

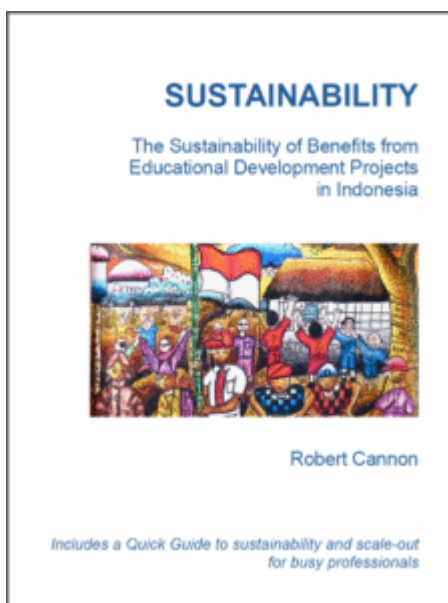
Were donors serious about the sustainability of benefits from projects?

by Robert Cannon

8 July 2025



Junior secondary school children in Indonesia
Photo Credit: USAID PRIORITAS Project/Robert Cannon



The OECD **defines sustainability** as the extent to which the net benefits of a development intervention continue or are likely to continue. Effective development projects require a shared understanding among partners of the definition of sustainability in goal setting and in the design and implementation of interventions.

However, in donors' documentation it is rare to find clarity about definitions and a clear commitment to the idea that development interventions should lead to sustainable benefits. Instead, we usually find definitional weaknesses of the kind illustrated in paragraph 3 of the **technical report** for the UN's Sustainable Development Goals where sustainability is circularly defined in terms of itself. Elsewhere, vague and virtuous uses of "sustainability", for example in connection with sustainable growth, waste, innovation and blue economies, clutter research and development documents. As Heather Farley and Zachary Smith asked in the title of their **aptly titled book**, *Sustainability: If It's Everything, Is It Nothing?*

The idea of the continuity of benefits after project completion reflects the meaning of sustainability as discussed here. But were donors serious about the sustainability of benefits from their development projects? That question emerged during research for my recent **open access book**, *The Sustainability of Benefits from Educational Development Projects in Indonesia*. The evidence available from donors' reports on their education projects since 1971 indicates that the answer to the question is "no".

The donors with five or more education projects in Indonesia were the World Bank (44 projects), the Asian Development Bank (27), Australia (25) and Japan (7). Although lacking independence and **potentially biased**, donors' project reports were the only accessible and comprehensive sources of evidence available for the study of these projects and the sustainability of benefits from them.

Overall, donors' reports showed that 82% of their projects were successful. Sustainability results, though, were far less positive. Donors approached evaluation in two ways. First, before project completion, they evaluated the *likely* sustainability of benefits. Only 59% of projects were judged likely to provide sustainable benefits. However, *actual* post-project sustainability was evaluated for only 23, or 20%, of the 114 projects. Of those 23, 52% demonstrated actual sustained benefits beyond project completion. Further analysis by education sub-sectors, and by comparing the data split into two time periods, 1971-1997 and 1998-2021, showed a pattern in which sustainability was achieved in only about half of the projects in each category.

From my research, puzzles about two questions emerged: “should donor-supported development projects lead to sustained benefits beyond the end of the project?” and “should donors know whether or not their projects have produced sustained benefits?”

Common sense suggests the answers should be “yes”. Yet donors' own evidence showed that only about half of their projects had likely or actually sustained benefits. The evidence also revealed donors' limited interest in sustainability. Collectively, donors investigated the actual, post-project sustainability of benefits from only 20% of their projects and ignored the remaining 80%. The ADB showed most interest, evaluating 41% of its projects for actual sustainability. Japan evaluated 29%, the World Bank 9% and Australia just 4% of its projects on this measure.

However, one positive outcome, discussed in my book, was that donors' reports and the development literature did identify lessons for achieving sustainability. These lessons have been condensed in the book into **practical guidelines** for development professionals. Sustainability lessons from other development sectors and in developed countries have been similar, but these lessons have been routinely neglected in project designs, implementation strategies and monitoring and evaluation. An example of early work on lessons learned is AusAID's excellent *Promoting Practical Sustainability*, but this valuable guide has not been updated since its publication in 2000. Little progress has been made since then, and approaches to sustainability remain weak and incoherent.

Since 1971, donors have contributed about A\$9 billion to at least 114 educational development projects in Indonesia.

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Some of that development assistance has been informed by a donor's commitment to sustainability principles. Australian assistance is, or at least around 2014 was, meant to be guided by DFAT's "[Aid statement of principles](#)" which accords priority to sustainability: "Deliver lasting results and impact: we will deliver sustainable impacts and verifiable results ... " Similarly, from (the former) [USAID](#): "The core of the sustainability principle is that development agencies should design programs so that their impact endures beyond the end of the project."

Analysis of project reports revealed two fundamental areas of concern that help us to understand the neglect of sustainability: defining sustainability, and coherence in donor development policies and practices.

In Australia's case, definition is problematic. DFAT's [International Development Programming Guide](#) contains no definition of sustainability. Australia's [International Development Policy](#) neglects the sustainability of benefits and gives priority to Australia's interests above those of intended beneficiaries.

[Policy coherence](#), the alignment of sustainability policies with principles and other relevant policies, is poor. DFAT's guide doesn't discuss sustainability as a key program element. That could be why, for example, the "[Indonesia development program progress report](#)" hasn't evaluated sustainability since 2018-19. Evaluations now focus only on effectiveness, efficiency and gender equality. Nevertheless, other DFAT [policy documents](#) do require the [evaluation of sustainability](#). Such incoherence creates confusion, leaving project implementers with ambiguous guidance and no incentive to focus on sustainability. Documentation from the other donors reveals similar issues of definition and coherence.

Prospects for improving the sustainability of benefits are bleak. The need for donors to address this challenge is emphasised in my book and also in Prema Clarke's [2022 book Education Reform and the Learning Crisis](#). In a recent [Devpolicy Blog](#), Cameron Hill asserted that donors should focus on "... reforming their own practices to get the most out of what is likely to be a much smaller, but still significant global aid pie".

Neglecting to seek a deep understanding of the complexities of educational development and sustainability reflects a lack of professional seriousness. Donors had opportunities to achieve far better project outcomes and reduce the risks of failure by pursuing clearly defined, evidence-based and coherent policy approaches to sustainability and by addressing [the risks of unsustainability](#) so evident in their development policies and practices.

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