Principles of good project design

Project design

These recommendations are based on research carried out on a sample of UK Aid Direct projects.

The design of your project is critical to its success and there are a range of key factors you should consider when designing your project:

Context

Consider the national context for progress towards the Global Goals for Sustainable Development, reference the need by using existing data and provide further analysis of the local context and community in relation to the identified Global Goals. Then:

- Identify the gap, need or lack of appropriate initiatives to address the identified cause of poverty
- Do your research on what may or may not work in your context and base your approaches on evidence. Before you start have a good understanding of the social and cultural barriers that exist, include gender-based barriers and how they can be addressed
- If possible, demonstrate evidence of your previous work in this context

Stakeholders

Engage with stakeholders as part of the project design from the very beginning.

Beneficiaries – consult with potential beneficiaries; understand their needs; consider the context, barriers and practicalities; aim to reach and consult with the most vulnerable, marginalised and include women and girls. Work with communities to consider how best to reach them. Consider how to ensure your project design allows for inclusion of persons with disabilities.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/stepping-up-a-gear-for-girls-and-women-updates-to-dfids-strategic-vision-for-girls-and-women-to-2020-and-beyond

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/554802/DFID-Disability-Framework-2015.pdf

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/leaving-no-one-behind-our-promise/leaving-no-one-behind-our-promise/

Consider project designs where you can get beneficiary co-ownership of an intervention.

Local government – consult with local government counterparts to determine if your project is relevant to their priorities and approaches. Gain buy-in and support for the project by

working with the authorities from the beginning. Look at designing a project that encourages ownership of the approach at the local government level.

Implementing partners – develop the project design with your implementing partners. Ensure they are involved at every stage of the design process. Use their experience and lessons from existing work to build the design process and test assumptions.

Theory of change

Develop a strong theory of change for your project, with a logical flow.

Articulate your project's theory of change – the why, how, who and what of the project.

- What is your problem statement? What is the need that you will be addressing? What is the context?
- Who will benefit from this change? Why do they need the change?
- What change are you expecting to happen as a result of the project? How will it be measured?
- What is your strategy for making this change happen? And why is it the best strategy to choose?
- What resources do you need to help you implement this strategy?
- What is the impact your project will contribute to?

Develop assumptions as part of this process and outline each one.

Consider suitable indicators to be used at the impact, outcome and output levels which will eventually form your logframe and be used to measure progress.

Look at the time frame for delivery. How long will your project be? Shorter time frames are shown to be effective for those projects responding to underserved areas of service delivery, for example. Longer time frames are necessary for projects aimed at systematic change.

Consider how your Theory of Change responds to wider strategic objectives, in this case those of the Global Goals, DFID and the UK Aid Match fund. Also demonstrate how it responds to national government priorities or has the ability to hold the government to account.

http://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/department-for-international-development-single-departmental-plan

https://www.bond.org.uk/resources/theory-of-change-for-organisations

Measuring change

It is very important to demonstrate the **change** the project will have on all beneficiaries and not just the **number** of beneficiaries that are benefitting.

- Clearly define the change you are expecting to take place for each population group. If relevant include different changes per different target group e.g. men and women, with specific timeframes

- How will you measure change? Think about ways of demonstrating the impact you are having at every level. For example, consider measuring the knowledge gained by individuals through training, by assessing whether the beneficiaries are using the newly trained techniques or not
- Ensure you are measuring and providing evidence for **all** the changes you are expecting as part of the project intervention. For example, how will you measure 'women's empowerment'? What does that mean and how will you generate the evidence to show you are empowering women as a direct result of the project?
- Look at how best to measure different population groups and collect data on each group. For example, on adolescents, on men and women, on people with disabilities
- What about unintended changes, either positive or negative – how will you measure those?
- Set realistic targets and indicators, ensuring both are fully within the control of your project intervention and not reliant on others or external sources to help you achieve them
- Consider ways of using the learnings from your results to adapt your programming to respond to a changing need

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/497354/learning-brief-gender-equality-womens-empowerment.pdf

Flexibility and adaptability

Projects need to be able to flex and adapt to changing contexts. A good project should regularly test assumptions and the theory of change to see if still holds.

It is important to consider the context and any changes to the context that the project may face and put measures in place to be able to adapt interventions, activities and budgets to respond to the changes. There are various ways the project design should consider this:

- The project should show how it has developed a risk management strategy and how it will continually revise the strategy with implementing partners. Group your risks into categories and consider all of the risks the project could face. Develop an action plan on how the project will address these risks should they occur. Test your assumptions on a regular basis
- All projects should ensure there is a mechanism to capture beneficiary feedback. There are different mechanisms that can be used to do this and the mix of mechanisms should be built into the project design process
- What will you do with the feedback you receive? Establish a method for analysing and then adapting projects from the feedback you receive

http://oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/how-do-you-do-adaptive-programming-two-examples-of-practical-experience-help-with-some-of-the-answers/

https://www.odi.org/publications/10367-putting-learning-centre-adaptive-development-programming-practice/

http://feedbackmechanisms.org/

Capacity Building

A significant proportion of time and resources in interventions focus on capacity building of primary beneficiaries.

