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Influence of Monitoring and Evaluation Practices on Sustainability of Non-Governmental Organisation Projects: A Case of Mercy Corps Financial Access Project

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Abstract:

Monitoring and Evaluation has advanced as a widely accepted practice that is fundamental to all development approaches across various countries in the world. From the 1950's, the concept has evolved to become a force of change in communities that enhances project ownership, empowerment as well as mutually shared benefits. It is therefore seen as a great contributor to development in communities. This study was concerned with investigating the influence of M&E practices on the sustainability of Non-Government Organization (NGO) projects. The theory of sustainability attempts to identify how social responses relate with the environment (Jenkins, n.d.). Social sustainability originated from countries like Greece, Rome and China who believed that humans should live in harmony with nature. The study established that beneficiary participation improved their motivation to participate in the project, assignment of roles to beneficiaries during project implementation and shared decision making greatly stimulated project ownership and commitment and post-project beneficiary engagement enhances sustainability. It is pertinent that beneficiary participation in the project cycle of interventions that affect the beneficiaries is accorded sufficient regard by the NGO. This aids in improving their understanding of project goals and objectives and nurturing project ownership; an attribute that is essential in enhancing the long-term sustainability of interventions. It is instrumental that beneficiaries are consulted during the project and as such, diligent beneficiary analysis and selection for participation be emphasized.

Keywords: *Monitoring and evaluation, sustainability of non-governmental organization, beneficiary participation in project phases*

1. Introduction

Monitoring and Evaluation is a very important aspect when carried out appropriately at the correct time and it is one of the record significant aspects of ensuring project sustainability. Monitoring and evaluation has been increased in the subsequent years due to the increasing demand from donors to NGOs to ensure the long-term sustainability of their implemented projects (Niringiyimana, J. 2014). Several studies have shown that for this to be effective, then monitoring and evaluation practices have got to be centered on project beneficiaries.

Monitoring refers to the continuous process of collecting and analyzing information during the project life cycle so as to determine how well a project or program is being implemented against the projected results (Chand, S. 2016). Monitoring is also defined as a continuing practice by which beneficiaries obtain systematic feedback on the development being made towards attaining the set goals and objectives (UNDP, 2009). Generally, it aims at providing stakeholders with regular feedback and early indications of progress or lack in the achievement of the desired goals.

Evaluation is the regular and unbiased assessment of a continuing or completed project, program or policy, its strategy, implementation and outcomes. (Freeman, K.M. 2010). Evaluation provides useful information to stakeholders and enables the incorporation of lessons learned into decision making processes of both recipients and donors. It documents outcomes, assesses effects and solicits understanding about what was achieved and why, the feedback provided leads to innovations that influence important changes in future projects and the NGO.

Monitoring and evaluation refer to separate practices that are aimed at assessing the NGOs performance. They are one of the tools that help project managers to identify whether the set goals during project implementation are being achieved according to plan, and when conditions need to be changed. Monitoring and evaluation also helps to determine if there is proper utilisation of resources and provides decision makers with a strategy to plan for project sustainability and guidance for future projects. This makes monitoring and evaluation a key tool in ensuring the sustainability of NGO funded interventions and it has been observed to contribute greatly to project success.

Over the course of the last fifteen years, sustainable development has become very crucial in the development of most countries. According to Busiinge (2010), 'Sustainability is defined as the ability of donor aided programs to create systems that continue to connect and impact on the beneficiaries even after the programs are wound up'. Sustainability implies ensuring that project goals are continuously carried out in the community after project termination and they are consistent with the needs of the people in that region.

Project sustainability is our major concern in this study. Project sustainability is attained when beneficiaries continue to receive project benefits after the project has been wound up. Therefore, withdrawal of financial assistance from a project should not be seen as the end of a project but as the start of sustainability for that project (Bienzele, 2015). Nationally, Uganda was ranked as the 6th biggest recipient of aid among African countries with the United States of America being its largest donor by 2011 (Nyanzi, 2011). By 2014, according to a report from OECD on development aid at glance statistics by region to Africa edition showed that Uganda received \$1,633 million on aid alone in the last three years. Nyanzi (2011) goes on to report that the main drivers for this aid in the country were humanitarian aid, strategic importance and economic potential. All this aid is sent through interventions that are implemented by NGO's with a major aim of ensuring sustainable development through having sustainable projects.

NGOs in Uganda started in the 1980s working alongside government to provide services while empowering the rural poor. According to United States Agency for International Development [USAID] 2017 (as cited in Chandia, 2016), the number of registered NGOs increased from 1,000 in the late 1980s to 12,456 in 2013. This increase in number was a result of the gained political stability in 1986 followed by an increase in the amount of foreign aid being sent to the country in the subsequent years (Niringiyimana, 2014). NGOs have played a major role in pushing for sustainable development globally and have received major acclaim in the development of the rural communities in Uganda at large through their development interventions (Chandia, 2016).

1.1. Objective

To determine the effect of beneficiary participation in project phases on the sustainability of NGO projects.

