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Girls' Education Challenge

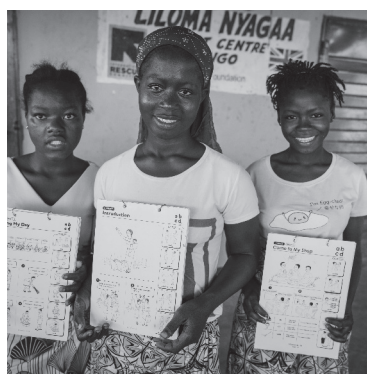
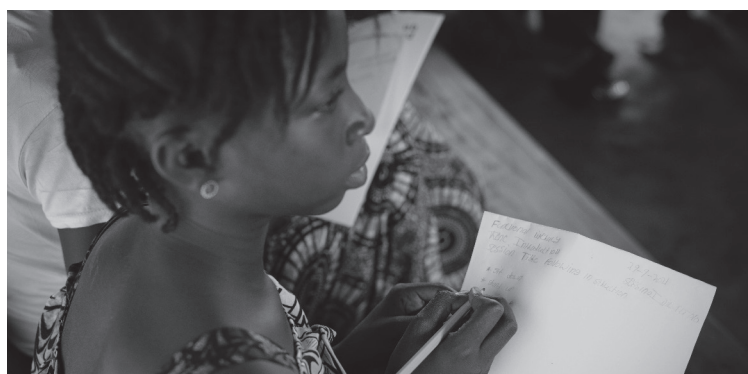
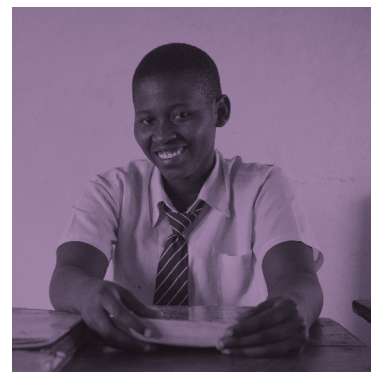
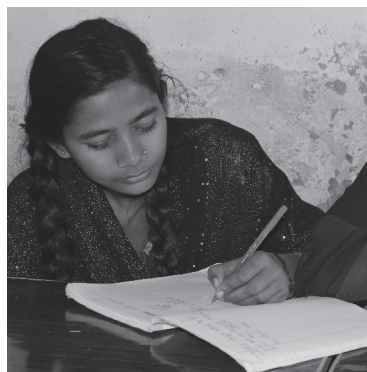


PORTFOLIO IN PRACTICE



JULY 2023

Advancing sustainability across a portfolio: A deep dive into the Girls' Education Challenge Sustainability Framework



The GEC 'Portfolio in Practice' series consolidates best practice and lessons learned regarding how to drive performance across a complex and diverse portfolio of projects. This knowledge and experience come from the GEC Fund Manager, a team drawn from a consortium of organisations, who manage the GEC portfolio of 41 projects across 17 countries on behalf of the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO).

This series is aimed at individuals and organisations (including Fund Managers, INGOs, donors, foundations and consultants) involved in managing large portfolios. The briefs provide practical guidance on how to set up technical, operational and managerial systems or tools to ensure that a large and diverse set of projects effectively delivers for girls. They also provide reflections on successes, challenges and lessons learned.

Introduction: The challenge of conceptualising and measuring sustainability across a diverse portfolio

The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) aims to improve educational opportunities for the world's most marginalised girls. To do this, all 41 GEC projects have a deep understanding of the home, school and community/societal and systemic constraints that girls experience. They design and implement targeted interventions to address these effectively. Ensuring the sustainability of these interventions is paramount, so that girls continue to flourish well beyond the life of a GEC project. In addition, sustainability efforts deepen the impact and reach of each GEC project, which can have a multiplier effect that benefits future generations of girls.

