

Learning Brief: What does sustainability look like post-program?

Celebrating achievements, challenging our assumptions, and wrestling with the unknown
—case studies from our public grants, and private funding such as foundations, and sponsorship.

World Vision pursues sustainability to maximize positive program results, recognizing that the endurance of improved child well-being is the shared fundamental goal of community participants, donors, and staff members alike.

According to Giving USA, charitable donations in the United States reached over \$427 billion in 2018.¹ World Vision U.S. received slightly over 1 billion in the same year.² To World Vision, these resources are sacred and entrusted from God through donors on behalf of the poor.³ Ensuring use of these resources to achieve long-term, sustainable impact is therefore both a moral imperative and an accountability issue for the organization.

“Without returning to look for what participants and partners valued enough to continue on their own, without returning to learn about unexpected sustained impacts, we rob ourselves of pivotal learning needed for success.”

(Valuing Voices, 2016)

Perhaps the most difficult element of planning for sustainability is the inability to predict the future. World Vision, like most other organizations and donors, typically expects and measures its impact at the time of program closure or exit, while growing evidence shows that impact at closure does not automatically equate to sustained benefit over time.⁴ End-of-program evaluations provide invaluable early evidence of what might be sustainable, however it is through post-program evaluations (also known as ex-post evaluations or studies) that we can learn whether results are durable beyond the intervention period. And yet, ex-post

studies are not a routinized practice—often because they require additional funding after program closure; other times because they are not feasible or difficult to conduct; and sometimes because the stories they bring back are complex narratives of what worked, for whom, and why, which raises more questions with no straightforward answers. Despite these challenges, in the last five years World Vision U.S. has conducted or participated in a dozen ex-post studies, which we can all learn from. Most were internally led and focused on our sponsorship-funded programs, and a handful were commissioned from external donors as part of their efforts to learn about sustainability. These programs closed between two to five years prior to their ex-post measurement, and represent World Vision’s work in different sectors and countries, and through different funding sources, i.e., public grants, private funding such as foundations, and sponsorship.



Countries with ex-post sites (Bolivia, Angola, Kenya, Uganda, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka)

¹ Global Giving (2018) <https://givingusa.org/giving-usa-2019-americans-gave-427-71-billion-to-charity-in-2018-amid-complex-year-for-charitable-giving/>

² World Vision US, Annual Review (2018) <https://www.worldvision.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/annual-report.pdf>

³ <https://www.worldvision.org/about-us/mission-statement#1468275795906-dfba4b75-490b>

⁴ Rogers, Beatrice Lorge and Coates, Jennifer. 2015. Sustaining Development: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects. Washington, DC: FHI 360/Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA).

In the past five years, World Vision has compared learning and reflections from these ex-posts with numerous other organizations and donors, reaching similar conclusions and grappling with similar issues around sustainability drivers or factors, measurement, and results. What follows illustrates **three key learnings** emerging from these studies.

- 1 In all ex-posts, including for programs that had robust performance data, sustained impact is hard to track and attribute post-program due to the dynamic context.
- 2 When we plan ex-posts in hindsight, findings may be difficult to anchor or compare because they lack benchmarks, and old records are challenging to obtain. This particularly affected our ex-post studies of sponsorship funded programs.
- 3 Carrying out post-program sustainability measurement for learning purposes and to improve future program designs enables us to press forward to quality programming.

Systems are dynamic: External factors such as economics, politics, and climate constantly influence project achievements—positively and/or negatively across time.

