

# Implementing a Post-Project Sustainability Study (PSS) of a Development Project: Lessons Learned from Indonesia

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## *Abstract:*

This policy brief draws on lessons learned from a recent post-project sustainability study (PSS) of a community health project in Indonesia. Understanding how project components and results are evolved, sustained, and adopted after the conclusion of a project is important from policy perspective as the lessons learned serve to inform future programming, as well as contribute to the general body of knowledge. The paper suggests that the focus of any PSS should not only examine what activities are sustained, but also the factors responsible for sustaining the results. It also suggests that, mixed methods – quantitative and qualitative – help research teams understand why and how project activities are sustained. It further suggests that PSSs are different from traditional impact evaluations, so including all stakeholders in the study is crucial to understand how each of them contributed toward the project's sustainability. Other conclusions related to sustainable development goals (SDGs) are also made.

**Keywords:** impact evaluation; post-project sustainability; mixed methods

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In 2014, researchers at the University of Notre Dame Initiative for Global Development (NDIGD) conducted a post-project sustainability study (PSS) of a community health project implemented in Indonesia between 2003 and 2007 to determine whether project interventions led to lasting improvements in infant health, nutrition, sanitation, and cognitive development. The PSS was implemented seven years after the cessation of funding (Guzman, Eder-Parker, & Khatiwada, 2015). The purpose of a PSS is to answer fundamental questions concerning any given project's long-term impact. From a development perspective, projects should be designed and implemented in such a manner that they continuously produce outputs, services, and outcomes beyond the official conclusion of the project (AusAid, 2000; Mahonge, 2013; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Development Assistance Committee [OECD-DAC], 2002; Russell, Witcherman, McHugh, & Esselman, 1995). It is also imperative that projects are not only sustained, but can also benefit additional people by expanding to new areas. Development outcomes are both enhanced and more reliable when there is a high return on investment on program activities. Based on the work of Mahonge (2013) and Russell et al. (1995), this paper defines sustainability as a set of evidences in terms of continued existence and/or emergence of new practices, goods, and services, beyond a conclusion of a project. While the sustainability literature emphasizes continuation of outputs, services, and outcomes after the project ends, there is no consensus on the length of the continuation.

Each year a significant amount of money is spent on community-based improvement projects in developing countries. These funds, often provided by bilateral and multilateral organizations, foundations, and the private sector, are provided with the goal of improving the socioeconomic conditions of people within developing countries. While significant resources and effort go into designing, planning, implementing, and evaluating projects, considerably fewer resources are invested in understanding how project components and results evolve and are sustained after projects end. Understanding sustainability, both conceptually and operationally, as well as intentionally engaging in sustainability enhancement efforts, should be matters of importance in strategy and application for donors and funders, program implementers and participants, researchers, and other stakeholders (Bamberger & Cheema, 1990; Guzman et al., 2015).

Using a PSS to examine the long-term impacts of development projects are often discussed in the corridors of development conferences, but almost never implemented (Sarriot, Ricca, Yourkavitch, & Ryan, 2008). Inevitably, even the most successful projects face the challenge of sustaining effectiveness over time. Although many funders now recommend – and even require – that a viable sustainability plan and exit strategy be included as part of the project proposal, project implementers do not generally invest significant effort towards understanding the concept of sustainability, nor do they develop a concrete strategy to address sustainability throughout the project life cycle. There is thus pressing need to conduct more PSSs to develop concrete strategies to address development projects' sustainability issues.

Systematic application of PSSs could improve the decision-making processes for projects related to sustainable development goals (SDGs) and developing countries can benefit most. To achieve SDGs, which include ending poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring economic prosperity for all to live a dignified life, governments, the private sector, civil society, and individuals will play larger roles. Sustaining projects that are directly related to SDGs will not only help developing countries achieve their SDGs, but will also assist the donor community in sustaining interventions by embedding the projects in the local systems and therefore decreasing the need for external support in the longer run. Furthermore, PSSs also help to

achieve the integral human development goal that puts personal well-being in the center of just and peaceful relationships and emphasizes equality between every person and the common good of all people in the community (Burpee, Heinrich, & Zemanek, 2008).