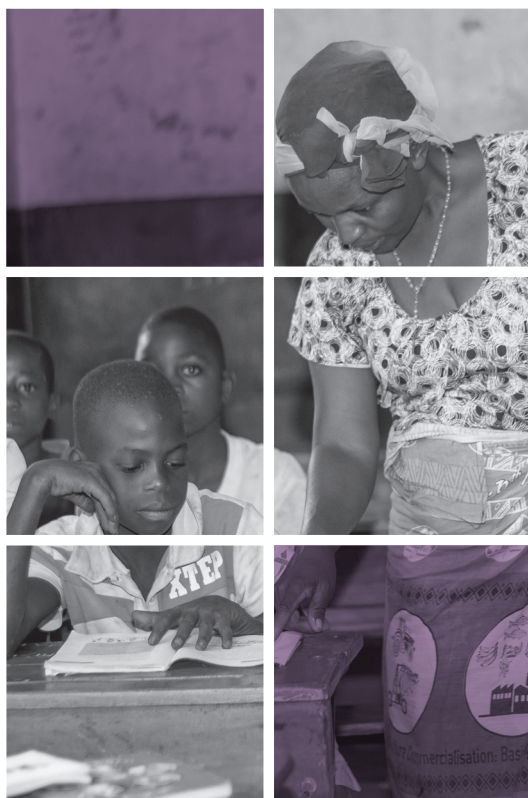
Given these benefits, sustainability constitutes one of four main outcomes for all GEC projects, alongside girls' participation in education, progress in girls' learning, and girls' transition through education, skills or work. Although all projects share this set of outcomes and have a great deal of experience in designing and

implementing interventions to support girls' education, few projects have deep expertise in conceptualising, planning for and measuring the sustainability of these interventions. This is understandable, as the focus of most education programming, including the GEC, is on delivering intended results as quickly and effectively as possible. In addition to this, sustainability is often an afterthought, or only comes into sharp focus towards the latter half of a project cycle. The Fund Manager took steps to ensure that this was not the case. Nonetheless, ensuring that all 41 projects were sufficiently planning for and implementing activities to achieve sustainability had many challenges.

For example, clarifying if and how GEC projects are making progress towards achieving sustainability has been a longstanding challenge. Each project has their own vision and understanding of what constitutes a sustainable intervention for marginalised girls and how to achieve this. For example, a project in Kenya conceptualised sustainability at the individual level and has seen success through girls taking up local leadership roles and mentoring other girls in their communities. However, a number of projects in Nepal conceptualised sustainability at a systems level and have seen success through establishing a national-level network to promote girls' inclusive education, which is currently being supported and adopted by the federal government of Nepal. This variety in conceptualisation poses measurement, comparability, management and communication challenges when assessing sustainability success across the GEC portfolio.

Aggregating progress and results without privileging certain types of sustainability efforts, has not been straightforward. To respond to this problem, the Fund Manager developed a conceptual framework for sustainability to provide clarity on definitions and methods for evaluation – to support the measurement of the GEC's overall and individual projects' sustainability outcomes.

“Sustainability constitutes one of four main outcomes for all GEC projects, alongside girls' participation in education, progress in girls' learning, and girls' transition through education, skills or work.”



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The Girls' Education Challenge (GEC) is the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office's (FCDO) 12-year, £855 million Global Fund which aims to improve the educational opportunities of the world's most marginalised girls. The GEC is comprised of two types of projects: 1) GEC-Transition (GEC-T) projects, which work within schools and support girls most at-risk of dropping out; and 2) Leave No Girl Behind (LNGB) projects, which target highly marginalised girls who have already dropped out or who have never been able to enrol in school.

Providing a comprehensive and realistic conceptual framework: The first step to strengthen sustainability across a portfolio

Sustainability is often viewed as an ultimate goal within the international development sector, but it is a term that is used with varying interpretations and levels of ambition. This was the case for the GEC, in which some projects aimed to ‘hand over’ activities to Ministry of Education actors to sustain at a national level¹, while others sought to sustain activities amongst the local families, communities and schools with whom they worked. Each of these aims represent different levels of ambition and degrees of visibility, yet both represent valuable efforts to sustain lasting improvements to girls’ educational opportunities.

To account for the diverse types of sustainability aims and achievements across the GEC portfolio, the Fund Manager developed a Sustainability Framework, grounded in research literature, to categorise five different ‘sustainability goals’ that comprehensively acknowledge the different scopes of sustainability, as well as realistic levels of ambition.² These include:

1. **Contribution** – knowledge, practices and/or processes are demonstrated/introduced to a targeted beneficiary group. This is what any project should achieve during its lifespan, at a minimum.
2. **Continuation** – knowledge, practices and/or processes are *established* within the targeted beneficiary group. This means that there is acceptance and a consistent application of new knowledge/practices that were introduced.
3. **Adoption** – established knowledge, practices and/or processes are *integrated within existing systems*, meaning that the new knowledge/practices will likely continue after the life of the project.

