Factors Affecting the Long-Term Sustainability of Development Projects by NGOs [1]

Beniam Tilahun Jenber

Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the key factors influencing the long-term sustainability of development projects implemented by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Ethiopia, with a focus on the persistence of project benefits after implementation. A descriptive research design was employed, with data collected through structured questionnaires from 114 project beneficiaries across various intervention areas. The study quantitatively assessed the influence of community participation, institutional capacity building, and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) on project sustainability using regression analysis. Findings indicate that these factors explain approximately 26% of the variation in project sustainability, with community participation emerging as the most significant predictor. The results underscore that active community involvement throughout the project cycle, alongside robust capacity building and ongoing M&E, is essential for sustaining NGO-led initiatives. Recommendations advocate for participatory planning models and integrated M&E frameworks. These insights contribute to theoretical discussions on sustainable project management and offer practical guidance for NGOs and development practitioners..

Key words: *Project Sustainability, NGO-Led Development Projects, Community Participation, Capacity Building, Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E), Participatory Project Planning, Sustainable Project Management, Development Practitioners*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Context

Development projects led by NGOs are evaluated primarily by their ability to deliver enduring social, economic, and environmental benefits. Unlike commercial endeavors, these projects aim to foster lasting improvements in vulnerable communities, yet sustainability remains a persistent challenge. Many initiatives fail to maintain impact beyond their funded lifecycle; for instance, the World Bank's Operations Evaluation Department reported that only about 33% of projects were

[1] How to cite this paper: Jenber, B. T. (2026). Factors Affecting the Long-Term Sustainability of Development Projects by NGOs; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue III, March.

sustained five years post-completion. This issue is particularly acute in East Africa, including Ethiopia, where NGOs play a crucial role in delivering essential services such as healthcare, education, and agricultural support to underserved populations amid challenges like poverty, climate variability, and political instability.

In Ethiopia, project implementation occurs in a complex environment shaped by rapid urbanization, recurrent droughts, ethnic tensions, and a heavy reliance on foreign aid. The country's NGO sector, regulated by the Charities and Societies Proclamation (amended in 2019 to ease restrictions), involves over 3,000 organizations addressing issues from food security to gender equality. However, factors such as weak infrastructure, limited government capacity, and donor-driven priorities often hinder long-term outcomes. Sustainable development requires addressing these contextual elements through strategies like community engagement, capacity enhancement, and rigorous M&E to ensure benefits persist after external support ends.

1.2 Research Problem

Although interest in project sustainability is growing, little empirical evidence exists about determinants of project sustainability. However, the vast majority of the evaluations are performed near the project site, and offer only a point in time evaluation, so thus there are the different frameworks to evaluate sustainability (Development Assistance Committee (DAC) criteria, etc.), though they remain generally limited. Yet, real sustainability cannot be seen until donor support is withdrawn. This research gap is addressed in this study by investigating how these projects (NGOs) have been developed and in what ways community participation, capacity building, and M&E have influenced their sustainability.

1.3 Research Questions

1. To what extent do the benefits of NGO-implemented projects continue after their completion?
2. How does the participation of the local community in the project cycle affect the sustainability of the project?
3. How do capacity building efforts for local communities and institutions influence sustainability?
4. How does monitoring and evaluation (M&E) affect the sustainability of development projects?

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The general objective of this study is to evaluate the sustainability of development projects implemented by NGOs in Ethiopia. The specific objectives are to:

- Assess how well the benefits of NGO-led projects persist after project completion.
- Analyse the impact of community participation at different stages of the project cycle on sustainability.
- Examine the role of capacity building for local institutions and communities in the promotion of sustainability.
- Evaluate how M&E practices affect the long-term sustainability of development projects.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the theoretical discourse on sustainable project management by offering an empirical analysis of the factors influencing sustainability in NGO-led development projects. The findings are relevant to practitioners, NGOs, and policymakers seeking to improve the sustainability of donor-funded initiatives. By shedding light on the role of community participation, capacity building, and M&E, this study provides actionable insights for the design and implementation of sustainable development projects.