Here is an illustration from World Vision’s ProRenda project in Angola on how economic context changes affect project achievements post program. Two years post-project, in 2015, the University of Michigan conducted an ex-post evaluation as part of a panel study.⁵ They reported clear signs of economic growth in the region in 2015, with households owning more assets, such as cellphones and motorcycles, and a high percentage of households having roofs with iron sheets rather than thatch, a key home investment in that culture. However, the study found no significant difference between those participating and those not participating for many indicators, including ownership of non-animal assets (motorcycles, carts, plows, cellphones, etc.). The researchers concluded that the lack of significant differences in many trends between the participant and nonparticipant households may reflect the spillovers of trade and market enhancements from ProRenda, but also the improvements due to public sector infrastructure investments, especially in roads.⁶

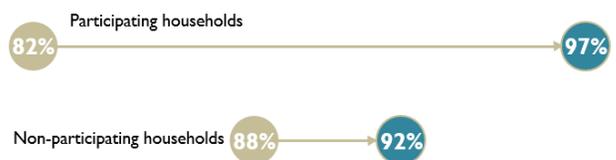
Raising the Incomes of Smallholder Farmers in the Central Highlands of Angola (PRORENDA Project) was an agriculture, economic recovery and development project in Central Plateau, Angola funded through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2008-2013). It aimed to increase incomes of smallholder farmers in the central highlands of Angola from potatoes and other high-value crops by establishing and maintaining competitive value chains (i.e., improve marketing of produce for major urban markets, improve organization of farmer associations to operate as a business, and increase yields, quality, and the regularity of production.)

Nevertheless, there are a few indicators that show that ProRenda **participating households** tended to have **better food consumption** and **fewer households with long hunger period** in 2015 than in 2009 compared to non-participating households. Their children also attended school at higher rates.

For example: fewer participating households suffer hunger periods of more than four weeks per year in **2015** than in **2009**



Overall children were attending school at high rates (2015), especially among participating households.



⁵ In these types of longitudinal studies, the same participants and non-participants are followed over time (baseline, end-line, ex-post).

⁶ Post Project Impact Assessment Report (2015) *Raising the Incomes of Smallholder Farmers in the Central Highlands of Angola: A Model Project for Improving Agricultural Value Chains in Post-Conflict Nations* (Rep.). Conducted by University of Michigan.

Measuring sustainability through ex-posts requires setting clear benchmarks to measure success prior to program closure, including timelines for expected sustainment.

Supported by Tulane University (2014-2018), World Vision U.S. carried out 10 ex-post evaluations exploring different facets of our sponsorship-funded programs. These studies provide insight into what has remained of our investment in **infrastructure**, the **status of community groups** left behind as a mechanism to sustain child well-being outcomes, and the **status of child well-being**, especially among registered and sponsored children, and perceptions around social cohesion. They explored the complexity of measuring sustainability in multi-sectoral, long-term programs (running over a decade), that continuously change and adapt over years and are not set up for ex-post measurements like the ProRenda panel study. One of the challenges to interpret the findings from these studies, even when achievement seemed high, was the lack of benchmarks to judge success.



INFRASTRUCTURE

85% of sampled infrastructure investment across nine sites were still functional and contributing to community needs⁷. The sites ranged from classrooms to wells to community centers, and the scale of World Vision investment in them varied widely.

For example, in Krupasagar (India), the continued functioning of 15 out of 22 water infrastructure investments and 20 out of 24 education-related infrastructure investments translated into ongoing benefits for an estimated 13,100 people with access to drinking water and almost 3,000 students served by schools supported by World Vision. In Willuwa (Sri Lanka), investments in water projects between 2000-2011 continued to provide benefits for at least 2,767 families in 2015.



COMMUNITY GROUPS

87% of community groups were still active almost two years after closure in three sites—Chan Mya Thar Zi and Hlaing Tharyar West (Myanmar), and Tiraque (Bolivia). These included context-specific self-help groups, water-users associations, savings groups, and other community-based organizations. The groups reported that their strongest assets were competency of **leadership**, **member involvement** and **integration**. However, the proportion of groups still active post-program drops to 41% of sampled adult community groups for other sites assessed 3+ years after closure. The weakest dimension of capacity for all groups regardless of when they closed is ‘strategic funding’, i.e. inability to maintain stable funding needed for program activities.

How much is good enough? For how long?

Is having 87% of groups active two years post-closure good enough? How long is it reasonable to expect a community group to be active?