4. **Replication** – knowledge, practices and/or processes are *picked up or replicated by other actors* to benefit new people, in addition to the original beneficiary group. These efforts generally occur during and/or beyond the life of the project.
5. **Scaling** – knowledge, practices, processes are *replicated at a large scale* (i.e., at district, regional or national scale), generally by government actors. The overall aim is to facilitate a multiplier effect in which the benefits of new knowledge/practices are realised by a significant number of people over subsequent years.

Each of these goals can be pursued at different levels, including the girl, community, school and national/system level. Each goal can also range in ambition. For example, an intervention could be replicated by a different NGO or project in 20 additional schools, or be scaled by subnational actors throughout two new districts. The most ambitious goal is scaling in all schools, in all districts, which is scaling at the national level (see Figure 1).

“Girls and community members are as much change agents and leaders of sustainability as formal and national leadership.”

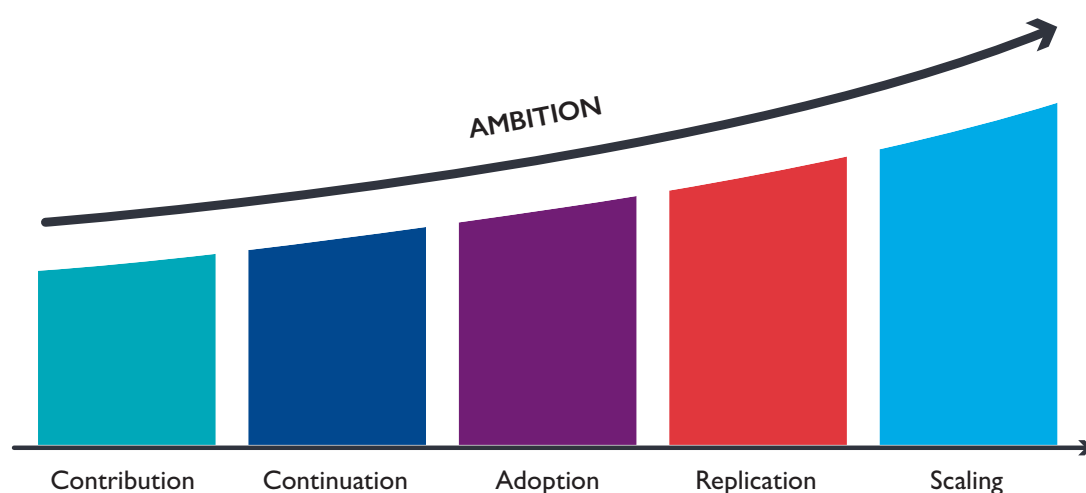


Figure 1: The five types of sustainability goals

¹ The assumption that a Ministry of Education (MoE) will rapidly and easily ‘take over’ a programme or suite of interventions is problematic. At a minimum, interventions need to be 1) financially viable; 2) technically sound; 3) politically palatable; 4) socially acceptable; 5) administratively and operationally feasible; and 6) legally acceptable. There is a great deal of literature that outlines these and other factors that affect whether a government will be willing/able to take something to scale.

² See: Feeny, S., Westthorp, G. and Williams, E. (2022) Understanding sustainable outcomes in international development: Towards a realist evaluation framework. *Journal of International Development*, 35: 21-42

