ways that evaluations are commissioned; how policies and

programmes are framed—to take risks, going beyond existing evaluation mandates, to improve equity, health and prosperity; reduce pollution; take care of our air, waters and lands; and protect biodiversity... we should use our facilitating skills to foster democracy and engagement. Evaluators can contribute to creating spaces for dialogue and debate with commissioners, participants, and stakeholders, on the socio-ecological impacts of projects, programmes and policies. (para. 4)

Linking Competencies and Capacities to Sustainability via Valuing Voices Sustained Exit Checklists

There are six types of evaluator competencies that are relevant to focus work planning for sustainability during design/implementation or conducting an ex-post sustainability evaluation.

Evaluation as a field needs to embrace a variety of such competencies as we seek to address a range of complex problems. The first three competencies come from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), from a 2017 report called “Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives,” which informs the macro view for sustainability and locally led development.

Systems Thinking Competency

UNESCO (2017) defines this competency as “the abilities to recognize and understand relationships; to analyse complex systems; to think of how systems are embedded within different domains and different scales; and to deal with uncertainty” (p. 10). This is key as interventions interact with complicated societies, often with wider aims than what just one project wants to achieve. Uncertainty affects projects in implementation (which is why adaptive management is a checklist item (see Figure 7). Further, because ex-posts are not about direct attribution, given the complexity of communities, but contribution, it is vital to look at a range of outside influences post-project closure that could explain the results (not) seen.

Collaboration Competency

This competency is pivotal in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating sustainability, which lies in both “the abilities to learn from others; to understand and respect the

needs, perspectives and actions of others... and to facilitate collaborative and participatory problem solving” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10). Listening to those who will be tasked with sustaining results or innovating emerging outcomes involves a close collaboration, as does using participatory methods to both design for and troubleshoot/problem-solve with.

Anticipatory Competency

Anticipatory competency is “the ability to understand and evaluate multiple futures—possible, probable and desirable—and to create one’s own visions for the future, to apply the precautionary principle, to assess the consequences of actions, and to deal with risks and changes” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10). This competency is key to the whole field of sustainability as a field of study. Often projects *assume* sustainability will be the long-term result of development efforts. But, as Rogers and Coates (2015) note,

Hope is not a strategy. Sustainability plans that depend on the expectation, or hope, that individuals and organizations will continue to function without the key factors previously identified are not likely to achieve this goal. Such plans should take account of what is feasible within the economic, political, and social/cultural context of the areas in which they work. (p. 44)

This also relates to two other competencies, systems thinking (discussed above) and situational practice (discussed below).

The Canadian Evaluation Society (CES; 2018) provides us with the second three domains relevant to sustainability that evaluators need to consider in terms of how the M&E is done.

Reflective Practice Competencies

CES’s Reflective Practice domain includes competencies that “focus on the evaluator’s knowledge of evaluation theory and practice; application of evaluation standards, guidelines, and ethics; and awareness of self, including reflection on one’s practice and the need for continuous learning and professional growth” (2018, p. 5). This competency applies to the content of the sustainability methods presented below, as well as the knowledge evaluators will gain from evaluating prospects for sustainability and emerging outcomes (Figure 1) in projects. Additionally, this competency domain includes both considering “the

well-being of human and natural systems in evaluation practice” and being “committed to transparency” (p. 6), which is the aim of using the checklists as a whole sustainability learning process. It is important in such reflection to clarify one’s values.

Technical Practice Competencies

These competencies focus on the “strategic, methodological, and interpretive decisions required to conduct an evaluation” (CES, 2018, p. 5), which directly applies to the five sustained exit commitments and conditions (see Figure 3). One competency, “assesses program evaluability,” is germane to ex-post evaluation and prospects for long-term sustainability. Cekan and Legro (2021) have applied the elements in the nine checklists which comprise the Embedding Sustainability in the Project Cycle framework to a World Bank sustainability study, and Cekan has used it in ex-post evaluations, such as a recent one for youth employment (USAID Mali, 2022). It has informed the training materials created for the Adaptation Fund (2023) on how to evaluate sustainability and resilience ex-post.

