Learning Brief: Durable change - sustaining impact in natural resource governance initiatives

As part of the Embedded Evaluation of the BHP Foundation Natural Resource Governance Program (NRG Program), the Sustainable Minerals Institute (SMI) undertook research towards a global thematic case study and practice note on project sustainability entitled **Durable Change, sustaining impact in natural resource governance.** The study consisted of: i) a desktop review of program/project sustainability thought and practice as reflected in the natural resource governance, development and academic literature; ii) interviews with 13 sustainability experts, program partners and BHP Foundation personnel; and iii) a benchmarking of NRG Program sustainability approaches.

Key ideas in current sustainability thinking

The standard definition of sustainability – whether the benefits of an intervention are likely to continue – needs adaptation to interventions and contexts (OECD, 2019, 2021). Common concerns across various sustainability definitions include the durability of development benefits, the means to achieve those benefits, and an appropriate balance between investment and benefits.

Five key ideas in current thinking on sustainability are receiving significant attention:

- Sustainability depends on locally led processes, so it requires addressing power and resource allocation imbalances between north and south partners, and the behaviours and culture that enable those imbalances[1].

- Sustainability and impact are intertwined. Impact is about whether "the intervention created change that really matters to people"

(OECD, 2019, p, 65) – according to our expert interviews this makes an intervention more likely to be sustained.

- Sustainability requires a systems perspective. It depends on the organisational capacity, adaptability and responsiveness of social movements and ecosystems of change (Joyce & Walker, 2015; Halloran, 2015). Sustainability relies on the financial, economic, social, environmental and institutional capacities of those systems (OECD, 2019).

- Sustainability must be a consideration from the design stage, during implementation, and beyond (Ahmed, Dillan & Robinson, 2018).

- Sustainability is typically observed ex-post. Programs and donors need to implement and learn from ex-post evaluations and from transition processes (interviews with experts; OECD, 2019; Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning & Search for Common Ground, 2020b).

What supports sustainability?

There are a vast array of practices and strategies that can foster sustainability from a donor perspective. Five areas were salient in our review of studies and guidelines:

1. Program strategy: To support sustainability, donors can promote locally-led development, and organisational and system-wide capacity, flexibility and diversity; they can better understand and inform the funding ecosystem they are part of; and engage in trusting,

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[1] When discussing the global north-global south power imbalance, we refer to the inequality in power and control over resources that tends to characterise relationships between those leading development interventions and local beneficiaries and organisations. Often, but not always, those imbalances occur across the north-south divide. However, they also happen within

a jurisdiction and tend to reflect similar, deeply engrained, patterns of control of resources, higher status, visibility and power granted to organisations and people who come from the global north, or from historically privileged sectors in societies with a history of colonialism.

transparent and longer-term relationships with grantees.

2. Planning for sustainability: Sustainability depends on early and ongoing planning. The exercise is holistic, adaptive and collaborative. It requires strong local partnerships from the start, a focus on mutual capacity development rather than one directional north to south 'capacity building' (Boone, Teal & Barnard, 2020), and an understanding of the networks and social movements that are likely to sustain benefits.

3. Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL): Knowledge on how to support sustainability and sustainable transitions needs to be based on evidence. Donors need to support processes to evaluate and to develop capacity to understand sustainability (Rogers & Coates, 2015). Our review highlighted the role of specific sustainability indicators in project MEL, and of ex-post or predictive evaluations in grantee selection processes.

4. Sustainable transitions: Sustainable transitions to locally led development depend on inclusive, collaborative and less hierarchical structures being set up from the beginning to allow a strong voice and visibility to local partners, and an overall process of mutual capacity development. However, sustainable transitions are likely to be unsuccessful without specific resources or transition funding for local and international parties.

5. Financial sustainability: Financial sustainability, in particular at the local level, is central to overall sustainability. It requires skills that donors, international Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and other international organisations, as well as local NGOs and civil society organisations can all play a role in developing.

While sustainability is a clear intent and concern among donors in general, it is less common to find a comprehensive approach to sustainability, formalised policies or guidance (a notable exception being USAID). Rogers and Coates' (2015, p. 44) phrase: "hope is not a strategy" crystallises the concern, shared by several interviewees, that interventions might leave too much to chance by not embedding sustainability learnings and intent in all their processes. Recent large scale, multi-year, multi-

sector studies (Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning, & Search for Common Ground, 2020) have confirmed that learning on sustainability is a lagging area of practice.

What hinders sustainability?

Among the many factors that can hinder sustainability, five were salient in the literature review or interviews:

1. External control of resources: Control of resources by actors that do not belong to the local context where interventions are being implemented creates power dynamics that disconnect local practitioners from local priorities and accountability (Ahmed, Dillan & Robinson, 2018, Neumann et al. 2016).

2. Inequitable power dynamics: When donors and international actors do not address power imbalances, local leadership, skills and contributions are overlooked. This affects the capacity to think about sustainability, and results in premature exits. Local people understand local needs and what can be sustained in their context. However, international actors gauge local capacity in terms of 'technical' skill rather than local competency, reinforcing relationships of inequality, racism and exclusion by assuming that expertise resides in the global north (Ahmed, Dillan & Robinson 2018).

3. Narrow ideas of success: A narrow focus hinders holistic, critical thinking and the capacity to learn about sustainability. Emphasis can narrow down too much, for example, on a single Sustainable Development Goal. A narrow focus leads donors and projects to shy away from ex-post evaluations for fear of admitting 'failure'.

4. Project-by-project funding approach: Grantee organisations work in a political context and need to operate strategically within it. The lack support for organisations, to favour instead the pursuit of project goals or deliverables, distracts grantees and results in staff burnout and stagnant organisational processes at grantee organisations (see for example Peace Direct, CDA Collaborative Learning, & Search for Common Ground, 2020, 2021). This compromises grantees' ability to address strategic questions and to respond to political

risks, such as the ongoing risk of regressive reform in the natural resource governance field.

5. <u>Lack of conflict sensitivity</u>: hinders the success of development or aid projects and at worst it can intensify existing conflict or trigger latent conflict (Anderson, 1999) - these represent risks to sustainability. The guidance of the Do No Harm approach (Anderson, 1999) is that all stages of the project life-cycle it is necessary to act with an understanding of: how the project can interact with connecting and dividing factors within the conflict context, how resource transfers can affect conflict dynamics, and what ethical messages are implicit in the way development projects or teams work.

Overall, working towards sustainability requires a deep understanding of local contexts and needs, planning, learning and evaluation capacity at all stages. It needs to focus on systems, and financial sustainability skills and support. Sustainability is at risk when there is a too narrow, project or goal-oriented approach distracting organisations from larger strategic questions. There are political risks to sustainability when there is inequity in power relationships and resource allocation, and when conflict sensitive approaches are not applied.

Find out more about the BHP Foundation and the NRG Program.

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