1.2. Scope of the study

The scope deliberates briefly what the whole study entails. Defining the scope of the study aids in realizing a focused study that can be conducted efficiently and effectively. The study focused on the influence of monitoring and evaluation practices on the sustainability of NGO projects. It considered beneficiary participation, training and their feedback as measures of monitoring and evaluation practices in order to determine their influence on the sustainability of NGO projects.

The study was carried out in the Karamoja region. Karamoja comprises of seven districts in North Eastern Uganda and is one of the areas that received a substantial amount of aid in Uganda through interventions by NGO's from both the government and international donors for more than twenty years. However, the region is still classified as one of the World's poorest regions with 82% of the population living in outright poverty (USAID, 2017). This stands to show that a large percentage of the interventions set up in the region are not sustainable and in turn have not contributed to sustainable development. The study was carried out in the community of Kabong Parish, Karamoja in North East Uganda where Mercy Corps has implemented the Financial Access and Business Enterprise Development Project. The Mercy Corps Uganda head offices located in Kampala Uganda were consulted to examine project planning, policy formulation, implementation and project sustainability mechanisms in place.

The study focused on the project that was implemented in the last four years in a bid to provide the researcher with adequate information to study the execution of monitoring and evaluation practices in the project and to evaluate the level of sustainability attained after project termination.

2. The Theory of Sustainability

The theory of sustainability attempts to identify how social responses relate with the environment (Jenkins, n.d.). Social sustainability originated from countries like Greece, Rome and China who believed that humans should live in harmony with nature (Creswell, J.W. 2013). In its precise doctrines, sustainability refers to the ability to maintain some unit or result consistently for a long period of time. This implies that the resources available have got to be utilized in consideration with what the future will require.

Sustainability is measured through environmental protection, economic development and social equity (Huang, 2018). He further reports that it is very important in sustainability to coordinate the relationships among environment, economy and society. Understanding how to co-ordinate these three determines the level of sustainability that is either strong or a weak sustainability.

Some of the weaknesses of the sustainability theory are that its measures are not exact for example most of the countries that are considered to be sustainable are industrialized and have high levels of pollution hence environmental degradation. An assumption of the theory is that weak sustainability supporters believe that natural and human made capital can be interchangeable while the strong sustainability supporters disagree to this.

This theory is relevant to the study as it shows the indicators of sustainability and how this can be measured so as to determine if projects will have either weak or strong sustainability after project end.

3. Methods and Procedures

The research adopted an approach where knowledge was attained by gathering qualitative and quantitative data concurrently. This implies that both qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilized.

The study applied a mixed method design while using the concurrent triangulation approach. A mixed method design refers to a research design that applies both elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches so as to acquire a deeper understanding of the study at hand (Schoonenboom & Johnson, 2017). This helped to attain a full understanding and realistic insight of the research problem through cross validation and collaboration of the research findings.

The study population consisted of Mercy Corps Uganda project beneficiaries in Karamoja North East Uganda from the financial access and Business enterprise development project under the Grow Health and Governance programme in Kabong, Karamoja. The total beneficiaries were seven hundred (700) in number as of the Mercy Corps project records 2017. The project beneficiaries that were considered were vulnerable people, marginalised women and youth that benefited from the project in their respective groups and or SACCOs. The project beneficiaries were selected specifically due to their knowledge, experiences and expertise with the project and or study.

4. Findings and Discussion

Details of the measures of beneficiary participation under different key statements obtained from the respondents are presented in Table 1. The following abbreviations were used; N for sample population, Min for Minimum, Max for Maximum and S.D for Standard deviation. The statements have been ranked in terms of their mean and standard deviations so as to deduce meaning out of the findings.

Beneficiary Participation	N	Min	Max	Mean	S. D
Beneficiaries were identified and assessed prior to the implementation of M&E practices	234	1	5	3.71	.791
Beneficiaries were motivated to participate in the M&E practices	234	2	5	4.15	.695
Assignment of roles to participants enhances project continuity	234	2	5	4.03	.614
Shared decision making contributes to project ownership	234	2	5	3.98	.635
Post project beneficiary engagement enhances sustainability	234	1	5	4.04	.679
Valid N (list-wise)	234				

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics on Beneficiary Participation

Respondents were asked if beneficiaries were identified and assessed before the implementation of M&E practices and a mean score of 3.71 was obtained with a standard deviation of 0.791 suggesting that many of the respondents were in agreement with this statement although they gave differing views on the subject matter. This is because the beneficiaries were informed about the project and those interested were encouraged to join to benefit from it however there was no prior assessment before implementation of motivation and evaluation practices.

This is backed up by Rugugamu (2011) who states that beneficiaries should be assessed before the implementation of M&E activities. This helps to determine if they are sufficiently knowledgeable about the project to be implemented and the kind of skills that may be needed to ensure their full participation and commitment towards the project. He, however, observes that most NGOs do not carry out this assessment thus creating a gap between the NGO and the beneficiaries.