Situational Practice Competencies

As so few projects are “cookie-cutter” versions of each other, it is always vital to contextualize each project and its prospects for sustainability in its unique context, applying CES’s third competency domain, Situational Practice: “Focus on understanding, analyzing, and attending to the many circumstances that make every evaluation unique, including culture, stakeholders, and context” (CES, 2018, p. 6), identifying how specifically the project has moved around the project cycle (see Figure 2), particularly monitoring “organizational changes and changes in the program environment during the course of the evaluation” (p. 7) as well as tracing changes that lead to likely sustainability post-project, and building evaluation capacity by “engag[ing] in reciprocal processes in which evaluation knowledge and expertise are shared between the evaluator and stakeholders” (p. 7) throughout both the analysis and the sharing of the learning results.

Competencies that M&E professionals need can be used when monitoring and evaluating prospects for sustainability during project implementation as well as during ex-post evaluations. Sustainability prospects increase when they are designed and planned for, as Zivetz et al. (2017) found in researching ex-posts. There are clear advantages of

planning for sustainability measurement from the outset of the project as well as measuring sustainability through the entire project cycle. Donors, implementers, and experts in monitoring and evaluation, as well as national partners, need to be trained in these competencies.

Evaluating Sustainability in Practice

Aid experts including evaluators embed values in their work in a myriad of ways, starting with how projects are funded and designed and by whom; for this reason, much M&E emphasis is on final rather than ex-post evaluations and learning from them. Over \$3.5 trillion has been spent on public foreign aid projects in the past 70 years (OECD, 2019). Yet, the aid industry has evaluated fewer than 1% of these projects for sustainability (Cekan, 2015). Valuing Voices’ ex-post research on 39 organizations’ ex-post evaluations of sustainability shows that most project results decrease (10–90%) as early as 2 years ex-post (Valuing Voices, 2012).

Except for the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), which has done over 2,500 ex-post evaluations on their grants, loans, and technical assistance, learning from what lasts is rare among international aid donors and implementers. An Asian Development Bank study (2010) of post-completion sustainability found that “some early evidence suggests that as many as 40% of all new activities are not sustained beyond the first few years after disbursement of external funding” (p. 1). The World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, both multilateral banks, show less stellar investments in ex-post learning (Lopez, 2015; Cekan, 2022). Ex-post evaluations are rare, as is illustrated by a Sustainable Governance Indicators overview of EU member state policy evaluations, with most countries using them rarely or not at all (Sustainable Governance Indicators, n.d.).

Often in the ex-post evaluation of sustained impact, we see some results fade as early as 2 years ex-post. It is key to prioritize learning from what was sustained by asking our project participants and local/national partners directly during implementation about sustainability prospects. Field inquiry gives no time to test assumptions about drivers/barriers that the project is being implemented under and test whether optimistic trajectories will hold post-closure, as is widely assumed in the global development industry. For as Sridharan and Nakaima (2010) write:

There is no reason for the trajectory of performance outcomes to be linear or monotonic over time—this has important

implications for an evaluation system... [and] should programs that do not have a 'successful' trajectory of 'performance measures' be terminated? (p. 144)

To make sustainability more likely, designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating *for* sustainability is key, and makes successful trajectories more likely. While widespread ex-post learning would be the most effective, lessons can be learned to manifest our values of pro-sustainable development by extracting learning from the ex-post evaluations and exit studies that have been done. This is the aim of the rest of this article.

Most ex-posts have found mixed results of some activities being sustained, and others not. Often, what was relevant and locally owned, was sustained, whereas activities that relied on donor incentives such as food aid failed to continue (Catholic Relief Services [CRS], 2016). A 2020 Jones and Jordan ex-post study of USAID Global Waters projects found that while 25 million have gained access to water and sanitation,

despite tremendous achievements within the life of our programs, they have largely not endured... Rural water systems that, at activity close, delivered safe water to households have fallen into disrepair. Basic latrine ownership and use have dwindled. Communities certified as open-defecation free are backsliding, and gains in handwashing have not been sustained. [Nonetheless,] where USAID invested in providing technical assistance to committed government partners and utilities, gains in service provision and local capacity were sustained, with local actors taking up and expanding upon best practices introduced during activity implementation. (para. 3, 4)

This again supports designing and implementing for sustainability during the project, which is the aim of this paper. But such reviews are rare among donors.