Sustainability goal		Definition	Illustrative example at the girl level	Illustrative example at the community level
Contribution		Knowledge, practices and/or processes are introduced to a targeted beneficiary group	A new safeguarding reporting system has been introduced to girls in a marginalised population	A new safeguarding reporting system has been introduced to a community where one has not previously existed
Continuation		Knowledge, practices and/or processes are established within a targeted beneficiary group	Participating girls have accepted the new reporting system and are consistently using it to report violence	Community members have accepted the new reporting system and consistently action their roles and responsibilities within it
Adoption		Established knowledge, practices and/or processes are integrated within existing systems, knowledge, practices	Participating girls have fully internalised their rights, the reporting system and now demand/ expect action as a result of reporting	Community groups have integrated the reporting system into their 'business as usual' practices – PTAs and SMCs routinely test and check the systems, the resulting actions and their resolution
Replication		Established knowledge, practices and/or processes are picked up by other actors to benefit other people	Girls in a non-participating community have heard about the reporting mechanisms and are engaging in similar behaviours in their own communities	Another NGO picks up the reporting system and seeks to implement it with a different community
Scaling		Benefits of an established set of practices are realised by a significant number of people	All girls in the marginalised population have internalised their rights to safeguarding and utilise the reporting systems	The district education office establishes a safeguarding mechanism for all girls in the district and safeguarding principles have been adopted and embedded into their processes, expectations and resources

Figure 2: The GEC Sustainability Framework: Goals defined and exemplified

Figure 2 gives examples for each sustainability goal at the girl and community levels. This demonstrates that girls and community members can also be seen as gatekeepers and champions of sustainability, just as much as formal national leadership. It also illustrates how multiple sustainability goals can be pursued simultaneously within an individual project or intervention.

In general, all projects' interventions automatically fall under the sustainability goal of 'contribution'. This is because, at a minimum, this level is within a project's sphere of control and aims to contribute knowledge, activities and/or processes that might not have existed prior to the project. Or if they did, these activities disadvantaged girls and the project helped to reverse this.

That said, more ambitious sustainability goals were imperative for the GEC. Continuation of new knowledge and activities by GEC beneficiaries was a minimum standard and the adoption of knowledge/activities within family, school or district structures would help to ensure benefits to future generations of girls within those communities. Adoption by other implementers, or by the Ministry of Education at a national scale, was an ambition not necessarily assumed for all GEC projects, particularly those working outside of the formal education system.³

However, many GEC projects did have these more ambitious sustainability goals and recognised that replication and scaling involve a wide range of stakeholders and is only feasible with certain political, social and economic factors on the ground. These factors include:

1. Local and national political will
2. Organisational will, ambition and capacity
3. Social and political capital
4. Sectoral coordination
5. Serendipity
6. The ability to identify converging agendas from the individual to the national levels

³ This was the case for Leave No Girl Behind projects that generally provided accelerated learning programmes for out-of-school girls. These interventions (and girls) often sat outside of the remit of MoE, making it difficult to cultivate the relationships needed for potential replication/scale-up.

Using the Sustainability Framework to develop projects' Sustainability Plans

The GEC's Sustainability Framework allowed projects to identify key interventions in their programming that they believed had the potential to be sustainable, as well as component parts of interventions that could be sustained. This process formed the basis of project's Sustainability Plans, which prompted them to be more specific and intentional about what was required to achieve a particular sustainability goal, including considering different stakeholder engagement activities for each goal.

To discern the sustainability potential of their interventions, projects were asked to consider four aspects of each intervention. These were:

1. **The degree of alignment with national education policy and plans.** How does this intervention align with or fit into national education sector plans?
2. **The cost of their intervention.** What would it cost to deliver by another party without leveraging project resources?
3. **The data and evidence about the cost and results of the intervention.** Was the evidence (i.e., evaluation data and dedicated research) valid and reliable?
4. **The capacity required to deliver and maintain the intervention.** How could this capacity be transferred or built as part of the sustainability strategy?

After considering these questions, projects finalised their Sustainability Plans ([click here for the GEC Sustainability Plan Template and Guidance Note](#)). The Fund Manager staff who were familiar with the project took the role of the 'critical friend', drawing on the latest project evaluation data and wider contextual knowledge to test if projects' prioritised interventions would achieve the intended sustainability goals. Once the project's Sustainability Plan was agreed, timeframes were decided for the delivery of activities.



Box 1. Supporting 'I Choose Life' to gain traction with the Kenyan Ministry of Education

Throughout its project lifecycle, the 'I Choose Life' project achieved great 'adoption' success through having its mentoring handbook integrated in all project government schools, including an explicit timetabled session for mentoring within these schools. The FM worked with the project to develop their action plan to strategically engage ministry, multilateral and private sector partners. This resulted in the mentorship scheme now featuring in the Kenyan National Education Sector Plan and the development of a resourced implementation plan for the national roll-out of the scheme. Implementation partners such as UNICEF are now formally tasked with responsibilities to achieve this plan. Furthermore, ICL has also secured funding from SIDA to further work on youth empowerment through their mentorship model beyond the MoE.