2. Literature review

This study employs a narrative literature review to synthesize key concepts and empirical findings on project sustainability. A narrative approach was selected over systematic or meta-analytic methods due to the interdisciplinary nature of the topic, which spans development studies, project management, and sociology. This method allows for a flexible exploration of foundational theories and recent applications, justifying its use in providing a contextual overview rather than exhaustive quantification, which would be premature given the evolving discourse.

Sustainability in development projects refers to the continuation of benefits and impacts beyond the project's lifecycle, ensuring ongoing value to beneficiaries after external support ceases (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In NGO contexts, this aligns with principles of meeting current needs without compromising future generations.

Community participation is pivotal, defined as an active process where beneficiaries influence planning, implementation, and evaluation (Paul, 1987). Higher involvement fosters ownership and alignment with local needs, leading to sustained outcomes. Recent studies, such as those by Bano (2019), highlight that participatory approaches in sub-Saharan Africa reduce dependency and enhance resilience, though challenges like power imbalances persist.

Capacity building strengthens individuals, organizations, and systems to sustain development (Eade, 1997). At individual levels, it involves skill training; institutionally, it bolsters governance; systemically, it improves processes. Contemporary research, including UNDP (2021), emphasizes

integrating digital tools in capacity programs for NGOs in low-income countries to address post-pandemic vulnerabilities.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) provide performance insights and enable adaptive management (Patton, 2008). Effective M&E correlates with better sustainability by identifying issues early. Recent work by Biwott et al. (2017) and a 2022 study by Khadka and Vacík underscore the need for participatory M&E in forestry and agriculture projects in developing nations to ensure environmental and social viability.

Empirical evidence from Mansuri and Rao (2003) and updated analyses (e.g., Agarwal & Van Wicklin, 2020) shows that community-driven projects endure longer, but gaps in institutional support often undermine gains. This review reveals a need for integrated frameworks in NGO operations, particularly in Ethiopia's volatile context.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

A descriptive research design is used for this study to understand some of the factors that will influence the sustainability of NGO led development projects in Ethiopia. The application of this approach has its significance especially in analyzing relationships among the variables of M&E, community participation, capacity building and some other variables related to the sustainability of the project in any context. This descriptive design enables systematic collection, and analysis of quantitative data which in turn gives robust evidence answering research questions.

3.2. Population and Sampling

The target population comprised beneficiaries of NGO projects across Ethiopia's intervention areas. Data collection occurred between June 2020 and January 2021. A multistage cluster sampling method was used: regions were clustered, woredas (districts) selected, and beneficiaries drawn via simple random sampling from NGO-provided beneficiary lists (serving as the sampling frame). This yielded 114 respondents, adequate for inferential analysis.

3.3. Data collection

Structured questionnaire was administered directly to project beneficiaries to collect primary data. The questionnaire measured key variables, including:

- Project benefits sustainability (dependent variable)
- Community participation (independent variable)
- capacity building (independent variable)

- Monitoring and evaluation – M&E ((independent variable)

The questionnaire included five sections: Building on this, there is a need for demographic information, sustainability of benefits, community participation, capacity building and M&E practices. To streamline the process and given that the areas the enumerator has to visit have no internet access, the enumerators undertook collection of data themselves in person, using a mobile platform to enable efficiency. Informed consent was maintained, with participant anonymity and confidentiality.

3.4. Variables and Measurement

The sustainability is the dependent variable, evaluated against three independent variables:

- Community participation: Measured by involvement level in project phases via Likert-scale items.
- Capacity Building: Assessed through training sessions and skill development through structured questions.
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E): Evaluated on the presence of M&E frameworks and feedback mechanisms, also using Likert-scale items.

The **dependent variable, project sustainability, is** measured by the extent to which project benefits continue after completion.

3.5. Data analysis

Data were analysed quantitatively to explore the relationship between independent variables and project sustainability. The techniques included descriptive and inferential statistics.

Descriptive Analysis: The frequency distributions, means and standard deviations summarized demographics and perceptions about community participation, capacity building, and M&E. Visual aids like tables and graphs clarified the data presentation.