The dearth of ex-post evaluations suggests that most global development evaluations currently being conducted are not value neutral. Commissioners seem to value short-term results rather than showing and learning from sustained impacts. Further, donors and implementers design and fund aid projects and their evaluations.

Country nationals need to be engaged throughout the project cycle (Figure 2), for they will be left to sustain results. As Scriven stated in discussions with Donaldson, Patton and Fetterman (2010),

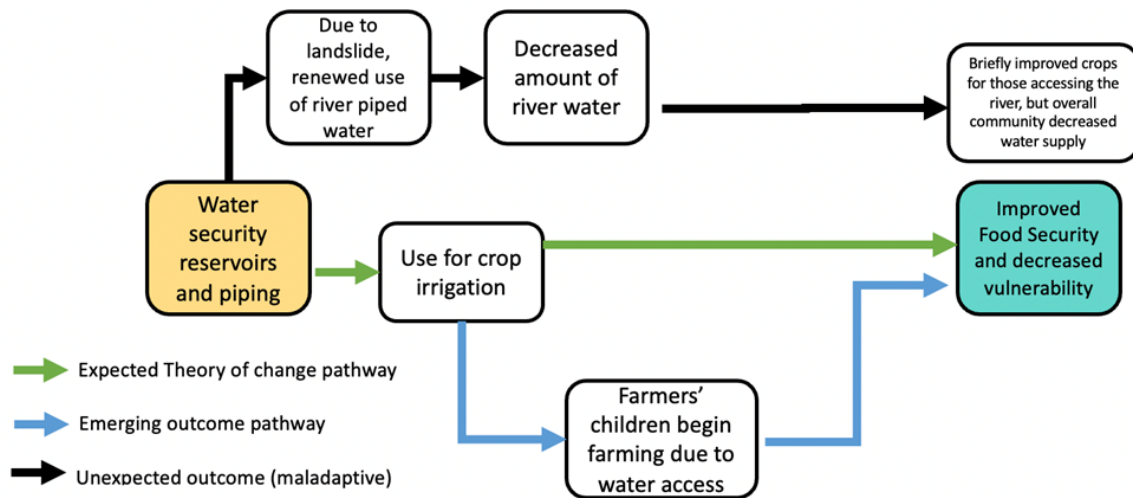
I want to hear, not just about intended use or users of the evaluation. I want to find out about impact on intended and actual impactees—the targeted and accidental recipients of the program, not just the people that get the evaluation. So I consider my task as an evaluator to find out who it is that this program is aimed at reaching and helping. (p. 23)

Emerging Outcomes

Typical ex-post evaluations focus on what lasted from what donors funded. Few evaluations return ex-post to also ask the front-line users, project participants, and partners what lasted of the prior project, and what *emerged* from *their* local efforts to sustain results with fewer or different resources, partnerships, etc. This glaring omission speaks to a lack of valuing sustained results, much less learning from local capacities to sustain results differently. Thus an innovation by Valuing Voices in evaluating sustainability, either ex-post or for monitoring sustainability, is the search for *emerging outcomes*, namely what emerges from local efforts to sustain results, rather than focusing only on expected donor-designed pathways to still exist.

The example in Figure 1 comes from 2023 Adaptation Fund training materials on ex-post; it draws on a three-year World Food Program Ecuadorian ex-post evaluation of sustainability and resilience. The expected change was that improving the water supply for crops would lead to improved food security. While that was happening to some degree, other outcome pathways were happening as well. In some areas, more water was used to improve cultivation methods, which led to an emerging outcome of children returning home to their rural villages to help their parents and continued to sustain food security, which decreased family vulnerability. Elsewhere, maladaptive pathways also emerged, in which a landslide eliminated the stable water reservoir source in one site, leading farmers to revert to drawing water from a river via pump systems, which likely led to decreased water for the community.