There have been an increased number of calls to conduct PSSs of development interventions to better understand why and how program activities are sustained (Eder, Schooley, Fullerton, & Murguia, 2012; Mahonge, 2013; Sarriot et al., 2008). To our knowledge, there are not many PSSs that examine the long-term impact of development interventions. Unlike traditional impact evaluations, PSSs have their own opportunities and challenges. While PSSs looks at long-term impacts, conducting a PSS is not necessarily straightforward, as it requires a different set of tools and techniques than a traditional impact evaluation.

### **Lessons from Indonesia**

Notre Dame researchers, working with the Project Concern International (PCI), designed and conducted a PSS seven years after the official conclusion of a project in Indonesia. These reflections on the lessons learned are based on Notre Dame's involvement in this study (Guzman et al., 2015). The purpose of this paper is to highlight lessons learned from implementation of a PSS and provides suggestions for improving PSSs for development projects implemented at community level.

The researcher recorded the following lessons that can be used to design better and more efficient PSS in the futures:

#### **Evaluating all projects might not be worthwhile**

Before you initiate a PSS of a development intervention, it is important to first assess a project's evaluability. Independent researchers should review project documents to examine whether there were clear objectives and expected outcomes, a well-defined theory of change, designated beneficiaries, specified geographic boundaries for the project implementation, well-defined timeframes, and the availability of human and financial resources. If researchers determine the project meets all the criteria for evaluability, they should move forward on developing a study design.

The success of a PSS depends on the availability of prior data. To monitor changes in the outcome of interest, researchers need to track changes over time to determine whether the project had a continuous impact in the community in which it initially took place. Access to prior data, including baseline, midline, endline, and other follow-up survey datasets is important to assess any changes. A well-documented baseline dataset and other follow-up surveys should be available so that researchers can replicate the survey and changes. In the absence of prior datasets, researchers can still perform a retrospective assessment, but this type of assessment is not preferred as it suffers from a recall-bias (Hassan, 2005).

In the case of Indonesia project, the research team reviewed the available project-related documents (the project proposal, progress reports, outcome indicators, evaluation report, etc.) and datasets provided by the project implementer, PCI, prior to conducting the study and determined that it would be worthwhile to evaluate the project using a PSS.

### **Understanding project location and beneficiaries is important**

Community-based development interventions have well-defined geographic boundaries for project implementation with an estimated number of beneficiaries. When the research team arrives for a PSS there might be some confusion regarding what areas to include in the study if there was no well-documented project data, as a PSS is not performed immediately upon completion of the project. Understanding the population served during the program implementation is key to developing an appropriate sampling procedure for the study. In addition to reviewing project documents, speaking with local individuals, as well as project staff with knowledge of the project and local context, who were also present during the project implementation, could be a valuable source of information for delineating the boundaries of the PSS and determining an appropriate sampling. In the Indonesia study, the research team initially had a difficult time determining both the intervention area and treated population, but after speaking with project staff who were involved in implementing the health project, the team identified the intervention area and population to include in the PSS. This significantly eased the sampling procedures.

When conducting a PSS, it is also important to include information about the project beneficiaries. Since PSSs are conducted after a gap of time, it is not always possible to find actual beneficiaries to include in the study. It is, therefore, also important to assess if the PSS should include a populace that was not present during the time of project implementation, but has since been impacted indirectly, to understand how knowledge and practices were passed on from generation to generation, or from the populace of one geographic area to another. In the case of the Indonesia study, the researchers included a populace that was treated during the time of project implementation, as well as a group that would have been treated if the project were running at the time of the PSS to understand how the project could have impacted the latter (Guzman et al., 2015). This group consisted of young children who were born after the closure of project, as the project was related to children's health with various behavioral change components.

### **The PSS differs from a traditional impact evaluation**

Sustaining project activities should be a goal of any intervention as this provides a continuous flow of outputs and services to the population beyond the official conclusion of an intervention. However, determining which factors attribute to the sustainability of program activities is difficult in traditional impact evaluation as the researchers are often challenged when asked to provide solid evidence on the degree of contribution of a project towards the sustainability of program activities (Sarriot et al., 2008). Evaluating sustainability requires more than a comparison between a past and present situation as seen in classic evaluations of a project; it should also give a sense of how a project will fare in order to form evidence-based hypotheses about potential future changes (Sarriot et al., 2008).

A PSS must focus on both examining which project activities are being sustained and which are not, as well as documenting the causal mechanisms, processes, and channels that contribute toward sustaining activities, as well as the flow of services and outputs.

