

Sustainability

About this guidance

This guidance seeks to ensure that UK Aid Match applicants and grant holders understand what Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO) means by sustainability, and more specifically, that they:

- Understand sustainability both conceptually and in UK Aid Match guidance and templates
- Know how to address sustainability in project documentation.

Sustainability is addressed in the following sections. At the end of the document there is a list of useful websites for further information and reference.

Definition of sustainability

There are many definitions and understandings of what sustainability means. The broad statements above were developed to be non-specific. The World Health Organisation (WHO) of the United Nations (UN) describes sustainability is the ability to continue a defined behaviour indefinitely.¹ A more complex definition of sustainability requires the description of environmental, economic, and social sustainability.

Sustainability is thus often divided up into these sub-categories:

- Environmental sustainability is the ability to maintain rates of renewable resource harvest, pollution creation, and non-renewable resource depletion that can be continued indefinitely
- Economic sustainability is the ability to support a defined level of economic production indefinitely
- Social sustainability is the ability of a social system, such as a country, to function at a defined level of social well-being indefinitely.

Sustainable development

Sustainable development provides the context within which we as development practitioners are normally dealing with sustainability. It is the organizing principle for meeting human development goals while at the same time sustaining the ability of natural systems to provide the natural resources and ecosystem services upon which the economy and society depend. The traditional definition of sustainable development was developed and appeared in the Brundtland Report in 1987:

‘Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

The United Nations’ [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for everyone, addressing the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, and peace and justice. The SDGs interconnect and aim to leave no one behind. The target is to achieve every one of the 17 SDGs by 2030.

Sustainability and UK aid projects

Sustainability is complex and is understood in different ways by different people. It is influenced by people, context and power and how people see their own organisation’s systems working. There is no single, standardised approach that can be adopted across projects and programmes. The process of sustainable development is inherently a process in which interventions and activities change and improve rather than remain in a static condition. To be able to define a sustainable approach at the project level it is important to have a full and in depth understanding of the root causes of the problem you are hoping to tackle and address.

Do an analysis of what the resistance to sustainability is at the system level. What do the institutional and regulatory frameworks look like? Relate this to the wider picture as well as the local context. This means considering policy, governance, institutions and financial enabling environment as well as how your communities work, environmental context and technology restraints).

Carry out an analysis of the sustainability of the institutions you are working with. Identify capacity building needs for all partners, NGOs, private sector, government. Following completion of your analyses, define your sustainability goal or aim. Then look at how to achieve your sustainability goal in your programmes in terms of three pillars:

- Social sustainability: How can the project optimise quality of life? What kind of political or policy changes can the project influence? How can the project affect cultural behaviour change?
- Economic sustainability: How will the project lead to greater economic empowerment? How can the project support beneficiaries in graduating from poverty or raising beneficiaries over the poverty line? What is the impact of the project on growth and development? What does a potential long-term financing model look like?
- Environmental sustainability: What will the impact be on the environment without the intervention? What will the impact be on the environment from the intervention?

What are the external environmental factors affecting the intervention? How can you use innovation and technology in your programme?

Examples



Sustainability and the education sector

In education, as with other sectors, it is important to ensure that activities should not be sustained simply because they have been started. They should be sustained if they have demonstrated measurable, cost-effective, and meaningful improvements over alternative approaches.

In the education sector, the idea of scaling up or replicability refers to programmes that can be applied consistently in all schools.

However, sustainable change needs to capture improvements at two levels:

- Effective changes in each school and classroom that improve education quality and learning outcomes
- Effective changes at the system level (district, state, national) that support and encourage such changes in all schools.

In addition, some of the factors in achieving educational improvements are not adequately captured by quantitative measures of project accomplishment—such as number of teachers trained etc.

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Long term sustainable change is more complicated than simply the provision of supply but is also about addressing issues of demand, the economic context, political considerations, and institutional support. This requires thinking of sustainable education development as a dynamic process of change.

Sustainability and WASH

‘A water service is sustainable if the water sources are not over-exploited but naturally replenished, facilities are maintained in a condition which ensures a reliable and adequate water supply, the benefits of the supply continue to be realized by all users indefinitely, and the service delivery process demonstrates a cost-effective use of resources that can be replicated. Water supply is about much more than the provision of physical infrastructure’. (Rural Water Supply in Africa. Peter Harvey & Bob Reed WEDC 2004)

Aim to:

- Move away from provision of equipment, and move towards provision of integrated services
- Design longer term programmes rather than short-term quick fix projects
- Work closely with both users and governments
- Reflect user choice and link to institutional frameworks and policy support
- Consider the sustainability of the institutions you are working with. Identify capacity building needs for all partners, NGOs, private sector, government.
- Ensure there is ongoing institutional support to communities; no matter how much buy-in or ownership exists
- Consider financing models. Can users pay for water provision for example?
- Look at using local innovation and technology. Use low cost technology if possible.
- Design household water supplies where possible as it reduces some of the issues with community supplies.
- Consider how to best work with the private sector? What model works best for your communities?

Ensure you have a robust monitoring system in place, not just for data collection but for evaluating the data and revising your approach as needs be as is reflected by the data.

References and further reading

[Water supply and maintenance manual \(opens in new window\)](#)

[Rural Water Supply in Africa – Building Blocks for Handpump Sustainability, by Peter Harvey and Bob Reed \(opens in new window\).](#)

[Sustainable sanitation for all by P Bongartz, N Verno and J Fox, published by Practical Action \(opens in new window\)](#)

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