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Institutional sustainability: a case study on project transition in rural Malawi

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In the final stages of a project, the transition between implementation and the post-project context marks a critical period for institutionalizing sustainability of project impacts. In practice, however, transition is an often overlooked and undervalued aspect of project design. Facilitating the transition strategy of a WaterAid Malawi project from the district of Salima over the past year, Engineers Without Borders Canada has been working in partnership with permanent institutions and the local implementing organization to both effectively transition the project and to articulate the process taken. Role definition and mapping, skills gap identification, and targeted development of key capacities have emerged as key steps in this case study. In addition, essential components of a strong transition are elaborated on, such as clear expectation setting and design of collective spaces.

Introduction

All projects go through an "exit phase", where resources are withdrawn and partnerships are closed. Few, however, do so with clear intentions and with enough flexibility to ensure that permanent stakeholders will be able to sustain the achievements seen through the project (Heldgaar, 2008). Critically, it is a trend to simply handover or exit, instead of facilitating the transition between project and post-project environments with permanent stakeholders (Gardner et al., 2005). Exit decisions are often politically or financially motivated, and are not usually coordinated with other partners and organizations in the sector to account for a coming gap in resources (Heldgaar, 2008). Regardless of how projects are designed or implemented, a poorly executed or non-existent transition jeopardizes the sustainability of the achieved impacts.

Background

In 2013, WaterAid Malawi decided to begin transitioning out of a long-term commitment with the district of Salima as a result of a Post Implementation Monitoring Survey revealing that most of the project goals had been met. As an organisation that had worked for several years with district level local government in the sector, Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB) was sought to facilitate this transition. WaterAid Malawi's plan was to have the local implementing NGO wrap up aspects of the project related to the infrastructure that had been installed, and for EWB to specifically examine and enhance the sustainability of project impacts through permanent institutions. This transition phase began in late 2014, and aims to wrap up in early 2017.

As a non-implementing organization, EWB specializes in improving the management strategies of rural district government water offices through thought partnership and facilitative techniques. Our experience has given us a deep understanding of the complexity of service delivery in resourced constrained environments, and has allowed us to develop honest and neutral relationships with our partners due to the absence of financial incentives provided.

Here we will summarize three phases of EWB's transition facilitation work so far, which has been focusing on three key permanent stakeholders: the district council (DC), extension staff, and community or area development committees (ADCs). We will conclude by highlighting five important concepts to guide a good transition, contributing to the growing knowledge base on sustaining services in practice.

Transition steps taken in Salima district

Phase one: role definition and post-project mapping

An important first step in the transition was to ensure that the transition phase was launched in a collaborative and inclusive way, and that a clear rationale for exit was shared with all partners. Stakeholders were then supported to map their own commitment to sustaining the project impacts; this built understanding and ownership over post-project responsibilities. The following two role mapping exercises were facilitated with each of the three key permanent stakeholder groups as part of a broader discussion on roles and responsibilities:

Current roles and responsibilities: Allowing the project to be implemented
Each stakeholder group involved in the project collaboratively developed a list of responsibilities they had carried out and activities they had participated in during project implementation. They also discussed their perception of their own performance of these duties. This brought clarity to role divisions between different stakeholders, and helped increase awareness about the capacity to perform given duties., So that each stakeholder group could also learn in depth how their colleagues defined their role, this exercise was facilitated in a multi-stakeholder group space.

Visioning the post-project roles: Allowing the project impacts to be sustained
After examining current roles, stakeholders went through a visioning exercise to brainstorm the roles and responsibilities of each group in a 5-year post-project context. The goal was to get people thinking both about how they support projects during implementation, and also how they would be needed once the project had completely wrapped up to avoid possible risks to sustainability. Each group also identified and discussed the types of support they would need to fulfill that role, which stakeholder(s) they thought should provide that support to them), and which stakeholders they felt they could in turn support themselves. Many of the roles discussed in this "post-project" context had to do with management, stakeholder coordination, and operation and maintenance.

Table 1. Example of roles brainstormed by Area Development Committees	
Project implementation roles	**Post-project support roles**
Resource mobilization at community-level	Ensuring other organizations are following proper procedures
Recruitment of local masons for latrine slab construction	Encouraging local chiefs to motivate others on proper hygiene behaviours
Identification of villages to benefit from water points or latrines	Continuing to supervise local builders
Distribution of cement to water point committees and masons	Connecting water point committees and village health committees to lessons that are relevant for their work
Purchase of spare parts for boreholes	Helping mother groups to find additional financial support

Phase two: skills gap identification

Understanding and clarifying roles created harmony and mutual understanding at the beginning of the project. From that, key skills were extracted that would help each stakeholder fulfill their post-project roles.

   For example, in phase one it was discovered that the ADC was planning to focus most of their post-project efforts in supporting other stakeholders like local chiefs and water point committees. To have a coordinated approach to this stakeholder support required skills such as facilitation, self-directed action planning, and communication. A list of essential future skills was extracted from the roles discussed by extension staff and the district council as well as ADCs.