### **The use of mixed methods is important**

Studies that utilize a combination of methods, such as surveys, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and observations, reveal factors that are responsible for sustaining the

results of a project (Mahonge, 2013). The survey designed to monitor the project outcomes should be supplemented with qualitative methods that capture how the various stakeholders contributed toward sustaining the results. Both qualitative and quantitative methods can be used concurrently during the study. In Indonesia, the researchers used qualitative methods to understand how the project interventions were embedded in the local system and how the different stakeholders contributed toward the sustainability of project. For example, during the key informant interviews, which aimed to unfold causal mechanism and processes, the key informants reported that after the project implementer, PCI, left the area, the local government continued the activities initiated by PCI by launching a similar health and sanitation program, which improved local sanitation. Identifying and interviewing the right populations, who can adequately describe the history and design of sustainability efforts from different entities is essential. In the PSS study presented here, the researchers concurrently used the qualitative and quantitative methods and concluded that using qualitative methods to investigate the results obtained from the quantitative methods yield the best results. For future projects, the researchers recommend first conducting the surveys, then, after a preliminary analysis of the findings, researchers should work to design a qualitative component that will best enhance their understanding and interpretation of the quantitative data.

### **Identifying and engaging stakeholders**

Understanding project sustainability from the implementer's perspective is also crucial for providing information on how the project could continue to generate a continuous flow of services and outcomes. It is thus imperative to identify and include various project stakeholders in the PSS. For instance, if the project was implemented in collaboration with government bodies, it is important to include, if possible, representatives from those involved in the project from initial stages to completion. Similarly, including project staff, local leaders, representatives from the donor community, and members of civil society is also important to facilitate understanding of the different dynamics that might impact sustainability. Focus group discussions and in-depth interviews can be conducted with these groups to understand what types of contributions they provided toward project sustainability.

In the case of the Indonesia project, the key informant interview and focus group discussion participants included health center staff, volunteer health workers, midwives, and birth attendants. These types of participants were included in the study because they frequently work in the areas of children's and maternal health and were therefore knowledgeable about the health services locally available for children and mothers.

### **Examine what was sustained, as well as if the capacity has changed**

PSSs often look at which programs were sustained and how, although it is also important to investigate the ways in which the organizational and community capacities have changed over time. Amid these changes, researchers must look at whether there has been an expansion of the program with new beneficiaries. It is also worthwhile to identify if new networks and partnerships developed with new institutions, which would be instrumental in sustaining and expanding the program in question. Qualitative methods can capture this type of information from stakeholders.

In the case of the Indonesia project, during the focus group discussions and key informant interviews, the researchers learned that the project's initial activity, child growth and development, had evolved into play group and kindergarten under the Government of

Indonesia's Office of Religious Affairs. This shows how a stakeholder's involvement sustained a program activity.

### **Conclusion and policy implications**

The focus of any PSS should examine what activities have been sustained, as well as the factors responsible for sustaining the results. Using mixed methods, both quantitative and qualitative, could help research teams understand why and how the project activities are sustained. Furthermore, PSSs differ from traditional impact evaluations in that they include all of the stakeholders in the study as a crucial step toward understanding how different stakeholders contributed toward the project's sustainability.

In most cases, donors are interested in learning about the immediate impacts of projects they fund, but do not seek to understand the long-term impacts of these projects. In this context, donors should promote sustainability studies by funding more PSSs. Development projects aimed at scaling up to larger areas need a thorough examination so that research teams sufficiently understand the factors that contribute to sustainability. When designing new projects, teams should plan to conduct a PSS from the outset so that the results of new projects can provide policy-relevant feedback to the broader development community. Development agencies, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development, Oxfam, and the World Bank, should fund new projects based on the knowledge acquired from impact evaluations and PSSs. This should be particularly important to donors who promote sustainable development goals (SDGs) in a way that leaves a lasting impact. While it is important to have an agreed-upon list of SDGs, it is also critical that the project outcomes are sustained - this will require that significant steps are followed to measure the sustainability of SDGs-related interventions.

This policy brief argues that more PSSs should be conducted to better understand and ensure the sustainability of projects and provides lessons learned to improve future PSSs. However, there are many additional approaches and frameworks that may be useful to promote sustainability. For example, an integral human development framework which puts personal well-being in the center of just and peaceful relationships and a thriving environment could keep sustainability on the project's horizon. More research needs to be done to determine how different approaches and various factors contribute to sustainability, and how best to measure the long-term impacts.

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