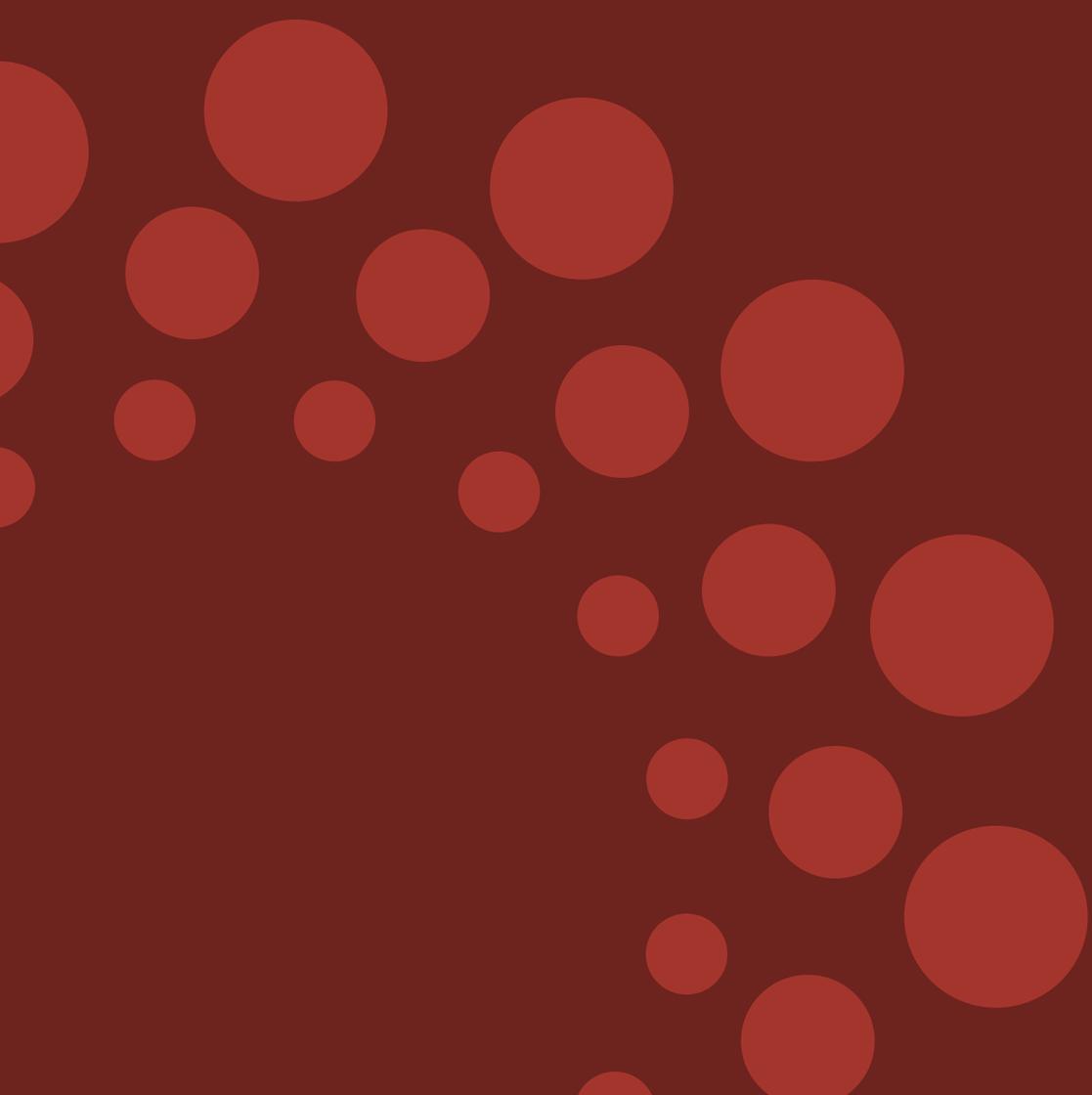Rowan Popplewell

With Rick James and Sarah Lewis

What remains
Programming for sustainability

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rowan Popplewell is a researcher with a background in civil society advocacy, policy development and capacity building. She is currently completing her doctorate at the University of Oxford titled *Creating Spaces for Peace? Civil Society, political space and peacebuilding in post-war Burundi*. Rowan worked as a researcher at INTRAC from 2011 to 2016.