The following steps were then taken:
- each stakeholder group vetted the final list, confirming that the skills extracted from the broader conversation on roles accurately reflected valued capacities
- a simple self-assessment tool was developed for a facilitated process where each stakeholder group would discuss current examples of having utilised a given skill, and would then rate themselves as either strong or weak for each
- once each skill had been discussed and rated, participants also ranked the skills from most important to least important, regardless of skill level; and
- finally, the results of the assessment were shared back with each stakeholder group, and stakeholders were asked to brainstorm how they could, on their own, begin growing the skills that were identified as both weak and important.

Phase three: capacity development

Capacity building workshops and trainings are very common in Malawi, but truly building capacity requires much more than a simple training. It requires successive, facilitated skills building exercises, but also long-term support from other permanent stakeholders to continue to practice, hone, and fully adopt each skill.

In that light, and stemming directly from the assessments undertaken in the second step of our transition process, a plan targeted at each stakeholder group was developed to improve the identified skills. Activities with each stakeholder group were designed to strengthen and reinforce the management roles they were already playing to support existing services, while facilitating new exercises that would grow the weak skills being targeted. Each stakeholder's individual capacity building plan, which was discussed after the assessment phase, was also incorporated into the exercises. Table 2 below shows an example of a capacity building session designed for ADCs.

Table 2. Capacity building session with ADCs	
ADC workshop activity	**Goal of activity**
Problem identification	Discuss challenges being faced by the group in performing their role, and choose one cross-cutting issue that could be used in activity two and three.
Root-cause analysis	Take the chosen challenge from activity one and break it into smaller root causes, shedding light on potential leverage points and sparking a discussion on where the group is best suited to take action.
Development of action plans	Choosing one root cause from activity two and develop an action plan to address that issue. Identify if there is more information still needed and if other people need to be consulted in this process. Set timelines and delegate specific responsibilities to certain people within the group.

Phase four and beyond: capacity building re-visited

At the time of writing, the capacity building sessions with each of the three key permanent stakeholders had just completed. Goals for the remainder of the transition phase were focused on following up on the capacities built in the first half of the transition, and ensuring that the implicated permanent stakeholders knew the working relationship required amongst themselves in the post-project context.

Lessons learned: essential components of a transition strategy

Through implementing the steps outlined earlier in this paper, which highlight the necessity of post-project role definition and addressing capacity gaps of stakeholders to play those roles, we were able to derive some high level lessons that relate to the successful exit of a project. The following are some key lessons we have learned for other projects to consider when designing a transition phase.

Allocate a dedicated transition period to address gaps in institutional sustainability

Conducting a critical evaluation of institutional sustainability of project impacts before the end of the project and dedicating a portion of the project period specifically to a transition phase is critical. Rather than implementing up to the end of the project, it allows a gradual transition to a post-project context and to identify gaps in the institutional sustainability that can be addressed before the project is completed. As we

have piloted this transition phase in Salima, many capacity gaps and other institutional weaknesses have been identified. These are now being addressed during the transition itself, but could have been mitigated and better tackled during project implementation. This reiterates the importance of planning for a transition, and ultimately planning to address institutional capacity gaps from the beginning of a project.

Set clear expectations with all stakeholders regarding the exit of the project

Clear and practical expectation setting with partners and beneficiaries should be a priority for all phases of any project, but can be an even more crucial during a transition period. As implementation slows down, the direct visible benefits of the project will decrease. If not managed well, this can lead to disillusionment and ultimately a "checking out" of stakeholders. As the partnership comes to an end, the interactions during the transition can be an important determining factor of sustainability. It is therefore important to set clear expectations about further involvement from the NGO both financially and in terms of implementation/presence. Being vague about the possibility for future implementation does not lead to better outcomes during the transition, but is manipulative and unrealistic.

Budget for the known post-project resource envelope

Responsibilities or processes that must occur after the project must consequently happen without project funding. Assessing the financial environment, with particular attention to regular operational budgets of permanent institutions such as local government offices, is critical in order for stakeholders to play their post-project roles. Every minute or seemingly trivial cost must be accounted for and possibly re-imagined for the likely low-resource situation facing permanent institutions post-project. For example, the cost for printing forms can result in the total collapse of project impacts if there is no strategy in place for covering such expenses without project funds.

Employ greater flexibility and longer timeframes per activity during the transition phase

Working through permanent institutions such as local government can slow down progress on objectives due to inefficient bureaucratic processes or the over-burdened workload they experience. As a result, engagement and collaboration by NGOs with such institutions is often deprioritized for the sake of progress. This mindset is particularly harmful during a transition phase. As implementation of project activities slows and hand-over type activities increase, the target audience becomes less beneficiary focused and more concentrated on permanent institution capacity. In this light, timeframes for transition phase activities must be in line with permanent institution processes and plans.

Design collective spaces and strengthen permanent institution linkages

Joint planning of the transition stage gives permanent stakeholders the opportunity to ensure that post-project roles are realistic and in line with current capacities, aspirations, and resource levels. It also can serve as a platform to forge or strengthen existing linkages between key stakeholders that will have to work together to maintain impacts post-project.

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