Figure 1. Expected, Emerging, and Unexpected Outcomes Ex-Post



Note. From *Training Material for Ex Post Pilots*, by Adaptation Fund, 2023 (<https://www.adaptation-fund.org/document/training-material-for-ex-post-pilots/>).

The picture is incomplete without looking at what was expected to be sustained and what local communities had to innovate to maintain results. Unless we look at both what was expected to be sustained and what local communities had to innovate to sustain results, the picture would be incomplete. Both can be traced during implementation and at ex-post evaluation.

Sustainability Around the Project Cycle

We need to build sustainability in from the onset, from funding and design to implementation, while

looking out for alternative paths that locals create (see the orange slices in Figure 2). Once local stakeholders are involved throughout the project cycle (green slices in Figure 2), results are more likely to be sustained, for the programming is done with country nationals who will sustain results after donors leave. Assumptions need to be checked, adaptation to foster durability needs to be monitored and evaluated, and exit needs to include consultations on ownership, resources, partnerships, adaptation, resilience, and communications, much of which can be traced in a theory of sustainability.

Figure 2. Embedding Sustainability in the Project Cycle



Note. From “What Happens After the Project Ends?”, by J. Cekan, 2016 (<https://valuingvoices.com/what-happens-after-the-project-ends-country-national-ownership-lessons-from-post-project-sustained-impact-evaluations-part-2/>)

As ex-post evaluation of projects is an important link missing before exiting with participants and partners leading sustainability; this paper focuses on lessons learned from the 90+ ex-posts reviewed. Lessons come from projects such as those below. Roughly 80% of the CRS Niger PROSAN food security project was sustained 3 years ex-post. It was implemented *for* sustainability by taking the final 18 months to exit, rather than 3 to 6 months. National partners were co-implementers pre-project closure. The UK charity EveryChild similarly worked with INTRAC (Lewis, 2016; Morris et al., 2021) to evaluate sustainability during exit. They did so in four countries 5 years ex-post, learning similar lessons about phasing down and over before exiting sustainably.

Were national stakeholders to partner equally, these local “targeted recipients” as Scriven tells us, could require projects not to close until further funding was secured, as EveryChild UK did. Donors, implementers, and evaluators need to listen to what locals want and can sustain. All of us who value sustainable development need to design M&E to incorporate sustainability. Exemplary studies are an ex-post tracing national primary teacher training (USAID Uganda, 2017) and final evaluation projecting sustainably prospects pre-

exit from migrants and NGOs in Bangladesh (Hasan, 2021).

Thus, the checklists below help foster sustainability through M&E that involves questioning assumptions that donors and implementers, partners, and participants hold about the sustainability of results. It means building capacities to monitor and evaluate conditions for sustainable impact that are embedded in a traceable, relevant way as projects are implemented. It means documenting and learning from data throughout implementation, planning sustained exit beyond the final evaluation, and retaining data to be evaluated ex-post. This involves building understanding and capacities for ex-post evaluation and project planning (funding, design, implementation, and M&E) to foster it. This includes national stakeholders and evaluators who have a greater stake in their countries who can help foreign national stakeholders focus on learning what excelled or failed and how to use it for future projects in-country.

Validation

Several sources of expertise inform and validate the checklists (see Figures 4 to 8). In their 2015

analysis of exit strategies and sustainability for four USAID / Food and Peace countries, Rogers and Coates highlighted monitoring and evaluating the presence of four “drivers” of sustainability. These drivers create conditions that both are used to evaluate sustainability ex-post and are likely indicators for how likely sustainability is (if such drivers were put in place during implementation pre-exit). Rogers and Coates’ drivers are (a) sustained motivation/ ownership by national stakeholders to sustain a project’s activities; if activities are yielding relevant results, they are far more likely to be sustained; (b) a sustained flow of resources from, national or international sources; (c) sustained technical and managerial capacities passed on to new participants; and (d) linkages/partnerships with governmental/private or other organizations, for an array of support. Negi and Sohn (2022) confirmed the presence of these drivers across Global Environment Facility (GEF) projects created by Rogers and Coates and applied by Cekan and Legro (2022). Negi and Sohn’s review of 62 projects also confirmed that project design, a key sustainability driver, feeds into OECD’s (2019) Relevance criterion, as well as Figure 4. Similarly, USAID Uganda (2017) found the same four drivers were operational in sustainability.