Rick James is Principal Consultant at INTRAC. He is an organisational change specialist with more than 25 years' experience working with NGOs in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Europe. Rick has trained, consulted, researched and written extensively on NGO capacity building and organisational change issues.

Sarah Lewis is Research Officer at INTRAC. She joined the organisation in 2013 and undertakes thematic research, contributes to INTRAC's convening and publications portfolio, and provides technical support to consultancies. Her interests include aid withdrawal and exit strategies.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What makes a particular partner or programme more or less likely to survive following exit?

What can development actors do to increase the sustainability of their interventions?

The paper highlights the answers to these questions that emerge from the experiences of EveryChild's exit from its former partners. In 2012, EveryChild decided to close all its international programmes over the following three years. INTRAC visited four countries – Cambodia, India, Malawi and Nepal – between April and June 2015 to see which partners and programmes remained up to 15 months after EveryChild's exit. Although it is still too early to tell which partners and programmes are truly sustainable, there are already some indications. We found that a remarkable number of partners and programme activities remain and that many of EveryChild's interventions have resulted in lasting changes.

Interestingly, those that have survived, and those that have not, possess a number of similarities. Activities that have survived tend to be those that are locally driven and could be easily taken over by communities following exit. Partners or programmes that struggled with resource dependency or require ongoing financial inputs have closed, whereas those that scaled back resources required and successfully diversified their funding base have survived. Programmes that contained a strong advocacy or awareness raising component, which resulted in changes to legislation, policies, attitudes and behaviours, continue to have positive effects on the children and communities that EveryChild worked with one year on.

The main factors that shape sustainability in these examples post exit are the context within which partners and programmes exist; relations between funders, partners, governments and communities; resources, especially resource dependency and resource diversification; and ultimately, the people involved. While they cannot guarantee the sustainability of particular partners or programmes, there are concrete steps that development actors can take to increase the likelihood that their interventions will result in lasting change:

1. Focus on the end at the beginning
2. Ensure participation and community ownership
3. Design programmes that are resource light
4. Prioritise advocacy and awareness-raising
5. Invest in partner-driven capacity development support
6. Support resource diversification
7. End well

The quality of the exit also has a profound impact on future sustainability. Partners and programmes that are prepared for exit, have a greater chance not only of surviving exit, but thriving from it. Ultimately, it is what remains after you have gone that really matters.

INTRODUCTION

"I have seen lots of international NGOs leave badly without any sustainability. Two years later there is nothing left. The manner of leaving can destroy years of good work."

EveryChild Country Director, 2014

All development actors want their work to have a lasting impact, but what makes a particular programme more or less likely to be sustainable? This paper seeks to answer this question by drawing on the learning generated from an evaluation of EveryChild's Responsible Exit Process.

In 2012, EveryChild decided to close all of its international programmes through a carefully managed process, and to transfer its income and assets to a new global alliance called Family for Every Child. EveryChild drafted a set of Responsible Exit Principles which it used to guide its exit from 18 partners in 15 countries[1] over a three year period. In 2014, EveryChild commissioned INTRAC to evaluate the extent to which they achieved their aim of exiting responsibly (see Box 1).

This short paper explores the issue of programme exit through the lens of sustainability. It looks at what remains up to 15 months[2] after EveryChild's exit, asks what this tells us about programme sustainability, and explores some of the implications it has for other development actors seeking to make their interventions more sustainable.

BOX 1: INTRAC EVALUATION OF EVERYCHILD'S RESPONSIBLE EXIT PROCESS

PURPOSE

EveryChild developed a set of Responsible Exit Principles to guide its exit from 18 partners and 15 countries between 2012 and 2015, and to mitigate the impact of exit (Morris, 2015). EveryChild commissioned INTRAC to conduct an evaluation of its Responsible Exit Process in November 2014. The evaluation focused on the extent to which EveryChild achieved its aim of exiting responsibly from its country offices and partners from 2012 onwards.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation had two phases. In Phase I (January to February 2015) evaluators conducted a survey of all 18 partners, and six case studies (Cambodia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nepal and Russia) which were mostly desk based (with the exception of Malawi where a field visit took place). In Phase II (February to June 2016), local consultants undertook field visits to four countries (Cambodia, India, Malawi and Nepal) to see what remained between five and 15 months after exit.