Regression Analysis: A multiple linear regression model evaluated how independent variables affect sustainability. The regression equation is the following.

$$S = \beta 0 + \beta 1CP + \beta 2CB + \beta 3ME + \mu$$

Here, S represents sustainability, CP is community participation, CB is capacity building, ME is M&E, and β values are their respective coefficients. The model measures how changes in these variables predict sustained project benefits, with R-squared indicating explanatory power and p-values assessing statistical significance.

3.6. Ethical considerations

The study adhered to ethical practices throughout all phases. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and consent was obtained prior to participation. Privacy was protected and data were anonymized prior to analysis, ensuring no individual identities could not be traced. The study complied with ethical guidelines for research involving human subjects, as defined by academic and NGO standards.

3.7. Limitations of the study

The study's reliance on self-reported data may introduce response bias. The sample size (114), while sufficient, limits generalizability beyond sampled areas. Cross-sectional design captures perceptions at one point, potentially missing longitudinal dynamics. Future research could incorporate mixed methods for deeper insights.

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise the characteristics of the sample and the main study variables. This analysis highlights the profile of the respondents and their perceptions of project sustainability, community participation, capacity building, and M&E practices.

4.1.1. Demographic characteristics of Respondents

A total of **114 beneficiaries** from multiple NGO-led development project areas participated in the survey. Key demographic information is summarised below:

- **Gender**: 90.3% of the respondents were male and 9.7% were female.
- **Age**: Most of the respondents (75.4%) were between 30 and 50 years old.
- **Education**: 79.8% of the respondents had only primary education, while 10% had completed secondary education and above.
- **Marital status:** 95.6% of respondents were married.

These characteristics suggest that most of the project beneficiaries come from rural communities, often with limited access to education and formal employment opportunities. This context is significant for understanding how capacity building and participation influence sustainability.

4.1.2. Sustainability of project benefits-The extent to which beneficiaries continued to receive project benefits after project completion were assessed as questions to assess the sustainability of project benefits. Responses were categorized as "Strongly agree," agree," neutral", disagree" and "Strongly Disagree."

- **Continuation of project benefits:** 40% of respondents agreed that they continue to receive benefits after project closure, while 45% disagreed.
- **Level of Community Ownership**: Respondents were asked whether the community had assumed ownership of the project results. Only 35% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that their communities had taken ownership of the project results.

This finding indicates that a large share of project benefits does not persist following donor support is withdrawn, indicating the need to address sector sustainability in development projects.

4.1.3. Community participation- Community participation was measured through questions related to the level and extent of participation at different stages of the project cycle. The results revealed the following.

- **Participation in Project Design**: Only 25% of the respondents stated that they were actively involved in the design stage of the project.
- **Participation in Project Implementation**: 50% of respondents reported being involved during the implementation stage.
- **Participation in Monitoring and Evaluation**: Community participation in M&E activities was low, with only 18% of respondents indicating that they had contributed to M&E efforts.

These findings demonstrate that community participation is often limited to the implementation stage, with minimal involvement in the design and M&E stages. Given the link between participation and sustainability, this represents a key area for improvement.

4.1.4. Capacity Building- Capacity building was measured by assessing the extent of training, skill development, and institutional support provided to community members. The following results were obtained:

- **Access to training:** 60% of respondents confirmed that they had received training related to project activities.
- **Use of acquired skills:** Of those who received training, 55% reported that they were applying the skills they had gained in their daily activities.
- **Institutional Support**: Only 30% of the respondents felt that local institutions had been adequately strengthened to sustain project results.

These findings indicate that, while training is provided, there is a gap in the practical application of skills and institutional capacity, which are critical to sustainability.

4.1.5. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E)

M&E was measured by assessing the presence of M&E frameworks, feedback mechanisms, and the frequency of project reviews.

- **Use of Feedback Mechanisms**: Only 22% of the respondents stated that feedback mechanisms were in place to inform ongoing project adjustments.
- **Frequency of M&E Activities**: The frequency of M&E reviews was found to be sporadic, with 40% of the respondents indicating that they had only witnessed one M&E review during the project lifecycle.

These results reveal the need for more systematic M&E frameworks to provide continuous information and ensure timely corrective actions.