Box 2. Supporting Link Malawi to build a coalition around Community Based Education

As a result of the FM's revised sustainability guidance in 2021 and 2022, Link Education's TEAMGirl project in Malawi developed a more targeted approach to sustainability which allowed them to raise their ambition around potential scale-up of activities at the system-level. The Link Malawi team took a lead role in the harmonisation of Complementary Basic Education (CBE) nationwide; working with the Ministry and five other NGOs to develop a single model of CBE, which would be adopted into policy alongside an accompanying implementation framework.

To action this, the project hosted the first CBE conference alongside the MoE, which convened high-level representation from many relevant departments, NGOs, and other critical stakeholders. The conference served as a forum to draw together inputs for the policy draft across various thematic areas. Link Malawi intends to provide a draft consolidated CBE policy for the MoE to review and budgets for operationalisation have already been allocated to CBE within district offices. More critically, the MoE's statement in the National Education Sector Plan 2020-30 sets out CBE as a priority area for the Basic Education Department, for which this CBE policy will serve.

"The GEC's Sustainability Framework allowed projects to identify key interventions in their programming that they believed had the potential to be sustainable, as well as component parts of interventions that could be sustained."

Monitoring implementation progress across the portfolio

Once the projects were implementing their Sustainability Plans, the next challenge was monitoring and measuring progress across the portfolio. Progress towards sustainability goals was tracked for each project. To ensure consistency, the Fund Manager team applied the rubric across all projects on an annual basis. Team members reviewed the degree of progress made on a project's Sustainability Plan in relation to the time remaining in the project's cycle.

Based on this assessment, a score is assigned against a four-tier scale of 'red', 'amber-red', 'amber-green' and 'green' (referred to as a RAAG rating). A red rating indicates a low level of achievement against objectives with no opportunity to change (particularly for projects that had closed). Amber-red indicates significant underachievement but with some success at a small scale. Amber-green indicates ongoing progress (i.e., nascent or potential for sustained change rather than a confirmed achievement but still seen as meeting expectations). Green indicates successful implementation of activities and proven achievement the desired sustainability goal, often at a large scale. Both amber-green and green ratings are viewed as indicators of success. These assessments are conducted annually and form the basis for the GEC Logframe outcome indicator for sustainability.

It should be noted that although these annual assessments analyse the degree to which activities are in the process of creating sustainable outcomes, a more complete assessment of an intervention's achievement of sustainability would need to be conducted several years after project closure. This, of course, is difficult to achieve for a Fund Manager that is also only in operation whilst projects are operational; however, provision could be made for this type of assessment if it is prioritised and budgeted for early on.⁴

Box 3. An annual assessment of sustainability progress across LNGB projects

The GEC portfolio has 13 'Leave No Girl Behind' projects that focus solely on girls who have already dropped out of the education system. At midline, 12 were rated Green or Amber-Green, indicating strong progress. This result, so early in the project cycle, demonstrated the progressive nature of projects' sustainability strategies and how early active involvement of counterparts helped to build ownership for their interventions. For example:

- **ActionAid Kenya's** multi-intervention and multi-level sustainability strategy (i.e. every intervention working at girl, community, school and national levels) earned them a Green rating. Most notably, they established the Kenyan Accelerated Education Guidelines in November 2022.
- **IRC Pakistan's** Digital Library of Audio lessons that were developed as a response to COVID-19 school closures are now being sustained and broadcast on Balochistan-wide radio, post COVID-19. The library has been handed over to the Non-Formal Basic Education Department and in its last phase, the project focused on continuity of broadcasting and getting greater uptake. This is teamed with strong learning gains for girls in both numeracy and literacy.
- LNGB project tools, curricula and materials were also being adopted by government counterparts. This included **Street Child Nepal's** life skills manual and **Plan Zimbabwe's** parent/teacher committee guidance tool.

There was only one LNGB project that received a Red rating. This was due to the fact that the project experienced overarching technical and operational issues that precluded any sustainability planning or implementation efforts.