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

Resources relating to this evaluation, including a number of blogs, can be found on the INTRAC website at https://www.intrac.org/projects/longitudinal-evaluation-everychilds-responsible-exit-process/ and in the references and useful resources section below.

---

[1] These countries were Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Guyana, Cambodia, India, Georgia, Moldova, and Russia.
[2] Phase II of the INTRAC evaluation upon which this report is based took place 15 months after EveryChild's exit in India and Malawi, five months after EveryChild's exit in Nepal, and at the time of EveryChild's exit in Cambodia.

It argues that it is what development actors leave behind that really matters. Consequently, it encourages those concerned with sustainable programming to start thinking about what their legacy will be as early as possible. This is because sustainability is a process that takes time and effort. While there are many variables that development actors cannot control, there are concrete steps that funders can take to give their partners and programmes a better chance of producing lasting change. The paper concludes by looking at what some of these steps might be.

WHAT REMAINS?

The evaluation assessed the sustainability of EveryChild's work in the countries that it had operated in. For EveryChild sustainability related to the continuation of programmes, or the creation of lasting changes in children's lives. In many cases, the continuation of activities is dependent on partner sustainability. INTRAC went back to Cambodia, India, Malawi and Nepal up to 15 months after EveryChild's exit to see which partners and programmes remained. We will revisit the study sites in five years' time to ascertain what changes are truly sustainable.

PARTNERS

EveryChild partnered with a wide diversity of organisations and adopted different ways of working across the various countries they operated in. Some partners were local NGOs, others were localised field offices, and three were still operating as EveryChild country offices at the point of exit.

In Cambodia, Nepal and Kenya, EveryChild worked on joint programmes with established national NGOs, which were funded by donors such as Comic Relief and the Big Lottery. These relationships tended to last between two to five years (plus one to two years for exit). EveryChild had much shorter relationships with partners in Zimbabwe, Uganda and Ghana, where it provided one-year research focused grants to local NGOs.

While some of these organisations are struggling to secure ongoing resources in competitive funding environments post exit, the majority have managed to find other income sources. They have either partnered with new external donors, or adopted different models that can be sustained by a smaller, but more diverse, funding base.

EveryChild worked through country offices in India and Malawi for more than a decade. They partnered with ten local NGOs in India. In Malawi, they chose to work directly with communities through ten community based organisations (CBOs). These partners had a much longer term relationship with EveryChild and were more dependent on them.

Of the ten NGOs that EveryChild supported through its country office in India, two have closed, three or four are surviving, and four or five are thriving. In Malawi, eight of the ten CBOs established by EveryChild are continuing to operate a year after exit. In India, both of the organisations that folded were 100% dependent on EveryChild, and found it difficult to accept that they were leaving until it happened. They also had internal issues. Both had severe leadership problems and one struggled with legal registration.

Exit has, however, made some former partner organisations stronger. It forced them to become less dependent, and they built on the strong foundation left by EveryChild to develop into much healthier organisations with a more diverse and locally rooted funding base. For these organisations, exit was like pushing a baby bird out of the nest – it helped them to find their wings and to fly.

PROGRAMMES

While many activities had ended, a surprising number of programmes either remained or continued to have an impact on children's lives one year after exit. Those activities that remain post-exit share two key characteristics:

1. Locally-driven and resource-light

Those activities that remain tend to be those that are locally-driven and provide resource-light solutions to critical problems, which could be easily taken over by communities following exit. Despite a lack of external funding in Malawi, communities are still coming together to discuss issues and find potential solutions to them. There has been a huge expansion in livelihoods activities, including a four-fold increase in Village Savings and Loan Associations post exit.

Conversely, those programmes and activities that ended tend to be those that require ongoing resources to continue. In India, 60% of Child Activity Centres (CACs) closed, and in Malawi, a number of Community Based Child Care Centres (CBCCs) have also shut. Those that remain have either found new sources of funding or have changed the way they work so that they are less resource intensive and can be run by communities themselves.