- Consider the most effective way of delivering capacity building, for example individual training; group training; on the job training. Consult with beneficiaries to understand their needs in relation to training and to co-develop a strategy for capacity building, to ensure buy-in
- Ensure you have allocated enough time during the intervention to carry out training of the highest quality
- Consider how to manage the change that you want to happen through the capacity building. Think about qualitative approaches to measuring the impact of capacity building on individuals, rather than simply measuring the amount of training taking place
- Look at working closely with 'agents of change' in your project interventions – local leaders, elders, or people with influence who could have a longer-term impact on change
- Implementing partners may well need capacity building support on specific areas. Consider what their capacity gaps are during the design process and develop a capacity building strategy with them for the duration of the project
- Often capacity building of local government is not carried out as part of a project's intervention. By working with local government to assess what their capacity needs are in relation to the project's aims can lead to greater sustainability and ownership in the long term
- Investigate whether there is certain training available and delivered by local government partners that could form part of the project's training plan
- Consider also what extra support your own front-line delivery staff may need, especially if the project needs to recruit new staff

Sustainability

Projects should develop a clear and timebound sustainability strategy. Not all projects will be able to be fully sustainable at the end of the project period but those projects should clearly demonstrate elements of sustainability, providing the backbone to future sustainability. The most sustainable projects are those whose beneficiaries are self-sufficient at the end of the project.

- Build sustainability into project interventions wherever possible

- Work closely with beneficiary communities to determine what approaches to sustainability are possible. For example, a community owned revolving health fund may be able to fund elements of equipment maintenance
- Strengthen or add advocacy to project interventions - build capacity of beneficiaries to lobby local or national level government for strengthened or increased services
- Strengthen relationships with local level government to gain greater co-ownership and improve the possibility of sustainability
- Be realistic in assessments of the ability of stakeholders to absorb recurring costs for things like service delivery
- Continually reassess assumptions

Monitoring and evaluating

- Work with your implementing partner to establish a monitoring strategy. Consider: what data you need to collect? How you will collect it and why? What you intend to do with the data when you have it?
- How will you triangulate and verify your data? How will you work with other existing data systems for example national data management systems?
- Set up a reporting system that works for both you and your implementing partner. Consider the capacity of the partner and their ability to collect and monitor data from the field. Consider your own internal capacity to manage, use and analyse the data coming from the field
- Consider the use of different types of technology to help you with your monitoring
- Allow time and resources to carry out a baseline survey or access existing data to develop your baseline, then gather all the data you will need to populate your logframe and monitor the project, from the outset
- Develop a specific evaluation strategy. What are you planning to evaluate and why, what will you use it for? How will you share it? When will you do it? Who will do it and how much will it cost?

http://www.coffey.com/en/ingenuity-coffey/how-much-do-i-actually-spend-how-to-budget-and-plan-for-monitoring-and-evaluation/

Value for money

Value for money is an important element of your project design process. Consider setting up a framework or strategy for looking at the three Es – economy, efficiency, effectiveness. Different types of interventions and contexts result in different value for money measurements. Consider the best type of approaches for your interventions and your context, why is this the most cost-effective intervention? What are the alternatives? For example, to supply goods in a fragile context may result in a higher unit cost than non-fragile contexts.

- Economy analyses unit costs, inputs – are you getting the best quality inputs at the best price? How will you measure this and how often?

- Efficiency measures whether you are delivering your intervention in the most efficient way, whether services or training, are you reaching the maximum number of people at the minimum cost for example? How will you measure this and how often?
- Effectiveness – are you as effective in achieving your targets as you expected? If not, then why not? How will you measure this and how often?
- Consider also measuring equity – are you reaching the most vulnerable and those with the greatest need? How did you target them, are they really the most vulnerable? How are you measuring that?
- Look at the arguments to scale up or reproduce the intervention in other contexts using the evidence and data from the project's value for money approach.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/49551/DFID-approach-value-money.pdf

https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/leaving_no_one_behind_the_value_for_money_of_disability-inclusive_development.pdf

Budgeting

Involve your finance team from the beginning of the design process to ensure your budget is realistic and matches your proposed intervention strategy and all its related activities. Check your assumptions.

- Think about the need to get pre-financing for the design stage of your intervention to help you research and spend time with stakeholders to develop the most relevant design. Also consider it for the immediate set up stage for your grant if successful, as you wait to receive your funds
- Consider a realistic approach to your project inception phase of at least 6 months, don't plan activities without the necessary capacity to deliver or without having established your baseline
- Ensure you have the necessary financial capacity in place or a strategy to establish it, to manage a DFID grant should you be successful

Partnerships

Partnerships are a key element of strong project design. Partnerships should be developed from the start of the design process.

- Define and outline appropriate collaborative partnerships and linkages between yourself, project partners and government departments (where relevant)
- Explain the added value you will bring to the partnership

Gender, diversity and disability

Many projects consider gender throughout all aspects of their project, from organisational capacity to specific gender focus in interventions. However, there are other areas that often need to be strengthened.

- Identify areas of potential resistance to gender-related change from within the community that are relevant to the project and show how they will be addressed
- Being realistic in how barriers are to be broken down and clear about who needs to be involved to support the processes
- Look at how best to resolve multiple exclusions, e.g. disability plus gender, gender plus caste, caste plus disability etc
- Clearly articulate how girls/women will have a role in decision-making or management within the project scope or as a result of the intervention
- Clearly define 'economic empowerment' and ensure it is being adequately measured
- Differentiate the needs and perceptions of men and boys or the power relationships which underpin gender relations - clarify how men and boys will be included

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dfid-strategic-vision-for-gender-equality-her-potential-our-future

Other resources

https://www.bond.org.uk/sites/default/files/resource-documents/pswg_inclusive_economic_development.pdf