These elements of sustainability draw on ex-post research by Cekan and key studies about participatory implementation and exit. One is

Anderson, Brown, and Jean’s (2012) report *Time to Listen*. They interviewed 6,000 recipients and implementers of international aid across 20 countries from inside and outside the aid system. Their study focuses on unearthing stories “on the ways that people on the receiving side of aid suggest it can become more effective and accountable” (p. i). A second source was CDA (2020) case studies research led by Jean and a consortium of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), focused on improving exit. This work, *Stopping as Success*, highlighted that a gradual exit process contributes to sustainability. This research informs one of the commitments mentioned in Figure 3, namely phasing down over time during implementation and to national partners before exiting. These studies underscore that global development should be informed by local conditions and country nationals. Local participation is important while checking on sustainability prospects, as is getting local feedback on how well exit is going pre-closure. These checklists below also draw on seminal research by Lewis for INTRAC (2016), from extensive work on exit among NGOs.

Sustained Exit Commitments and Conditions Checklists

Figure 3. Valuing Voices Sustained Exit Commitments and Conditions Checklists

Valuing Voices Sustained Exit Commitments and Conditions Checklists

<u>Commitments to Sustainability</u>	<u>Conditions for Sustainability</u>
<p><i>I. The most sustained aid projects are those that are high quality at exit and have worked through all the conditions below via commitments to exiting for sustainability from earlier in the project. They have an implicit Theory of Sustainability and a mindset that projects can be locally sustained, that not all activities can or need to be, and a commitment to learning from what can or cannot last and support what emerges from local priorities and efforts</i></p>	
<p>VI. Exit/ Handover Sustainability Phases:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Phase down over time - Phase over to others - Phase out (exit at end of funding) 	<p>II. Ownership/ Motivation</p>
<p>VII. Address Risks to Sustainability, e.g. Resilience to Shocks (e.g. economic, political) and Natural Environment</p>	<p>III. Resources</p>
	<p>IV. Capacity Strengthening</p>
	<p>V. Partnerships, including Examining Assumptions about Accountability</p>
	<p>VIII. Timeframe and Adaptation of Implementation based on M&E of Transparent Exit Benchmarks</p>
	<p>IX. Accountable Communication</p>

Note. From “Exit for Sustainability Checklists,” by Valuing Voices, 2020 (<https://valuingvoices.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Exit-For-Sustainability-Checklists-Dec2020-2.pdf>).

Now, let’s return to reflect on how the evaluator competencies articulated by UNESCO and CES fit into these Figure 3 commitments and conditions. Systems thinking competency leads us to consider what a theory of sustainability could consist of, and how to plan for it, given the complex ecosystems any project is embedded in. Collaborative and anticipatory competencies are brought into play when handing over projects during implementation, pre-exit. This is especially relevant to partnerships seeking to best face unknown future risks to sustainability and foster resilience to shocks pre-closure. Taking these commitments to heart predisposes projects to continuation. Another competency, reflective practice, needs to be used to discern which

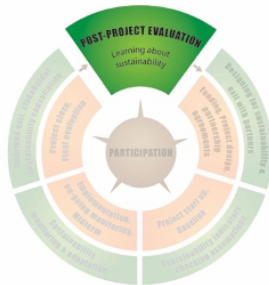
conditions of sustainability are driving change. Further, technical and situational practice are used in the field, examining if and to what degree sustainability is driven by these six conditions. While four of the six conditions (ownership, resources, capacities, and partnerships) driving sustainability come from the Rogers and Coates study, two additional conditions have been found to be important in the exit literature. Namely, how well timeframes pre-exit can be shifted to enable sustainability, and how clear and accountable the communication is between those closing out and those being left before closure. Consider using the nine checklists listed in Figures 4 through 8 along a scale of high–medium–low and revisiting them periodically to gauge change.