In Nepal, outreach centres have closed and REFLECT classes, which sensitised communities to education and encouraged them to send children to school, have had to change the way they operate due to a lack of funding. Despite the challenges, families are continuing to gather and discuss their own issues in the three districts where EveryChild worked as they did during the project.

2. Focused on policy, attitudinal or behaviour change

Programmes that contained a strong advocacy or awareness raising component, which resulted in changes to legislation, policies, attitudes and behaviours, continue to have positive effects on communities that EveryChild worked with.

EveryChild and its local partners in Cambodia advocated for the creation of a Juvenile Justice Law, which was passed in August 2016. This is likely to have a lasting impact on children's lives. Their awareness raising work, which involved building the capacity of local government officials on child rights, has also resulted in changes in attitudes towards young people and has led to changed practices in prisons.

In Nepal, advocacy and awareness raising activities have resulted in changes in policy, attitudes and behaviour towards child labour at a community and at a national level. The central government has created a budget allocation for child rights work, and school enrolment and retention rates have increased. Within communities, teachers and parents are more aware of child rights and continue to voice their aspirations to stop child labour and support children to stay in school.

Child protection work in communities has continued in Malawi. Important progress has also been made in the policy arena, particularly on child marriage with the passing of the Marriage, Divorce and Family Relations Bill. The campaign against child marriage in Malawi also appears to be gaining momentum as other NGOs get more involved and the Girls Not Brides network established by EveryChild continues to operate.

WHAT DOES THIS TELL US ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY?

Examining what remains and what does not up to 15 months after EveryChild's exit reveals a lot about partner and programme sustainability. The key factors that influenced sustainability post exit were: context, resources, relationships and people.

CONTEXT MATTERS

Being sustainable in an unsustainable context is extremely difficult. In each of the cases explored as part of this evaluation, the political and funding environment played a critical role in influencing programme sustainability. Crises and emergencies can also have a profound impact.

Crises and emergencies

The 2015 earthquake in Nepal profoundly affected EveryChild's partners, many of whom work in areas most affected. It hit the communities that they work in very hard, and knocked their sustainability plans off course. Although funding for local organisations has increased following the earthquake, priorities have shifted from long term development work such as child rights to more immediate needs.

A severe food crisis in Malawi has also affected the ability of CBOs to sustain some activities. Cuthbert Gondwe, INTRAC's local consultant in Malawi, explains that 'in most communities in Malawi, the current focus is on survival. People are trying to make sure their own families have food first, so the commitment to providing food for community activities like CBCCs is going down' (James et al., 2016).

Political and funding context

High levels of government corruption in Malawi led to an aid freeze, which has made local fundraising for services extremely difficult. Aid withdrawal has also resulted in a competitive funding environment in Cambodia, which has hampered the ability of EveryChild's former partner organisation to secure follow-on funding.

RESOURCES MATTER

Resources and funding are at the heart of sustainability. Whereas resource dependency can limit sustainability, diversification can support it.

Resource dependency

The evaluation found that programmes and activities that were resource dependent were more likely to close, and those that are less resource intensive were generally more sustainable.

This is because activities that do not rely on ongoing financial support are more likely to survive without international funding, and can be more easily taken on by communities with limited resources. In Malawi, activities that required continuing inputs such as the payment of school fees have stopped, whereas those that are less resource intensive such as Village Savings and Loans Associations are doing well. The on-going food crisis means that people tend to be more focused on activities that yield a short-term economic gain in order to provide food for their families.

Activities that prioritised political, attitudinal or behavioural change also tend to be less resource intensive, and therefore more likely to be sustainable post exit. They are also likely to have a lasting impact on children's lives, whether it is advocacy work on juvenile justice in Cambodia, child protection work in Malawi or awareness-raising on child labour in Nepal. Policies, attitudes

and behaviours may be harder to change initially, but once they are changed, they often stay that way.

