



Sustainability: what do we think we mean?

By Stephen Turner

There's no point trying to hide it: I suffer from Ageing Consultant's Syndrome. The older I get, the more people ask me to work on evaluations, rather than on planning (a forward-looking younger person's pastime?), managing, or (most rarely) direct implementation. Evaluations are important, should be (and often are) rigorous, and tend to keep the Ageing Consultant out of his comfort zone, which is a good thing. The point of this grumble is that, in addition to all the usual stuff about inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, impact, efficiency and effectiveness, I am often expected to pronounce on sustainability. And, in one sense, my pronouncements are very rarely positive. My reports don't actually say "what have they been smoking?" [famous and frequent query of an old Mosotho¹ boss of mine], or "who's zooming who?" [famous line from the wonderful Aretha Franklin]. But I do often find polite ways to ask what we think we mean, or really expect, when we claim to be setting sustainability as a target.

When I ask myself that question, I quickly realise how ill qualified I am to offer an authoritative answer. When in doubt, consult the OECD DAC'S Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management. It defines sustainability as the continuation of benefits from a development intervention after major development assistance has been completed. Actually, that leaves me still in doubt. Good enough as a narrow evaluator's definition, perhaps, but I think I'm after something broader.

Sifting through what I think I see and hear, I realise that there are various dimensions of sustainability, and that some trouble me less than others. The various 'development' endeavours that I work on may be more likely to achieve some kinds of sustainability than others. I'm sure this isn't an exhaustive list, and it's definitely not an authoritative classification, but I can mention a few.

I suppose technical sustainability is the simplest sort. Will the new crop variety or cropping system promoted by the project actually work for the farmer if she adopts it and practises it, through better seasons and worse, over the next couple of decades? Is there a realistic prospect that the solar pumps for village water supply will work year after year? Is the fibre optic technology proposed for national telecommunications durable and can maintenance requirements be kept within workable limits? Sometimes, the answer to such questions can be positive.

Strangely, I'm not that troubled by environmental sustainability – conceptually speaking. It's obvious. It has to be achieved. At some scales, within some fields of effort (rural and agrarian development, community-based conservation, production based on renewable resources, the energy sector...) we can see our way to achieving it, and some people, in some places, are doing just that. That doesn't necessarily mean that the planet isn't doomed. Human folly may have gone too far. But, after half a century of activism and struggle, environmental sustainability doesn't seem to be completely beyond humans' grasp.

Other lines of evaluation may lead us to assess financial, fiscal and economic sustainability. Again, to me, these are relatively straightforward concepts, however rare it may be for the evaluator to conclude that a business really is financially sustainable, that a government is balancing its books, or that the overall economic numbers associated with some innovation or infrastructural development will enhance rather than impair a nation's welfare. Of course, these criteria all concern the long term – and we all know what that leading proponent of the dismal science had to say about the long term. (For the Ageing Consultant, call it the mid term. But let's not go there.) The point is that for these kinds of sustainability I can see what to look for and, more importantly, I can sometimes see a realistic prospect of sustainability being achieved.

Things get foggier when I turn to social sustainability. I think there is such a thing – it seems a meaningful concept – but how to pin it down? What are we looking for, exactly? What do we expect? Can it be real? What I think we mean is that an innovation, an initiative, a 'development' measure can prove durable, can continue to work, because the various forces and factions in society – in a community, in a nation, somewhere in between – can accommodate it, or indeed actually embrace and accelerate it. Established power relations are not so threatened that they smother it. Existing trends in the relations between social groupings flow with this new thing rather than against it. I hope you get my drift.

One encouraging area of social sustainability concerns gender. I have a feeling that when development initiatives include elements of women's empowerment, the results may often be more durable than whatever else the projects achieve. One should not be naïve about the depth or meaning of such empowerment, but I suspect that, even after the committee has crumbled and the extension has evaporated, the idea that women (should) have rights and can be powerful stays in place. Barring outrageous political or religious onslaughts on women's rights, gender may prove to be the strongest dimension of sustainability for some projects.

Institutional sustainability is where I really get stuck. Unfortunately, the evaluation of 'development' programmes very often leads me into this quagmire. A project (sometimes a whole succession of projects, or Phase I to Phase IV of the same project) works with local people and government agencies to foster Village Forestry Committees, or Water User Associations, or Livestock Marketing Co-operatives, or – anyway, a few years after the end of the intervention, these institutions have mostly collapsed. Factionalism, corruption, elite capture or rejection, the failure of government to provide adequate (or any) support – we know the story. More and more often I point to the lack of institutional maintenance: the failure of projects and governments to recognise and resource the ongoing provision of advice, support, (re)training for local structures in the same way that canals should periodically be dredged or roads resurfaced.

At other levels, institutional sustainability proves equally elusive. Donors commit large sums; foreign 'experts' are embedded in ministries; impressive 'capacity development' programmes are pursued; institutional restructuring is doggedly driven through the bureaucracies of Africa and Asia. And yet the Ministry of Agriculture continues to be largely ineffective in the field: its staff underpaid, ill motivated, rent seeking, sometimes seeming more concerned with 4x4s, photocopiers and allowances than with their field mandate. The Ministry of Water Resources is completely out of its depth as the nation's rivers and aquifers are threatened by climate change, captured by the powerful or sold to foreigners. The National Enterprise Agency is anything but enterprising. It hosts workshops and attends foreign trade fairs, but it has little domestic or international profile and still less economic effect.

And so the Ageing Consultant's umpteenth evaluation report may well say, again, that for all the excellent and well intentioned work that the project did, not enough was achieved to suggest institutionally sustainable results. The community structures will crumble, at least until the next project comes. The national bureaucracy will grind on, largely unchanged and definitely not transformed in the ways that the project envisaged.

Why should this be? And is it really that bad? One answer to two questions, perhaps. Despite more than half a century of engagement, we foreign agents of 'development' still display far too superficial an understanding of how institutions work within societies that are not our own; and we still, quite unforgivably, take a short-term, project-driven perspective on processes of change that are bound to take longer than three or five years. Meanwhile, there certainly are cases where institutional sustainability is achieved. Factors contributing to it include dynamic national leadership; social movements that capture the nation's imagination; strong economic growth and adequate fiscal management that help governments to build competent ministries and effective procedures. Donor assistance sometimes helps, with injections of resources, ideas or charismatic expertise. But institutional sustainability is driven, when it does grow, from within. The conventional, externally resourced 'development' process that the Ageing Consultant must so often evaluate typically adds little value in this respect. Instead, his report glumly concludes that the institutional framework, with its labyrinthine and dysfunctional structures, its lethargic pace and its resistance to change, remains largely unaltered. Project outputs? Yes. Outcomes? Some. Sustainable, positive impact? No. Sometimes this is because the nation in question is in turmoil, the state is fragile or heading that way. More often it's because our western assumptions about the ways power and principle are deployed through due process in the national endeavour are far from the reality of how politics, economic interest and social change function in the countries we work with.

These are only amateur musings, and it is rash in the extreme to try to compress such massive issues into so few words. I guess my basic point is that we should be more careful, and think harder, when we use the S-word. What kind(s) of sustainability are we really talking about? What sort of factors promote or impede it? Are we serious when we think a 'development' initiative can achieve it? What can we do to stimulate a more realistic approach next time around?

And do you agree with any of this? Do you wonder what he's been smoking? Please tell!

1. A Mosotho is a citizen of Lesotho.