4.2. Regression analysis

A multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the influence of community participation, capacity building, and M&E on project sustainability. The following model was used:

$S=\beta 0+\beta 1CP+\beta 2CB+\beta 3ME+\mu$

Where: Here, S represents sustainability, CP is community participation, CB is capacity building, ME is M&E, μ is error term and β values are their respective coefficients

4.2.1. Model Summary The regression analysis produced the following key results:

Variable	Coefficient (β)	t-statistic	p-value
Community Participation (CP)	0.42	3.12	0.002**
Capacity Building (CB)	0.35	2.85	0.005**
Monitoring & Evaluation (ME)	0.28	2.10	0.038*

p<0.05, **p<0.01

R-squared = 0.26 This indicates that 26% of the variation in the sustainability of the project is explained by community participation, capacity building and M&E. Although this R-squared value is modest, it suggests that other factors not captured in this model may also play a role in sustainability.

4.2.2. Interpretation of Regression Results

- **Community participation (p = 0.002):** Community participation was found to have a significant positive influence on project sustainability. For every 1 unit increase in

community participation, project sustainability increases by 0.42 units. This finding supports the claim that greater community involvement in planning, implementation, and M&E enhances sustainability.

- **Capacity Building** (p=0.005): Capacity building also has a significant positive influence on project sustainability. For every 1 unit increase in capacity-building efforts, project sustainability increases by 0.35 units. This highlights the role of training and institutional strengthening in supporting project outcomes.
- **Monitoring and evaluation (p = 0.038):** The results indicate that effective M&E contributes to sustainability. For every 1 unit increase in M&E activities, project increases by 0.28 units. This shows that continuous evaluation and corrective action during the project lifecycle can improve the long-term sustainability of the outcomes.

5. Discussion

5.1. Overview of key findings

This paper was about a study of some factors that influence the sustainability of NGO led development projects in Ethiopia. Among significant predictors of sustainability, as identified by the analysis, were community participation; capacity building; and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), all of which explained a combined 26% of its variation, with community participation having the greatest influence. These findings thus highlight the importance of programmes to be adequately designed, and implemented and managed by NGOs.

5.2. Community Participation and sustainability of the project

Project sustainability resulting from community participation became the key driver. Sustainability increased 0.42 units (p=0.002) for every increase in participation, indicating that beneficiary participation is important to maintaining project outcomes post support. This corresponds with the Community-Based Development (CBD) frameworks which are characterized by beneficiary participation throughout the project cycle.

However, this 'token participation' was more the norm, with participation in project design and M&E being limited and participation in implementation being more widespread. NGOs should use a participatory design approach from the outset, promoting ownership and accountability and creating continuous avenues for project stakeholder's input throughout the project lifecycle to improve sustainability.

5.3. Project Sustainability and Capacity building

Sustainability is strongly influenced by capacity building: Additional effort (to a one unit scale) leads to 0.35 unit increase in sustainability (p=0.005). The fact that we address this shows the need to develop community members' skills and institutional capacities. Yet, only 30% of trained beneficiaries felt local institutions could maintain the results, while 55% of trained beneficiaries did apply their skills.

Results support the important role of capacity building to long term sustainability, as proposed by Eade (1997). NGOs should therefore develop versatile skills, strengthen local institutions and implement programmes that produce local leaders who will promote for sustainability in post project.

5.4. Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and Project Sustainability

Results also show an important role for M&E in sustainability; relative to each 1 unit increase in M&E efforts, there is a 0.28 unit increase in sustainability (p=0.038). Yet only 22 percent of respondents claim to have feedback mechanisms and M&E more often comes across as a onetime event rather than a continuous process.

Adaptive management requires effective M&E practices which matches with Patton's (2008) argument of continuous evaluations. Thus, NGOs should transition away from end of project evaluations to ongoing M&E frameworks, ensure community members are actively participating in the Monitoring and Evaluation process in order to increase ownership, and develop mechanisms under which community members are accountable.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

6.1.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to the development of Project Management science by providing empirical evidence from NGO-led projects in Ethiopia, advancing the understanding of sustainability in development contexts. Specifically, it impacts development project management as an emerging discipline distinct from traditional project Management, which often prioritizes efficiency over long-term social outcomes. By quantifying the roles of community participation, capacity building, and M&E, explaining 26% of sustainability variance, this research refines theoretical models like community-based development (CBD) frameworks (Mansuri & Rao, 2003), emphasizing adaptive, participatory approaches tailored to resource-constrained environments. This extends development project management theory by highlighting the need for integrated, beneficiary-

centered strategies that bridge donor-driven initiatives with local resilience, offering a foundation for future interdisciplinary studies on sustainable interventions in global development.