Resource diversification

Supporting partners and programmes to diversify their funding base is critical for ongoing sustainability. In India, the partners that remained completely reliant on EveryChild closed after exit, whereas those who were able to diversify their funding base flourished. Many partners found capacity building for local fundraising and resource mobilisation an invaluable part of the exit process.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Strong relationships are critical for sustainability. This includes relations between funders and partner organisations, relations with local and national government, and perhaps most importantly, relations with communities.

Relations between funders and partners

One of the main findings of the evaluation is that the quality of the relationship between the funder and the partner effects the quality of the exit and the ongoing sustainability of partners and programmes. Partners and programmes that have closed tend to be those with high levels of dependency on EveryChild. Partners with a strong pre-existing relationship with EveryChild tended to have a much smoother exit process and are more likely to be sustainable.

Relations between partners and government

Several partner organisations have gone on to secure funding from local government to enable them to continue their work. In India, EveryChild supported its partner organisations to develop stronger relationships with local government institutions. Many of these groups have since secured financial support from local government for CACs, and have influenced government policies to create a more supportive environment for child rights at a local level.

Relations between partners and communities

This evaluation found that those activities with a strong degree of community participation, and which provide resource-light solutions to local problems, such as some of the livelihoods activities in Malawi, have not only survived but thrived following exit. Community participation and ownership is critical to sustainability and must be the foundation and starting point for any interventions.

PEOPLE MATTER

Ultimately, sustainability comes down to people. The evaluation found that both the exit process and sustainability of partners and programmes were heavily influenced by people at EveryChild and in partner organisations. What individuals put into the exit process was key to the outcomes.

Leadership, commitment and ability

How well partners responded to exit was closely correlated with the leadership, their personalities and their appetite for managing change. Partners with leadership issues were much less likely to survive post exit. Leadership, commitment and ability of senior staff, programmes staff and country office staff at EveryChild have also been critical to the exit process, and to ensuring the ongoing sustainability of partners and programmes.

In India and Malawi, the leadership of the former EveryChild Country Offices was particularly forward thinking. They encouraged local partners to become less resource dependent early on, and provided them with the support that they needed to do this. Country Directors understood the rationale for EveryChild's exit, and successfully communicated this to staff and to communities. They played a key role in retaining staff and keeping them motivated throughout the exit process – a difficult task but one that was critical to the success of the exit process and future partner and programme sustainability.

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING?

These reflections have broader implications for sustainable programming. The recommendations that follow emerge from the experiences of EveryChild's exit from its former partners and are intended to provide food for thought rather than a recipe for ensuring sustainability.

1. Focus on the end at the beginning

Thinking about what and who will be left behind at the end, and what your legacy will be, is vital from the outset. You can then work towards it throughout the programme. Communities, civil society organisations and local government will have to carry on the work. Therefore, they should be at the centre of the way the project operates. Support partners to build relationships with local government, or encourage communities to invest in the programme.

2. Ensure participation and community ownership

Ensuring participation and community ownership is critical to making programmes more relevant and rooted, and ultimately more sustainable. Programmes that are more likely to remain are those that are about getting people together to solve problems that matter to them, and do not cost communities too much to run.

3. Design programmes that are resource light

Programmes that rely on ongoing financial inputs are less likely to be sustainable post exit, particularly in challenging funding environments. Designing programmes that are less resource intensive from the outset will support future sustainability.

4. Prioritise advocacy and awareness raising

Prioritising advocacy and awareness raising activities is critical to generating lasting change. Once changed they tend to stay changed. Programmes focused on supporting policy, attitude or behaviour change can continue to have positive effects well beyond exit.

5. Invest in partner-driven capacity development support

Invest in partner-driven capacity development support so that partners and communities can take responsibility for their future sustainability. Capacity development that is responsive to the needs and demands of partners, and focused on their future work with communities is more effective and long-lasting than capacity building for grant management compliance.

6. Support resource diversification

Partners and programmes that are completely dependent on international resources are less likely to be sustainable. Organisations that successfully diversified their resources by securing funding from local government and communities were more likely to survive.

7. End well

The quality of exit also has a profound impact on future sustainability. Ending well – allowing enough time, ensuing strong communication, and providing sufficient support and resources throughout the process – is critical. EveryChild found that it took an average of two years to end well.