Revising a theory of change into a theory of sustainability (Figure 4) is helpful to chart stakeholders, assumptions, trajectories, key questions, and whom to ask.

Figure 4. Sustainability Ex-Post Project: Theory of Sustainability

Ex-post project evaluation is a Learning Tool for Project Exit, and for Future Funding, Design, Implementation & M&E: Slice 1

I. SLICE1: Sustainability ex-post project: Theory of Sustainability



I. Theory of Sustainability

1. Who are the key stakeholders and how will they be engaged in funding, designing, implementing, monitoring and evaluations for long-term sustainability, including identifying different kind(s) of support pre-inception:
 - Donor(s)
 - Government
 - International and NGOs (non-profits)
 - Communities or other groups of participants
 - Private Sector
 - Research/ academics
 - Other
2. Are the partnerships among stakeholders equal in implementation to foster handover?*
3. For key stakeholders, what does 'success' look like at project closure? And how is this different after exit?
4. What activities and inputs are needed for project outputs, outcomes and impacts to be sustained?
5. Which activities if any can be triaged (closed) because no longer needed or able to be sustained?
6. For how long is the project results to be sustained post-closure?

Also, see [Valuing Voices' Evaluability Checklists](#) and [UN WHO's Guidance on ex-post Evaluation](#)

Ask all stakeholders involved long before exit about how much they feel they “own” the project’s continuation and the resources needed. There is a wide range of resources to be explored and

questions to ask about how much the interventions are generating local results that are valued (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Designing for Exit: Ownership/Motivation and Resources

II. SLICE2: Designing for Exit: Ownership/ Motivation and Resources Checklists



III. Resources:

- Is there grant funding or other income generation available?
- Can the funder/ INGO support the search for continued or new funding through technical support and advice or advocacy to other donors that funding be given directly to the NGO?*
- Does the project or partner have a facility or infrastructure that they own and is rentable to increase resources outside donor funding?
- Can the project shift to for-profit, including institutional and individual in-kind products or technical knowledge skills that can be sold to cover part of project costs?
- What are knowledge assets that need to be sustained and how will they be retained post-exit, e.g. databases of participant/ project data, reports and evaluations?
- What new equipment is needed, e.g. computers, vehicles, technical (e.g. weighing scales) for activities to continue? Which stakeholder will retain them?
- None (because some project activities will scale down, move elsewhere, focus on a smaller number of activities that are locally sustainable or the whole project will naturally phase out)
- Are financial indicators that measure the extent to which the necessary financial resources are in place at predetermined time intervals (e.g., by year 3, the successor organization will have secured contributions from external actors in the amount of X, then exit-ready) tracked and discussed?

II. Ownership/ Motivation

- Do local stakeholders feel they 'own' the project activities to sustain them?
- Are project activities addressing current needs of stakeholders or more a donor priority?
- Do local perceptions of outcomes and impacts differ from those expected by donors? How are new or revised expected outcomes and impacts tracked or updated in the indicator tracking?
- Who tracks what data?
- How is feedback provided both ways between stakeholders and how often?
- How often is project data discussed together? How are resulting changes to activities shared?
- How are key stakeholders are engaged in implementing for exit?
- Have shared commitments to sustainability shifted after donors leave? What if those change?*
- As the exit/handover process begins, checking that new versions of the activities still meet current needs and abilities of stakeholders is important. How is that knowledge gathered and shared?

Note: Items marked with a * come from Stopping As Success' I. Jean's comments to Cekan. Also see their research findings for details.

The questions in Figure 6 can be used during baseline and midterm evaluations. Some questions can also be selected, as part of ongoing monitoring, from the lists of resources and ownership (above)

and capacity strengthening and partnerships. With such data, evaluating sustainability during ex-post evaluations is much easier.