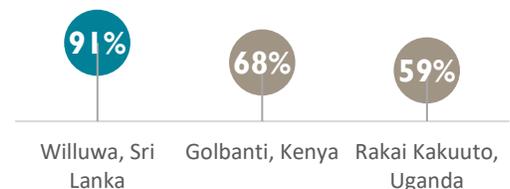
The programs evaluated did not have standards for group sustainment. Such standards are absent from the industry in general, and yet they are important to sustainability discourse.



STATUS OF CHILDREN (including former registered and sponsored)

Education: At the time of the measurement, the majority of former registered or sponsored children from three sites **completed high school or were still in school**, with the most prevalent education achievements in **Sri Lanka**. The same trend was noticed for other children (not registered/sponsored) living in the households.

The most recent ex-post measurement in Masaka Kaswa, Uganda⁸ found that while 90.4% of caregivers reported their child attended school in 2014, only 86.0% stated the same in 2018. Despite this slight



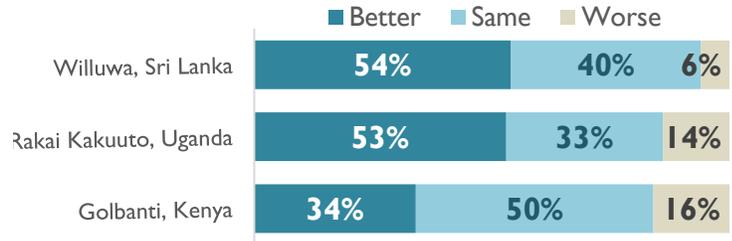
⁷ In some area programs, we were able to observe all of the infrastructure investments sites, but in others we took a sample.

⁸ The Masaka Kaswa study sampled households living in the program area regardless of sponsorship status.

decline, these data suggest that children in Masaka Kaswa are attending school at **substantially higher rates than the national average**. In 2016, the net attendance ratio among secondary school-age children (13-18 years) was 20% nationally.⁹

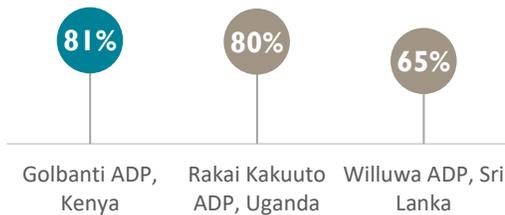
Health: Most former registered or sponsored children from three sites (Rakai in Uganda, Golbanti in Kenya, and Willuwa in Sri Lanka) were perceived to be in **similar or better health** than their peers. This proportion is smaller in Kenya.

The Masaka Kaswa, Uganda data from 2014 and 2018 suggest that child health had improved prior to the program closure, and these achievements were sustained through 2018.



SOCIAL COHESION

There was near unanimous reporting from former registered or sponsored children age 18 and above in each of the three sites (Rakai in Uganda, Golbanti in Kenya, and Willuwa in Sri Lanka) that **it is important to serve their community** (service mentality), that **if you try hard you can improve your life situation** (personal agency), and that their **faith gives them strength in their daily life**.



The majority of household survey respondents in these three sites (Rakai in Uganda, Golbanti in Kenya, and Willuwa in Sri Lanka) reported greater levels of community cohesion at the time of the measurement, compared to when the ADPs had closed.

In Masaka Kaswa, Uganda in 2018, 68.7% of respondents indicated that the community's willingness to come together to solve community problems was better than it was four years prior.

The 2018 qualitative data confirmed that the communities throughout Masaka understand and value the necessity of community mobilization to solve problems. Community leaders continue to follow the same methods of training, sensitizations and seminars that World Vision used throughout the duration of the ADP, to mobilize their communities. **Every key informant interviewed had at least one example of how his/her community has come together in a collective effort to solve an issue.** In the words of a Butego sub-county councilman: "The efforts of World Vision accelerated the heart of community work in us." Since the departure of World Vision, communities in Masaka have mobilized to solve various issues of importance, including security and water. Overall, it seemed that communities mobilized most fiercely when it came to finding solutions for their youth.