CONCLUSION: IT'S WHAT REMAINS THAT REALLY MATTERS

Sustainability should be at the core of development interventions. Ultimately, it is what remains once development actors leave that really matters, whether that is sustainable partners and programmes, or lasting change to legislation, attitudes and behaviours.

Up to 15 months on, it is remarkable to see what remains following EveryChild's exit. Although it is still too early to tell which partners and programmes will be truly sustainable, there are strong indications about which factors matter most post exit. Context, resources, relationships and people all have a profound impact on programme sustainability.

The factors over which exiting development actors either have limited or no control, such as the changing political and funding context, are likely to become more significant the further away you get from exit. Ultimately, development actors cannot guarantee that a particular activity or programme will be sustainable post exit.

Those concerned with sustainability should consider the recommendations made in this paper and focus on changing what is within their control or influence, such as programme design, capacity building, resource dependence, the nature of partnership, and the quality of the exit process.

REFERENCES AND USEFUL RESOURCES

REFERENCES

James, R., Popplewell, R., Lewis, S. and Bartlett, J. Forthcoming. *Ending well. Synthesis report. Longitudinal evaluation of EveryChild's responsible exit process.* Oxford: INTRAC.

James, R., Popplewell, R. and Bartlett, J. 2015. *Ending well. Phase I interim report. Longitudinal evaluation of EveryChild's responsible exit process.* Oxford: INTRAC.

James, R. 2015. Go through the door marked 'Exit' to reach sustainable development. *INTRAC blog,* 20 May 2015. Available at: http://www.intrac.org/blog.php/99/go-through-the-door-marked-exit-to-reach-sustainable-development (Accessed 30 September 2016)

Morris, L. 2015. *Working at the sharp end of programme closure: EveryChild's responsible exit principles.* Praxis Note No. 70. Oxford: INTRAC.

FURTHER READING

Hayman, R. and Pratt, B., eds. 2016. Civil society sustainability: facing up to new challenges in organisational legitimacy, credibility, and viability (Special Issue). *Development in Practice,* 26(5): 527-680.

Hayman, R. 2016. Unpacking civil society sustainability: looking back, broader, deeper, forward. *Development in Practice,* 26(5): 670-680.

Hayman, R. 2015. NGOs, aid withdrawal and exit strategies. *Journal fur Entwicklungspolitik/ Austrian Journal of Development Studies,* 31(1): 48-64.

Hayman, R. et al. 2015. *Building sustainability of civil society: beyond resourcing. Reflections from INTRAC staff and associates.* Oxford: INTRAC.

Hayman, R. 2012. *Aid withdrawal, partnership and CSO sustainability in a time of global economic change. Workshop conclusions and moving forward.* Oxford: INTRAC.

INTRAC. 2016. *Post-closure evaluation: an indulgence or a valuable exercise?* ONTRAC 61. Oxford: INTRAC.

Lewis, S. 2016. *Developing a timeline for exit strategies: experiences from an Action Learning Set with the British Red Cross, EveryChild, Oxfam GB, Sightsavers and WWF-UK.* Praxis Paper No. 31. Oxford: INTRAC.

Lewis, S. 2015. Leading by example? Why leadership buy-in is crucial to NGO exit strategies. *INTRAC blog,* 01 April 2015. Available at: http://www.intrac.org/blog.php/91/leading-by-example-why-leadership-buy-in-is-crucial-to-ngo-exit-strategies (Accessed 30 September 2016).

Lewis, S., Adu-Boateng, A. and Hayman, R. 2015. *Building sustainability of civil society: debates, challenges and moving forward.* Oxford: INTRAC.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Family for Every Child
http://www.familyforeverychild.org/

INTRAC Action Learning Set on exit strategies
https://www.intrac.org/projects/action-learning-set-exit-strategies/

INTRAC aid withdrawal and exit strategies
https://www.intrac.org/projects/aid-withdrawal-exit-strategies/

INTRAC civil society sustainability
https://www.intrac.org/what-we-do/civil-society-sustainability/

INTRAC longitudinal evaluation of EveryChild's responsible exit process
https://www.intrac.org/projects/longitudinal-evaluation-everychilds-responsible-exit-process/

intrac

for civil society