

LAB EVALUATION, RESEARCH, AND LEARNING PLAN

# EVIDENCE BRIEF

SUMMER 2019 UPDATE



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## QUESTION 5

**What is the sustainability of the results of science, technology, innovation, and partnership (STIP) programming?**



**USAID**  
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**U.S. GLOBAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
LAB**

*This Evidence Brief was produced as part of a series of outputs from the U.S. Global Development Lab's Evaluation, Research, and Learning (ERL) Plan - a utilization-focused learning agenda supporting evidence-informed decision making in Lab operations and science, technology, innovation, and partnerships (STIP) programming. A process and set of products, the ERL Plan facilitated Lab learning and adaptation around four bureau-wide areas of inquiry: uptake of products, services, and approaches; adaptive management tools and practices; support to awardees and partners; and sustainability of results.*

*Insights from the ERL Plan are shared here as a record of emerging opportunities for evidence-based adaptation that could be acted on by USAID and other development actors. This work also contributes to the evidence base for the Agency-wide Self-Reliance Learning Agenda - an effort to support USAID as it reorients its strategies, partnership models, and program practices to achieve greater development outcomes and foster self-reliance with host country governments and our partners.*

## INTRODUCTION

Providing development assistance that fosters sustained benefits epitomizes our purpose as development professionals and how to achieve USAID's mission to "promote a path to recipient self-reliance." USAID aims to promote sustainability by implementing programming that strengthens the capacity of local systems to produce development outcomes; but how much do we know about whether—and if so, how, and why—results continue to be sustained?

With "few evidence-based models or indicators to assess sustainability" (Lee 2017), our ability to design and implement strategies, programs, and associated monitoring and evaluation efforts that can help us to better understand and adapt toward greater sustainability is greatly restrained.

The following document summarizes select findings, conclusions, and recommendations from academic literature, program assessments, and evaluation and learning outputs, based on which the USAID US Global Development Lab (the Lab) has committed to priority actions to strengthen the potential for sustained results in its programming.

***"Sustainability is an essential component of development and a core commitment of USAID and every international development agency.***

The basic idea is simple: Development investments in poor countries, of whatever form, should catalyze the economic, political and social processes within those countries that yield ever-improving lives for their citizens."

— USAID Local Systems Framework

## SELECT EVIDENCE

### LEE (2017). SUSTAINABILITY IN INTERNATIONAL AID PROGRAMS

Identification of working concepts of sustainability and its contributing factors. ([link](#))

A review of 16 studies related to global health, agriculture, and rural development, this synthesis found that “incorporating sustainability into program design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation is difficult”.

It identified “sustained delivery of program services and outcomes” the most prevalent concept of sustainability, along with 11 contributing factors: capacity building (identified in all 16 papers); political commitment (10); continuous funding resources (8); community participation (6); linkages or connectedness, socio-cultural alignment/acceptance, program effectiveness (5 each); and institutionalization, transition of responsibility, negotiation, and communication (3 each).

Capacity building—the most frequently cited contributor to sustainability—includes both organizational/institutional capacity (‘the means and conditions required to function independently and maintain the core activities’), as well as community/individual capacity (‘local actors have the skills and resources needed to deliver high-quality services until those services achieve sustainable benefit flows’).

Citing Levinger & McLeod (2012), the study concludes that “a level of capacity in local actors can be a good proxy to measure program sustainability”; however, “it is difficult to recognize a [tipping] point where local actors acquired capacity and resources to sustain benefits”.

## FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Designing and Implementing for Sustained Results

#### FINDINGS

- Across literature and practice, there is **no agreed conceptual framework for “sustainability”, nor consensus on factors that contribute to sustained results** within or across international development programming.
- **Capacity building**—with the aim of independent provision of services by organizations/institutions and/or communities or individuals (without ongoing intervention by development actors)—**frequently appears across the literature as a factor contributing to sustained results.**
- In program and activity design, **sustainability objectives are often overshadowed by a focus on attaining maximum impact during the life of an award or engagement.** Incentives and resources are rarely aligned to analyze or reward results achieved outside this period.
- **Successfully achieving outcomes during the implementation period does not guarantee that results will be sustained** after assistance ends (In fact, several studies showed a steep decline in implementation of activities and their related results after project closure, despite broad successes during the award period.).
- Effective **knowledge management systems** and processes, including capturing tacit knowledge during employee handovers, can **play a critical role in business continuity.**

- **Providing “free” resources** (inputs, transportation, etc.) can be an effective way to achieve results during an intervention; however, without correcting for the market distortions this may cause or identifying alternative resources that produce similar results, **can ultimately undermine longer-term sustainability.**
- **Several Lab programs**, including Partnering to Accelerate Entrepreneurship, Development Innovation Ventures, and Partnering for Enhanced Engagement in Research, **require evidence of potential sustainability in their application processes.**
- It is **unclear whether certain processes/requirements** (e.g., having a robust sustainability plan prior to program approval, adaptation during implementation based on indicators for local capacity) **contribute to the likelihood that sustained results can be achieved.**
- **Tools that help identify risks to sustainability** and strategies for mitigating these risks (e.g., cost-benefit or other financial or economic analyses; political economy analysis; or private sector landscape analysis) are supported by E3, the Lab, PPL, and others inside and outside the Agency.

