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# PI-DOC 4: SUSTAINABILITY

This PI-doc is about the sustainability of a project: what does it consist of and how can it be taken into account in the planning and implementation of the project.

#### What is sustainability?

A project is sustainable when people can continue to benefit from the services or products offered by it, even after the external technical or financial support to the project ends. The possibilities of sustainability should be taken into account right from the planning stage of the project. Various factors determine or influence the sustainability of a project, and they will be described below:

- 1. The ownership of a project;
- 2. Context analysis;
- 3. Use of existing structures, systems and solutions;
- 4. Coordination of stakeholders in project activities;
- 5. Shared responsibility for results;
- 6. Capacity building of the local organization (learning capacity);
- 7. Financial sustainability.

### 1. Ownership

This means that the project is owned by your organization and the target group the project is serving. You are the Project Owner and you decide about the project. When setting up the project, the ideas of the target group and your organization are central. The project should give your organization and the target group an opportunity for development. Involvement of all stakeholders of the project in decision making regarding the choice, the planning and implementation is of great importance. This will increase the chances of continuation of the project after external aid has come to an end.

Stakeholders can become involved in setting up a project by using participative methods, like making an analysis which parties have a stake or are involved in the project, and involving them in defining the project's objectives and planning.

#### 2. Context

The context of a project is the environment in which the project takes place: other organizations, target groups and institutions (cultural norms and values, laws, etc.) that can have an influence on the project. It would be dangerous not to take them into account, because they can affect sustainability. But, with a little effort, you can map out these other actors and, their relationships and what sort of relationship the project would like to have with these organizations. Next to actors, there are also factors in the environment of the project that could have a positive or negative influence on the project, for example: political situation, climate, culture, etc.

A context analysis should provide an answer to the following questions:

- a. Who are the other actors in the direct environment of the project, with whom the project might want to collaborate?
- b. Which factors in the environment of the project could have an influence, positive or negative?

Better insight in the context of the project can be used to improve its sustainability, for example by:

- using a more appropriate technology (hand pumps for water where there is no electricity);
- using locally available construction materials;
- letting women have a better say in the project and a bigger role in its management;
- searching for additional financial sources.

#### 3. Use of existing structures, systems, solutions

Often new systems, procedures, solutions, materials, ways of working, etc. are introduced, mainly because they worked out well in other projects. But maybe they do not fit well in your local situation. It may be preferable to use technologies and materials that have already been tested and used in the project area.

How to find out what will work and will be sustainable? Go and talk to people that work with other organizations. Talk to all stakeholders. What is the best solution according to the other, what has been done already to solve the problem? What worked well and what did not work well? Will the solution be the introduction of a new system, structure, material, etc, then first analyze whether the system will continue to work after the project has been completed. For example, are spare parts locally available? Is there anyone that understands the system, material, technology and are they able to work with it? Has a training course been offered to learn the new technology?

### 4. Coördination of stakeholders in project activities

Projects and local organizations often deal with more than one donor showing their interest and co-funding the project. A good communication and transparent agreements among the collaborating partners are very important for the successful implementation of the project. If this is the case with your organization, you may have to comply with different requirements for each donor. For example when reporting: you may need to write a separate report to each donor. This may cause your organization lots of extra work and time, you cannot dedicate to the project itself. However, transparency to donors on who finances which part is of crucial importance.

## 5. Shared responsibility for results

Working result oriented. This is a concept that is applied more and more often. In the past the donors were only busy justifying and controlling the financial means and planned results. This led to a policing kind of relation between the project and the donor. A lot of time was wasted in justification of the financial means, while the end result was lost out of sight. Since some years this has changed. Many donors want to put more emphasis on assessing **results**. Partners agree to collectively achieve the project results and these will be monitored and evaluated. This will lead to partners feeling mutually responsible for achieving the results and both will dedicate oneself to it.

Development projects are nowadays mainly result-oriented. Donors are more interested in the end results, and less in checking (or even policing) the progress of activities and expenditures.

How to get to shared results? Your organization should define and write down the results the project will achieve, because you and the target group are the owners. The Dutch PI will only be supportive. The results will be formulated in a project plan. Responsibilities are distributed according to concrete results to be achieved. They will be monitored and evaluated. This ensures that all concerned feel co-responsible for the success of the project.

# 6. Capacity building of your organization

The sustainability of a project depends also from the capacities of your organization to manage it. If certain skills are lacking, your Dutch partner can be of assistance in obtaining access to capacity building activities. This helps your organization to become gradually independent from your Dutch friends. Building capacity may focus on strengthening and improving the capacity and possibilities of both individuals as well as of the organization. It is about strengthening personal skills and about improving procedures and systems.

How to strengthen your organization? Building capacity can become an integral part of the project.

You can think of a training by a local expert or training institute, knowledge exchange with the Dutch organization, an internship, an introduction to an administration system, etc. The more capacity building is integrated with the development of the project, more useful it will be for its future.

### 7. Financial sustainability

In many cases your organization will be financially dependent from your Dutch partner, especially at the start of a project. Gradually, this should change, otherwise the project will never become sustainable. It is therefore important to look for alternative financial sources to take care of the project's recurrent (running) costs, such as salaries, rent, maintenance, electricity, etc. Taking into account that foreign donors are seldom willing to finance such costs.

Activities you could engage in, with the assistance of your Dutch partner, are:

- setting up income generating activities in favour of the project;
- looking for possibilities of local fundraising;
- checking the possibilities for subsidy from your government.

#### Increasing the sustainability of your project

Any project plan should be seriously checked on sustainability. And if necessary, adjusted, or even abandoned.

Adjusting the project plan can be done in three ways:

- 1. Including activities that focus on sustainability (this nay also require changes in the **budget**!);
- 2. Posing conditions on the collaboration with other organizations;
- 3. Seek more ways to guarantee the continuation of the project after withdrawal of your Dutch partner. For example, the project involves the construction of a school. During construction a school committee is set up, which becomes responsible for the maintenance and functioning of the school.

#### Suggestions for your project plan:

- 1. Determine which results and activities need to continue after the external assistance has come to an end and define/calculate the means necessary to do so.
- 2. Define specific criteria that will increase the sustainability of the project. For instance, if the project is about drinking water supply: have the beneficiaries chosen the preferred location, were they included in the planning process, did they form a maintenance committee, etc.?
- 3. Examine every part of the project: the goal, the results and the activities, the collaboration and the budget, in order to answer the sustainability questions of this paper.
- 4. Decide on the basis of the answers whether:
  - results, activities and budget needs to be reformulated and/or adjusted;
  - more checking needs to be done;
  - specific recommendations need to be given to the project implementers.

#### The exit strategy

The ultimate aim of any project supported by a foreign donor is that it can continue without its financial assistance. The moment for this assistance to end is difficult to determine, because during the project implementation a situation of financial dependence arises. It is very important to prevent this dependence to be without end.

This can be prevented by conferring with your Dutch partner about a gradual exit strategy, already in the planning phase of the project. How will other sources of money be secured? What are alternatives? What needs to be done to be able to continue? What is the best way to show to all stakeholders that the project is now all theirs, and the Dutch involvement has ended?

During this discussion you can also think about what you may wish to continue doing together.

Do you want the Dutch partner to stay involved, for example by receiving information about the project, participating in the board of your organization, making publicity for the project in the Netherlands, etc.?





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