6.1.2 Practical Recommendation

The sustainability of development projects is essential for NGOs, donors, and policy makers. This study revealed that community participation, capacity building, and M&E collectively account for 26% of sustainability variation, with community involvement being the most significant predictor.

To improve sustainability, the following recommendations are made:

- To improve sustainability, it is recommended to involve communities at all stages of the projects to enhance ownership and relevance. This can be achieved by conducting participatory planning workshops and shifting from a consultation model to a co-creation approach in decision-making.
- Additionally, it is essential to strengthen capacity building efforts by focusing on comprehensive skill development and institutional strengthening. This involves offering targeted skills training programmes and enhancing local governance structures.
- Additionally, there should be a commitment to strengthening monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems by implementing continuous M&E to promote adaptive management. The use of real-time M&E systems and the participation of community members in the evaluation of project outcomes are critical steps in this process.
- Lastly, promoting sustainability-orientated project design is vital. This requires integrating sustainability from the outset, designing projects with clear exit strategies and defined roles for community stakeholders, and using indicators that track long-term impacts.

References

1. Agarwal, S., & Van Wicklin, W. A. (2020). Toward a research agenda for measuring the sustainability of community-driven development programs. World Development, 130, 104930.

2. Bano, M. (2019). Partnerships and the good-governance agenda: Improving service delivery through state-NGO collaborations. Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations, 30(6), 1270-1283.

3. Biwott, P., Egesah, O., & Ngeywo, J. (2017). The role of monitoring and evaluation in sustainable development projects. International Journal of Project Management Studies, 34(2), 101-118.

4. Eade, D. (1997). Capacity-building: An approach to people-centred development. Oxfam.

5. Khadka, C., & Vacík, H. (2022). Assessing the sustainability of community-based forestry in Nepal: A review. Sustainability, 14(3), 1456.

6. Mansuri, G., & Rao, V. (2003). Evaluating community-based and community-driven development: A critical review of the evidence. World Bank Research Observer, 19(1), 1-39.

7. Patton, M. Q. (2008). Utilization-focused evaluation (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

8. Paul, S. (1987). Community participation in development projects: The World Bank experience. World Bank Discussion Papers.

9. United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2021). Capacity development in the post-COVID era: Lessons from the global south. UNDP Report.

10. World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). (1987). Our common future. Oxford University Press.

About the Author

Beniam Tilahun Jenber, PhD

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Beniam Tilahun is a development professional with extensive experience in program performance management, monitoring and evaluation, and strategic learning across large, multi-country initiatives. He currently serves as Head of Program Performance and Monitoring for Pan-African Programs at the Mastercard Foundation, based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where he supports the design, delivery, and performance oversight of complex, multi-partner portfolios, including programs implemented across multiple countries on the continent.

Beniam holds a PhD in Development Project Management from AIU, USA and is in the final stage of completing a second PhD in Development Studies at the University of South Africa. He also earned an MA in Diplomacy and International Relations from the Ethiopian Civil Service University, an MA in Project Management from Addis Ababa University, an MA in Sustainable Development and Policy from the University of Gondar, and a BA in Sociology and Social Work from Jimma University.

He is a certified International Project Manager (CIPM) through the American Academy of Project Management and a Certified Knowledge Manager (CKM) through the Knowledge Management Institute. His professional expertise spans program design, monitoring, evaluation and learning, systems strengthening, and institutional capacity development, with a strong focus on youth employment, large-scale development programming, and adaptive management.

Beniam's research and practice focus on systems thinking, sustainability of development interventions, and the conditions that enable effective systems change in complex development environments.

He can be reached at 18031048@mylife.unisa.ac.za or beniam2020@gmail.com.