Figure 6. Checking Assumptions: Capacity Strengthening and Partnerships

III.Slice3: Checking Assumptions: Capacity Strengthening and Partnerships Checklists



V. Partnerships:

- What continued project knowledge and skills are needed from which stakeholder partners?
- How can donors support the technical visibility and reputation for excellence of local partners who co-implemented, to foster recognition in future programming alone?*
- What collaborations are needed with other partners, e.g. advocacy organizations, umbrella industry organizations that currently donors have held or other stakeholders, instead of NGO/CBOs?
- What statutory/ contractual relationships, even registration to work in different areas or sectors does the NGO/CBO need and how can donors support that?
- How can expertise be shared among existing coalitions, e.g. pooling expertise or collective research/ publications?
- What local contracting with direct and indirect partners of NGOs need to be created, including external IT, accounting, HR firms, and who will bear the costs?

Note: Items marked with a * come from Stopping As Success' I. Jean's comments to Cekan. Also see their research findings for details.

IV. Capacity Strengthening

- What is necessary project knowledge and skills to be transferred to national stakeholder partner, e.g. M&E data gathering and analysis? This includes services or trainings the project provides, including:
 - Strategic planning*
 - Management capacity of what activities at local and regional levels when handed over (and who decides)
 - Volunteer training sustained how
 - Specific sectoral skills and links to other input providers, e.g. 'who did the project call to provide...'
- How will training be sustained for specific sectoral behavior change among new entrants (e.g. new mothers, new farmers, new advocates) and who will pay?
- Who will troubleshoot challenges, including financing increases, including what costs will be shared by whom post-exit?
- What mentoring on technical, management, financial, reporting, fundraising, is needed as the project phases over, phases down, before phasing out? At which levels of the NGO/CBO is it most needed and for how long?*
- Can mentoring be provided after exit from abroad, doing remote-mentoring?
- How will staff exodus be addressed?*
- How will existing project capacities and tacit knowledge be retained for new staff?
- Are there new capacity developments and/ or resources needed to take over and sustain from emerging activities not part of original project expectations? How will these be met?
- What capacity needs show up during gradual exit and how will they be met, both in terms of longer timeframe for support, or is added funding of new skills needed?

Two of the elements that tell the most about the extent to which project implementation fosters sustainability are the amount of planning that has

gone into project exit and handover, as well as adapting timeframes to readiness for exit (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Monitoring and Adaptation: Exit/Handover, Timeframe, and Adaptation of Implementation

IV.SLICE4: Monitoring and Adaptation: Exit/ Handover, Timeframe and Adaptation of Implementation Checklists

VII. Timeframe and Adaptation of Implementation based on M&E of Transparent Exit Benchmarks

- Can the timeframe be adapted were there indications of elements succeeding or failing and needing more time pre-exit?
- Assumptions of sustainability in proposal are checked & attribution of results to the project also needs to be confirmed
- Some exit is improved if M&E is simplified, e.g. fewer indicators tracked, and they are tracked by local partners ongoingly
- At minimum 30% before the project timeframe's planned exit, stakeholders must discuss what they can sustain, how and by when and ready organizations
- Feedback mechanisms on progress - responded to how often and by whom?
- After adapting timeframe and budget, data may indicate further activities may have to be triaged due to constraints in both or stakeholders decide they cannot sustain. Data and discussions are needed.
- How is feedback on adaptation to external challenges and opportunities, unforeseen during implementation planning tracked?
- Is the door open to further support post-transition via organizational agreements, e.g. mentoring from afar?
- Confirmation of how impactful has project been is measured how long after exit?

Note: Items marked with a * come from Stopping As Success' I. Jean's comments to Cekan. Also see their research findings for details.