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⁴ The GEC had an Independent Evaluator that commissioned a study that traced girls from the SOMGEP project in Somalia six years after project closure. Although this study did not specifically assess the sustainability of SOMGEP interventions, it did assess the outcomes for SOMGEP's girls six years on, which were impressive. If assessment of a project's Sustainability Plan is valued, planning/budgeting for this should be done in advance of project closure.

Results from using the Sustainability Framework and Plans

Reframing sustainability on the GEC has allowed sustainability considerations to be mainstreamed throughout projects' work and the overall GEC programme. By using the Sustainability Framework, the GEC has seen many positive effects. These include:

- **Projects can clearly identify sustainability goals and plan accordingly.** The Framework helped projects to develop their Sustainability Plans and the strategies to achieve them. This has meant that sustainability is no longer an afterthought but a means to achieving a project's core work. Developing these plans stopped projects from thinking about sustainability simply in terms of securing more donor funding or assuming that others would replicate and/or scale their model.
- **Projects can clearly demonstrate sustainability success.** The Framework helped to standardise how projects report progress on sustainability, document their results and analyse the factors contributing to those results. This standardisation also supports the Fund Manager's meta-analysis. In a recent analysis of 24 projects' sustainability work, we were able to identify more than 70 examples of interventions with achievements against one of the five sustainability goals.
- **Shared sustainability language and definitions** Framing projects' sustainability goals according to the Framework has helped facilitate productive conversations by providing a structure for the Fund Manager and projects to use when discussing the strategies and the progress being made.
- **A greater understanding of what drives sustainability.** Analysing sustainability results through the lens of the Sustainability Framework has helped to trace the path between projects' potential and their sometimes serendipitous and not-so-straightforward successes. It has

allowed the Fund Manager to understand better what changes brought about the continuation or adoption of new practices and knowledge. It has also prompted opportunities to reflect on sustainability post-project closure and assess opportunities for longitudinal studies, tracer studies and monitoring.

- **Clearer articulation of progress towards sustainability.** The Framework has helped demonstrate a breadth of results and has created space for broader conversations about sustainability. It has allowed the Fund Manager to capture success as progress is being made rather than at one definable end point or 'jackpot' moment. This has helped to set expectations and share results with donors and the wider education sector on an ongoing basis.
- **Aggregating and comparing progress across many sustainability goals.** The RAAG ratings/scores of projects that result from the Fund Manager's rubric for assessment have provided a common unit for comparison and aggregation, despite the diversity of sustainability goals and interventions across the portfolio. The rubric has facilitated strengthened analysis of progress towards sustainability (for individual project and the overall portfolio) and has also enabled more accurate reporting into the GEC Logframe.

For future use of the Sustainability Framework, we recommend applying it during the initial stages of a programme. For the GEC, the Sustainability Framework was developed two years into the programme and some projects were nearing completion. Ideally, action to prioritise and focus attention on sustainability would have happened at an earlier stage.



The GEC Sustainability Framework: A value for money perspective

A VfM analysis of the GEC Sustainability Framework should go beyond just an assessment of costs required to develop and implement it. It should also consider the degree to which the Framework was used and the sustainability results it produced, both for individual projects and across the portfolio.

With regard to costs, the Fund Manager invested staff time to develop the Framework and accompanying tools and guidance, including revisions based on user feedback, to maximise its relevance and effectiveness. This investment equates to the full-time equivalent of 10 days for a senior technical adviser⁵. This represents a one-off cost that can be amortised when spread over the 41 projects in the portfolio, and the number of years it is utilised. This fixed development cost will reap further returns to the investment by projects and others using the framework and tools as open-source materials for their own purposes (noting that there will be some costs for tailoring them).

The FM also incurred set-up and recurrent costs for embedding the Framework and planning template with projects. An online workshop was used to introduce projects to the Framework (approximately one staff day for prep and execution) and the Fund Manager invested 5 days annually per project to monitor and support implementation. A technical adviser for ‘critical friend’ discussions during the Review and Adaptation process, twice a year.