"World Vision accelerated the heart of community work in us."

Continuous learning about sustainability advances knowledge and improves future practice

This learning is best exemplified by one of the highest profiled ex-post studies in the last decade—the multi-country study from the office of Food for Peace (FFP), which was carried out between 2009-2015 with support from Tufts University.¹⁰ This study covered 12 projects implemented in four countries (Bolivia, Honduras, India, and Kenya) from agencies such as Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), CARE, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), Food for the Hungry (FH), Save the Children (SC), and **World Vision**. The study is intentionally not reporting findings by agency, rather providing a synthesis for collective learning. The purpose of the study was to determine factors that enhanced the likelihood of sustainability and benefits, and incorporate this learning into guidance for future FFP projects.

⁹ Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and ICF. 2018. Uganda Demographic and Health Survey 2016. Kampala, Uganda and Rockville, Maryland, USA: UBOS and ICF.

¹⁰ Rogers, Beatrice Lorge and Coates, Jennifer. 2015. Sustaining Development: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects. Washington, DC: FHI 360/Food and Nutrition Technical Assistance III Project (FANTA).

The insights from this study continue to be pivotal in shaping the ongoing conversation about sustainability among donors and implementing agencies. They resonate with the reflections and conclusions from our other ex-post studies, some of which were already highlighted in this brief. Here are a few of the most salient recommendations and how they apply to World Vision:

Key synthesis findings related to factors/drivers of sustainability:

- Results from the synthesis demonstrated that **resources, capacity, and motivation** were **critical to achieving sustainability**. These factors are interrelated and synergistic, i.e., no project in this study achieved sustainability without all three of them in place before the project ended.
- **Linkages**, such as those between community-based organizations or individuals and existing public or private sector institutions, were **usually critical for successful phase-over of responsibilities**.

Findings related to better processes for smart transition planning and sustainability measurements in the long-run:

- In the exit process, a **gradual transition** from project-supported activities to independent operation was **important for sustainability**.
- In addition to measuring impact, **evaluations must incorporate indicators of sustainability**—that is, evidence of continued resources, capacity, and motivation; establishment of appropriate linkages; and gradual transition to independent operation—in order to judge a project’s potential to achieve lasting change. Different strategies for sustainability are appropriate and feasible in different technical sectors.

“In any project World Vision designs, we try to include livelihood approaches that use the findings from this ex-post sustainability study, especially fee for service by village agents selling seeds or providing animal vaccinations, the business model for farmer groups, and market linkages that farmers have to private sector input suppliers and buyers of farm production” says *Dan Norrell, Senior Technical Advisor, Economic Development*

Takeaway: Our sponsorship-funded ex-post studies reached similar conclusions, reinforcing the applicability of the recommendations across different programs. Our transition plans and sustainability benchmarks should be an integral part of our designs. They should clearly articulate sustainability as building blocks between activities and across implementation phases. Each program needs clear sustainability indicators and benchmarks—what to sustain, who will sustain it, how will they do it, how much change we expect to last and until when.

Findings related to managing expectations on sustainability:

- **Not all factors affecting sustainability are inherent in a project’s design and exit strategy.** The operating context and exogenous shocks (e.g., economic and climatic) also affected the sustainability of project benefits positively or negatively.
- Project **impact at the time of exit does not consistently predict sustainability**, and the magnitude of the impact is not related to the probability of sustainability.
- Incorporating the **lessons for sustainability into future project design** may improve the likelihood that development projects continue to offer benefits after project completion.

Takeaway: Routinize ex-post studies to measure sustainability, utilize their learning internally to improve programs and externally to position World Vision as a learning organization. This calls for sharing with donors, communities, and partners how we change as a result of our intentional learning of sustainability and sustainment.

Food for thought: How are resilience and sustainability linked? Can development be sustainable if it is not resilient?

Learn more what is the latest thinking here: <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/12711.pdf>