### **ROGERS ET AL. (2015). SUSTAINING DEVELOPMENT: A Synthesis of Results from a Four-Country Study of Sustainability and Exit Strategies among Development Food Assistance Projects. ([link](#))**

An ex-post meta-evaluation of USAID Office of Food for Peace programming across four countries, this study utilized a conceptual framework that grouped project activities into three output categories: creation or strengthening of service delivery mechanisms, assurance of beneficiary access to services, and improvements in beneficiary demand for services.

Sustained project impacts were hypothesized to depend on the continued delivery of these services (of sufficient enough quality to be effective and valued) and/or the continued adoption and use of practices and behaviors promoted in the project.

Three factors critical to sustaining results, and a fourth important factor, were identified:

1. sustained source of resources;
2. managerial and technical capacity, so that service providers can operate independently;
3. motivation and incentives not reliant upon program inputs; and
4. linkages to other organizations or entities that can promote sustainability by augmenting resources, refreshing capacity, and motivating frontline service providers and beneficiaries to provide and make use of services and to continue practices promoted by the projects.

The study found that the first three factors are interrelated and synergistic—no project in the study achieved sustainability without all of them in place before project end.

## CONCLUSIONS

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With “few evidence-based models or indicators to assess sustainability” and “little consensus” on the timeframe against which sustainability should be measured (Lee 2017), **our ability to design and implement strategies, programs, and associated monitoring and evaluation efforts that can help us to better understand and adapt toward greater sustainability is greatly restrained.**

**Further research is needed** to understand the contribution of Agency processes/requirements and various forms of capacity building (and other factors prevalent in the existing literature) to the achievement of sustained results.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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In September 2018, the Lab prioritized and committed to action against two recommendations informed by the evidence base on designing and implementing for sustained results:



When programming involves Mission-based advisors funded by the Lab (or other AID/Washington operating units), hire and develop local talent, or **create continuity plans for skill building and handover** to retain local/Mission capacity.



Intentionally experiment with activity design process/requirements, to **include sustainability analyses** (e.g., cost analysis, PEA), **plans, and exit strategies in new or existing Lab awards.**

The Lab deferred action against one recommendation informed by the evidence base on designing and implementing for sustained results:



Consider how to strategically **incentivize development impact beyond the period of performance** of our awards and engagements.

## Assessing Sustainability

### FINDINGS

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- **Evaluation of the sustainability of development programming, conducted following award or agreement close-out, is rare.** Many studies designed to assess sustainability are not conducted ex-post; instead, they are forward-looking analyses of potential for sustained delivery or results, or endline evaluations of program outcomes without follow-up.
- Evaluations conducted in the post-project period represent **less than 1% of all USAID evaluations** available on the [DEC](#). Even fewer studies have synthesized factors for success across contexts or technical areas, though examples include:
  - Framework for pathways and factors contributing to the endurance of public-private partnerships results (Lab/Center for Transformational Partnerships)

- [Series of six independent ex-post evaluations](#) to better understand the long-term impact and sustainability of USAID WASH-related interventions
- [Evaluation of sustained outcomes](#) in four cases of USAID Basic Education programs
- [Several organizations](#) have developed **guidance for conducting performance and impact studies to gauge sustainability of development interventions**. Common components include defining a “theory of sustainability”, assessing local capacity at baseline, and comparing potential sustainability of intervention modalities in the design phase; monitoring capacity milestones, service/ behavior uptake patterns, and context indicators throughout implementation; and evaluating development outcomes both at endline and post-program.
- The Lab's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations ([MERLIN](#)) program is **testing approaches for ex-post evaluation** via the Expanding the Reach of Impact Evaluation mechanism. Other MERLIN mechanisms, including Rapid Feedback and Developmental Evaluation, also have insights on measuring and analyzing sustained results.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our ability to understand the sustainability of development programming is highly constrained by our ability and commitment to **systematically integrating planning, measurement, and evaluation of its contributing factors into our awards and agreements**.

A more robust learning agenda is needed to **intentionally experiment with and ultimately better understand the role of ex-post evaluation at USAID**, and to determine other process improvements (e.g., analyses, design factors, implementation practices, follow-up modalities) associated with sustainable outcomes.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Lab deferred action against two recommendations informed by the evidence base on assessing sustainability (and therefore have no actions against this section):

- X Make the case for **ex-post evaluation to be centrally supported at USAID**, as a complement to Agency development policy and new focus on self-reliance.
- X Conduct **further research into Agency practices and learning regarding measuring/evaluating sustainability**, including disseminating learnings about Agency demand/barriers to sustainability analyses from the Lab's Monitoring, Evaluation, Research, and Learning Innovations (MERLIN) program.

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*Opinions presented in the document do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development or the U.S. Government. Feedback and questions may be directed to the Lab's Office of Evaluation and Impact Assessment at [LabEIA@USAID.gov](mailto:LabEIA@USAID.gov).*

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