Projects also incurred set up costs as well as recurrent costs to review progress against their Sustainability Plans⁶. These varied by project, based on the number of staff involved in technical, programmatic, and monitoring and evaluation aspects. For example, the amount of time needed to develop a project’s sustainability plan depends on how many consortium partners are involved and the degree of consultation/follow up with partners.

Increasing the sustainability of projects’ interventions increases their overall VfM proposition, particularly compared to projects whose interventions are not sustained. The use of the Framework helped projects to develop activities which brought in funding for replication or scale-up beyond project closure. These types of activities are excellent examples of VfM. Situations where host governments allocate budget to continue activities show the strongest VfM (see Box 4). Often, such activities are implemented at lower costs and implemented more efficiently and cost effectively, learning from the project experiences and real economies of scale. In situations in which revenue is raised and the activities are self-financing these are also very strong examples of VfM.

Box 4. Sustaining a mentorship scheme with the Kenyan Ministry of Education

As a result of sustainability planning, the Jielimishe project implemented by I Choose Life, was able to get its mentoring handbook adopted in all schools of operation and ensure that mentoring sessions were formally timetabled within schools. The Fund Manager worked with the project to plan activities to facilitate even more ambitious sustainability goals. This resulted in the mentorship scheme featuring in the Kenyan National Education Sector Plan and the development of a resourced implementation plan for the national roll out of the scheme. Implementation partners such as UNICEF were formally tasked with responsibilities to implement the plan. Furthermore, ICL also secured funding from SIDA to further work on youth empowerment through their mentorship model beyond the Ministry of Education.

Overall, the total costs incurred by the Fund Manager to implement the Framework within its first year of use was the full-time equivalent of 20.5 days for a senior technical adviser. This is less than 0.38% of the annual FM expenditure of roughly £4.1 million that year. To put this into perspective, the average spend on monitoring and evaluation is 13.7% of the total FM expenditure⁷. Therefore, the relatively low cost of the Sustainability Framework’s implementation, paired with efficient delivery and the significant effects on projects’ sustainability results, makes the Framework very good value for money

⁵ We have not provided actual costs as these will vary over time and context. Fund managers and projects should use the number of days provided and type of staff specified to calculate their own relevant costs.

⁶ Set up costs relate to core project staff members spending time in the introductory online workshop and developing their sustainability plan. Recurrent costs relate to staff participating in ‘critical friend’ discussions with the Fund Manager twice a year. Costs associated with implementation of the plan should be accounted for within general workplan budgets.

⁷ This relatively high percentage for Fund Manager monitoring and evaluation reflects the resource-intensive, experimental and quasi-experimental designs used for project evaluations across the portfolio. Source: GEC Fund Management financial data FY 20-21.

Making the Sustainability Framework and rubric work for you

The Sustainability Framework can be adapted for use with different sectoral specialisms and across various contexts. It is particularly helpful if project theories of change focus on different levels at which change should occur (i.e., individual, community and system). While the Framework was specifically designed for organisations and individuals who are overseeing a portfolio of projects, it is also a valuable tool for individual projects aiming to identify sustainability goals and analyse what is needed to reach them.

Below are reflections and recommendations for those who are interested in adapting the sustainability approach for their own use:

- 1. Sustainability must be part of initial project design.** Whilst the GEC Framework was developed for use during project implementation, it can be useful at the design stage to help teams think through the different components required for sustainable education interventions, securing capacity and ownership from the outset.
- 2. Consider using this Framework when designing a new theory of change** and deciding on work plan activities. Consider how the sustainability ambition is articulated and what can be tracked as ‘becoming sustainable’ over the course of the project or programme.
- 3. Ongoing political economy analysis is essential to move beyond the contribution stage.** Systematically use recurrent political economy analysis to identify serendipitous and strategic opportunities (e.g, changes in government and political will) and update Sustainability Plans accordingly.
- 4. Support projects to heighten the level of ambition where contribution-level gains have been achieved.** As projects track progress and start to show achievement against lower-order sustainability goals, a ‘critical friend’ Fund Manager should continuously support them to raise ambition levels and develop strategies accordingly (if relevant). Conversely, use the Framework to support projects to think through any naïve assumptions about overly ambitious goals.
- 5. Recognise attitudinal change as a foundation for sustainability.** Investing in relationships, advocacy and influencing can enhance any sustainability agenda.



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