

## Exit for Sustainability CHECKLISTS , Jindra Cekan/ova PhD (2020)



### What do we mean by sustainability?

The extent to which the net benefits of the intervention continue, or are likely to continue. This includes an examination of the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain net benefits over time. Involves analyses of resilience, risks and potential trade-offs.  
 UN's [OECD/ DAC 2019](#).

These Checklists for Exit along the Sustainability Project Cycle are based on lessons from [ex-post evaluations that Valuing Voices has done or researched](#). Ex-post project completion evaluations are rare and even more so those that consulted partners and participants in the field about sustained impacts. [Over \\$3.5 trillion has been spent on public foreign aid projects in the past 70 years \(OECD 2019\)](#) yet we have evaluated less than 1% of these projects for sustainability. Our Valuing Voices ex-post research of 39 organizations' [evaluations of sustainability](#) shows that most project results decrease (20-90%) as early as two years ex-post in addition to An Asian Development Bank study 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](#),"

Most project exits are in the last quarter and sustainability handover assumptions are not validated ex-post. Learning from what was sustained helps us know how to *exit for sustainability* from the very onset of the project (green slices) as compared to the typical project cycle (orange), above. We encourage those tasked with funding, designing, implementing, monitoring & evaluating projects to use these longer checklists and view the full recording shared with participants. A partial PowerPoint can also be found on „[Sustaining All of our Hard Work](#)“ presentation for the Vienna Evaluation Network (10/20). These checklists are aimed at donors/designers and implementers of foreign aid projects outcomes and impacts and can be adapted by local NGOs, national governments, private sector, academics, to create exit plans. Local participation in creating these and feedback on how well exit is going will help them *sustain results*.

Notably, these checklists draw on ex-post project sustainability evaluations and some exit literature including that below. Other excellent resources looking at how to foster local NGO/CSO organizational sustainability and country exit (not specifically covered here) are:

**INTRAC UK** (2014-16) [https://www.intrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/INTRAC-Praxis-Paper-31\\_Developing-a-timeline-for-exit-strategies.-Sarah-Lewis.pdf](https://www.intrac.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/INTRAC-Praxis-Paper-31_Developing-a-timeline-for-exit-strategies.-Sarah-Lewis.pdf) and

**CDA/ Peace Direct/ SCG** (2020): & <https://www.stoppingassuccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/SAS-Tools-USAID-Mission-Checklist-for-Sustainable-Transitions-2.pdf>

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## Valuing Voices Sustained Exit Commitments and Conditions Checklists

<b><u>Commitments to Sustainability</u></b>	<b><u>Conditions for Sustainability</u></b>
<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 <b>Theory of Sustainability</b> 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><b>VI. Exit/ Handover Sustainability Phases:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phase down over time</li> <li>- Phase over to others</li> <li>- Phase out (exit at end of funding)</li> </ul>	<p><b>II. Ownership/ Motivation</b></p>
<p><b>VII. Address Risks to Sustainability, e.g. Resilience to Shocks</b> (e.g. economic, political) and Natural Environment</p>	<p><b>III. Resources</b></p>
	<p><b>IV. Capacity Strengthening</b></p>
	<p><b>V. Partnerships, including</b> Examining Assumptions about Accountability</p>
	<p><b>VIII. Timeframe and Adaptation of Implementation based on M&amp;E of Transparent Exit Benchmarks</b></p>
	<p><b>IX. Accountable Communication</b></p>

As you go along the project cycle, different checklists are used along each of the five slices, see below.

## 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



#### 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](#)

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



### 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?

### 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?

### III.Slice3: Assumptions & Capacity Strengthening and Partnerships Checklists



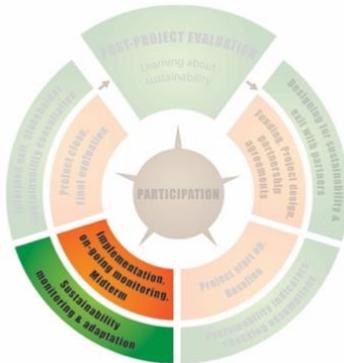
#### IV. Capacity Strengthening

- 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?

#### 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?

#### IV.SLICE4: M&E & Adaptation: Exit/ Sustainability Phases & Risks/ Resilience Checklists



#### 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

#### 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?

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



### 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

### 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?

Revisions or Updates when you apply them?

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