VI. Exit/Handover Sustainability Phases

- Differentiating between phasing over and phasing down is important, including learning from triage (by stopping activities that, when handed over, could not be sustained locally)
- Phase over:
 - Have local partners, during implementation agreed to take over activities for sustainability?
 - Is the M&E ready to check on progress of successful handover during implementation or if weak early results, what additional resources, capacities, partnerships etc. are needed?
 - How will results be discussed?
- Phase down:
 - Have partners and participants been readied for phasing down some activities that are strong to prioritize others that are weak?
 - Are unintended results tracked?
- Exit: Readiness depends on extent of sustained programming
- Transparency about readiness for phase-over or phase-down or exit of project to local stakeholders is needed

Finally, long-term sustained and responsible exit fostering local ownership is based on planning for the immediate term (communications about

who leaves and who knows why the project is closing, how respectfully this is this done and with how much involvement by local partners). As

shown in the two checklists in Figure 8, it is vital to examine how well consideration of present and future risks and resilience to shocks have been embedded in programming.

Figure 8. Exit Consultations and Close: Risks/Resilience and Accountable Communications

V.SLICE5: Exit Consultations and Close: Risks/ Resilience and Accountable Communications Checklists



IX. Accountable Communications for Exit

- Assumptions need to be checked about promised handover by a range of stakeholders and if they do not have the resources or capacities, even if they communicate that they do, the project needs backup planning (Note; phase-down and phase-over is helpful to ascertain sustainability)
- Who determines exit? Which organization decides shapes how it is done. Transparency is key so that national stakeholders are part of leading the process*
- How are staff redundancies communicated?
- What channels are used to communicate readiness for exit and to whom
 - Internal project to staff, partners, and communities?
 - External communication to national authorities, non-profits, donors, the public home and abroad?
- How are donors in-country outside the project, and local government stakeholders in-country informed?
- How and to whom are final and ex-post findings communicated for shared learning?

VIII. Risks and Resilience to Shocks

- Project activities are reliant on what natural resources (e.g. soil and water, energy quality/ quantity)? How long should it last?
- How at-risk are they? (Note: this could include cross-sectoral, e.g. water or energy sources affect income generation activities not just agriculture or water/ sanitation ones but are often not evaluated for those activities)
- What fallback mechanisms exist to buffer shocks, e.g. resources, technical inputs, out-migration, aid from which partners?
- Have emergency partners been identified for development projects other than national government for crisis preparedness?
- How and how often is the project's Disaster Risk Reduction or resilience tracked? By whom? Results are shared with whom?
- Resilience to changing conditions projected at exit also needs additional review and planning, including drought/flood mitigation, economic or political crisis, shortfalls in aid or other external support – we must de-silo

Note: Items marked with a * come from Stopping As Success' I. Jean's comments to Cekan. Also see their research findings for details. The rest is from Valuing Voices

Conclusions

In addition to infusing sustainability into the project cycle during implementation, it is important to live one's values and use evaluator capacities as guiding lights for one's work. What also matters is monitoring and evaluating sustained ownership and the other hallmarks of sustainability within the checklists during programming and at ex-post evaluation. Further, it's important to look for the capacities that remain behind after projects close (emerging outcomes) and learn from ex-post evaluations to inform current programming to facilitate sustainability while there are sufficient resources, partnerships, capacities and other conditions. Also important is fostering what national and local stakeholders *want* to sustain through their commitments and conditions. Six competencies equipping monitoring and evaluation experts to do this well have been outlined above, namely systems thinking competency, collaboration competency, anticipatory competency, and reflective, technical, and situational practice competencies. These types of "evaluative thinking" lenses can and should be used, as Archibald (2021) calls for an "ethical accountability" in locally led development. Values-driven sustainability can be a powerful driving force to improve public accountability and good governance. Equipped with such skills, evaluators simultaneously bolster evaluation systems and capacities among national evaluators and program implementers alike. For equitable, values-driven accountability for sustainability to happen, power needs to shift to people at national and local levels to determine what resources, partnerships, and capacities are needed and what is a priority for them to take ownership of. We can begin as soon as possible by building the most likely conditions for sustainability and commitments to foster sustainable exit into the project cycle. We have no time to lose; embracing such values-driven sustainability would be of great benefit.

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