

What is sustainability?

What is sustainability? There are many definitions or understanding of what the word sustainability means. The traditional definition of sustainable development was developed and appeared in the Brundtland Report of 1987:

'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

This definition is a very broad statement, developed to be all encompassing and not able to be applied practically in everyday life. In reality, a more useful working definition could be considered to be - 'the ability to continue a defined behaviour indefinitely'.

However, sustainability is complex and is understood in different ways by different people. It is influenced by people, context and power and how people see their 'system' as working.

There is no single, standardised approach that can be adopted across projects and programmes. The process of sustainable development is inherently a process in which interventions and activities change and improve rather than remain static at an achieved state.

To be able to define a sustainable approach at the individual project level it is important to have a full and in depth understanding of the root causes of the problem you are hoping to tackle and address.

Consider the '5 Whys' when analysing the root causes, look beyond the superficial layer to the fundamental causes of the problem. <https://open.buffer.com/5-whys-process/> Have an objective understanding of the environment in which your programme is set.

Do an analysis of what the resistance to sustainability is at the system level. What do the institutional and regulatory frameworks look like? Relate this to the wider picture (consider the policy, governance, institutions and financial enabling environment) as well as the local context (consider how your communities work, environmental context and technology restraints).

Carry out an analysis of the sustainability of the institutions you are working with – identify capacity building needs for all partners, NGOs, private sector, government.

Following completion of your analyses, define your sustainability goal or aim.

Then look at how to achieve your sustainability goal in your programmes in terms of three pillars:

- a) Social: how can the programme optimise quality of life? What kind of political or policy changes can the programme influence? How can the programme affect cultural behaviour change?
- b) Economic: how will the project lead to greater economic empowerment? How can the project support beneficiaries in graduating from poverty or raising beneficiaries over the

poverty line? What is the impact of the programme on growth and development? What does a potential long term financing model look like?

- c) Environmental: what will the impact be on the environment without the intervention? What will the impact be on the environment from the intervention? What are the external environmental factors affecting the intervention? How can you use innovation and technology in your programme?)

Consider how these 3 pillars or circles overlap to improve human lives.

Education Sector

In education, as with other sectors, it is important to ensure that activities should not be sustained simply because they have been started — they should be sustained if they have demonstrated measurable, cost-effective, and meaningful improvements over alternative approaches.

In the education sector, the idea of scaling up or replicability refers to programmes that can be applied consistently in all schools.

However sustainable change needs to capture improvements at two levels:

- effective changes in each school and classroom that improve education quality and learning outcomes
- effective changes at the system level (district, state, national) that support and encourage such changes in all of the schools

In addition, some of the factors in achieving educational improvements are not adequately captured by quantitative measures of project accomplishment—such as number of teachers trained etc.

Long term sustainable change is more complicated than simply the provision of supply but is also about addressing issues of demand, the economic context, political considerations, and institutional support. This requires thinking of sustainable education development as a dynamic process of change.

Experience from the WASH sector

‘A water service is sustainable if the water sources are not over-exploited but naturally replenished, facilities are maintained in a condition which ensures a reliable and adequate water supply, the benefits of the supply continue to be realized by all users indefinitely, and the service delivery process demonstrates a cost-effective use of resources that can be replicated.’ ‘Water supply is about much more than the provision of physical infrastructure’. (Rural Water Supply in Africa. Peter Harvey & Bob Reed WEDC 2004)

Aim to:

- move away from provision of equipment and move towards provision of integrated services.
- design longer term programmes rather than short term quick fix projects.
- work closely with both users and governments.
- reflect user choice and link to institutional frameworks and policy support.
- consider the sustainability of the institutions you are working with – identify capacity building needs for all partners, NGOs, private sector, government.
- ensure there is ongoing institutional support to communities. No matter how much buy-in or ownership exists.
- consider financing models – can users pay for water provision for example?
- look at using local innovation and technology. Use low cost technology if possible.
- design household water supplies where possible as it reduces some of the issues with community supplies.
- consider how best work with the private sector? What model works best for your communities?

Ensure you have a robust monitoring system in place, not just for data collection but for evaluating the data and making revisions to your approach as needs be as is reflected by the data.

After doing this, it is useful to think about the success criteria linked to programme or project sustainability. WELL in conjunction with DFID in 1998, proposed using the following programme

measures when it comes to sustainability:

- Effectiveness;
- Equity;
- Efficiency;
- and • Replicability, is it possible to replicate the programme and if possible scale it up?

Monitor, monitor and evaluate the data you are using to measure sustainability. So the programme can flex and adapt to the changing context and respond to dynamic systems. Be responsive to changes in context.

Case study of a UK Aid Direct grant holder



Support to young unmarried mothers in Sudan; adopting a sustainable approach

With support from UK Aid Direct, Hope and Homes for Children has made significant progress in improving access to appropriate care for children without parental care in Sudan and those at risk of being separated from their families, abandoned on the streets or entering orphanages. In order to ensure a long-term impact Hope and Homes for

Children adopted a sustainable approach to their project.

A significant number of unmarried mothers face challenges, including stigma, exclusion from their families and communities and barriers to accessing safe pre and postnatal care. Many are forced to abandon their babies on the streets or into orphanages where their life chances are reduced. Hope and Homes for Children has worked with the government across nine states to reform of the child protection system in line with the Government of Sudan's National Policy for Children Deprived of Parental Care, this has included the establishment of new support services to benefit young unmarried mothers.

As part of this approach, training to police, midwives and social workers has ensured that unmarried mothers are signposted to support services and treated with compassion and understanding rather than condoned and criminalised. Hope and Homes for Children has also supported a local partner to establish a pilot Mother and Baby Unit offering safe housing as well as other services.

'Now we don't manage children we care for them. We don't hide them away, we do all we can so they can stay with their families or with families who will love them. This is social work in Sudan today.'
(Khartoum State social worker)

The provision of services, training to government workers and policy reform has resulted in a positive shift in attitudes towards young unmarried mothers empowering women to make decisions about the care of their babies. In a 3 year period, the organisation has prevent 866 babies from across nine states from being separated from their mothers. A further 325 babies were successfully reunited with their mothers from three baby orphanages in Sudan. Due to the reform of the child protection system two of these orphanages have now been closed, with progress being made towards closure of the third.

"I am very grateful for the physical and psychological support which encouraged me to keep my baby and face the community. My message to all mothers is do not abandon your babies due to stigma because babies have no sin."

Massarra, who abandoned her baby daughter, Wafa, at a hospital. Wafa was placed in the hospital's emergency referral unit and was subsequently reintegrated with her mother. Massarra was supported

with family mediation, psychological support as well as referral to a skills training centre and financial support to complete the course.

Photo credit: a young unmarried mother and her baby supported through the Mother and Baby Unit, Khartoum. (Photographer – Hala Elfateh, HHC psychologist)

References:

http://www.unece.org/oes/nutshell/2004-2005/focus_sustainable_development.html

The DFID Guidance manual on water supply and sanitation programmes, prepared by 'WELL' that was led by WEDC:

<https://wedc-knowledge.lboro.ac.uk/details.html?id=2862>

Rural Water Supply in Africa – Building Blocks for Handpump Sustainability, by Peter Harvey and Bob Reed

<https://wedc-knowledge.lboro.ac.uk/details.html?id=14043>

Sustainable sanitation for all by P Bongartz, N Verno and J Fox, published by Practical Action at:

<http://developmentbookshop.com/sustainable-sanitation-for-all>