Respondents were asked whether beneficiaries were highly motivated to participate in M&E practices. A mean score of 4.15 from a maximum score of 5 suggests that the majority of the respondents were in agreement with the statement. The findings could be attributed to the willingness of the organization to involve beneficiaries in the project M&E implementation processes for example capacity building in terms of financial handling in their respective SACCOs, learning about Sharia finance for the Moslems in the groups among others. The beneficiaries were taught various skills in their respective groups during project training that made it more interesting to participate and also apply in their daily lives to improve their livelihoods. On the other hand, differing views by respondents could be attributed to the reluctance of the organization to involve beneficiaries in more technical aspects of their projects possibly due to their limited technical expertise in the design and evaluation of the project.

Discussions from interviews with the beneficiary project leaders reveal that beneficiaries were primarily involved in implementation. However, more often than not, the technicality of project processes, low literacy/education levels of beneficiaries were limiting factors in the participation of beneficiaries in the design and planning process of the project. It was also revealed that beneficiaries are often inclined to go with the designs and plans set out by the organization.

The above findings are in line with the assertions of UNDP (2011) who have found that involving decision-makers and beneficiaries in the project M&E design enhances performance through active, adaptive implementation of the intervention by project participants.

For NGOs like Mercy Corps, involving beneficiaries in design and planning of M&E implies that beneficiaries' perceptions and views are taken into consideration and plans set with their contribution accounted for. Such involvement nurtures a sense of project ownership by the beneficiaries. Improving the levels of project ownership contributes to the ability of beneficiaries to take self-sustained action thereby promoting the long-term sustainability of interventions.

Respondents were also asked whether assigning of roles to project beneficiaries enhances project continuity and whether shared decision-making stimulated project ownership. From the results presented in Table 1, a mean score of 4.03 and 3.98 respectively signified that the majority of the beneficiary responsibility and shared decision making enhanced the level of project ownership by beneficiaries. The findings could be attributed to the sense of project ownership beneficiaries derive from involvement in projects that directly affect them. Discussions with the beneficiary project leaders revealed that direct involvement of the beneficiaries in the implementation of project tasks motivated their participation in the project process and led to the improvement in the levels of knowledge of interventions. The findings are in line with Omara, (n.d.) who observed that building a sense of possession around a project and its activities by the project beneficiaries enhances their empowerment as well as their willingness to ensure its sustainability. For NGOs like Mercy Corps, the above findings can be interpreted to imply that continuous involvement of beneficiaries in its interventions contributes to the attainment of project goals and objectives due to their willingness to continuously participate in project M&E activities hence promoting project ownership which is a key factor of project sustainability.

Respondents were asked whether post-project beneficiary engagement enhances sustainability after donor phase-out. From the results, a mean score of 4.04 obtained from a maximum score of 5 signifies that the majority of the respondents were in agreement with the statement.

The findings could be attributed to the information, knowledge, and skills beneficiaries potentially obtain from post-project monitoring and evaluation and capacity development. Discussions from interviews with the monitoring and evaluation manager and beneficiary project leaders reveal that post-project beneficiary engagement by the organization results in knowledge retention which is significant in supporting the continuation of project activities. From the findings above, beneficiary involvement is very important to Mercy Corps. This is because beneficiary involvement in evaluation improves their levels of understanding and achievement of project goals and objectives as they gain knowledge and skills from continuous involvement in the project.

The findings of beneficiary participation are in line with the transformative learning and diffusion innovation theories. This is because when beneficiaries are included in M&E practices, this influences their experiences and approach to situations in the community as a result of the knowledge they have attained. This in turn influences beneficiary commitment to the project leading to its sustainability and development of that community. This is in line with (Omara, n.d.) who believes that involvement of beneficiaries by the project team contributes to project commitment as a result of the community being able to understand their local needs, enhance their dignity and self-reliance as a form of change and transmit any new knowledge acquired to other communities' hence fostering development.

From the findings therefore, it is shown that beneficiary participation plays a major role in the sustainability of NGO funded projects through enabling the full involvement of project beneficiaries throughout the entire M&E practices in terms of assignment of roles, enabling decision making and maintaining beneficiary relationships even after project end. These factors contribute to project ownership by the beneficiaries which help in enhancing project sustainability.

5. Conclusion

The study established that beneficiary participation improved their motivation to participate in the project, assignment of roles to beneficiaries during project implementation and shared decision making greatly stimulated project ownership and commitment and post-project beneficiary engagement enhances sustainability. The study established that Mercy Corps is committed to the identification and assessment of project beneficiaries before project implementation as it aids in the identification of skilling and training needs. From the findings, it can, therefore, be concluded that beneficiary participation in the project life cycle is a crucial component of its sustainability and as such, the process of involvement should be managed diligently whilst careful and informed stakeholders' analysis, selection and involvement should be done.

6. Recommendations

It is pertinent that beneficiary participation in the project cycle of interventions that affect the beneficiaries is accorded sufficient regard by the NGO. This aids in improving their understanding of project goals and objectives and nurturing project ownership; an attribute that is essential in enhancing the long-term sustainability of interventions. It is instrumental that beneficiaries are consulted during the project and as such, diligent beneficiary analysis and selection for participation be emphasized.

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