Requisites for Achieving Social Sector Project Sustainability

Prasanta Pathak*

Increasing scarcity in available resources for direct use in developmental programmes has made the planners, the funding agencies or investors, the managers and all other concerned stakeholders in the society more and more conscious about the importance of effective and efficient use of resources. As an off-shoot of this growing consciousness, attempts are now being made to use the concept of sustainability in practice so that maximum possible use of invested resources is ensured. A way to measure the extent of use of invested resources is to observe and analyse the returns. It has been found on many occasions that, in spite of investment of all the required resources, the actual level of returns has dropped much below expectation. Such problems are common in all sectors of an economy. However, the solution procedure is likely to differ from one sector to another and from one specific problem to another.

In the social sector, the problem is most complex as there are too many interacting factors, with the human factor in an organised or semi-organised form playing the most crucial and complex role. In the sectors of agriculture, industry and various tertiary activities, things are relatively more organised and function quite systematically because the operational units are of manageable size with well-defined goals and pre-defined levels of accountability of persons involved. But, in the social sector, implementation of any programme or project needs active involvement of not only the providers, including the stakeholders, but also the targeted community, constituted of persons in varying socio-economic, cultural and behavioural categories. The return out of investment, in any social sector programme or project, thus depends, to a great extent, on the

* *Faculty Member, Indian Institute of Health Management Research, Jaipur*

level of participation of not only the providers but also the targeted community.

It is difficult to measure the returns from a social sector programme or project. Various social benefits arising out of implementation of a programme or project might be taken as returns, but their multidimensionality in terms of some quantitative and qualitative features and their complex causal relation with various inputs and environmental factors pose a serious problem in their measurement and subsequent analysis. When the concept of sustainability is defined in terms of flow of social benefits out of an implemented programme or project throughout its intended life-time, its measurement and analysis become much more complicated. The degree of sustainability of a project has been defined by Honadle and Van Saut (1985) as

> the percentage of project-initiated goods and services that is still delivered and maintained five years past the termination of donor resources, the continuation of local action stimulated by the project, and the generation of successor service and initiatives as a result of project built local capacity.

Operations Evaluation Department of the World Bank (OED) (1986) has defined it similarly :

> The term Sustainability describes the ability of a project to maintain an acceptable level of benefit flows through its economic life. While this may often be expressed in quantitative terms involving the internal economic or financial rates of return, benefits may also be qualitatively assessed. For projects in the productive sectors such as industry, the principal measure of performance is output, generally expressed in terms of capacity utilisation, but Bank-supported projects normally have other objectives such as sub-sectoral policies, technology transfer and institution building, which must be assessed qualitatively.

However, it is not easy to assess it when a project is a component of a much broader programme funded by a number of agencies. Pathak et al (1993) have highlighted this in their recent study on sustainability of an NGO-promoted health programme. Actually, the NGO was found following a very holistic approach towards development of human resources and effective health education through provision of required curative services as just a component of their overall development programme. Assessement of sustainability of the health component in such a case should take into account the relevant impact of developmental activities in the other associated social sub-sectors too. These sub-sectors might be women's development, adult education, income generation, wasteland development, *balbari/anganbari* and so on.

Again, the sustainability study at a point of time, five years past the termination of donor resources or investments from government or private agencies, might be useful for evaluation and might also give scope for post-implementation learning about what the problems and causes detrimental to achieving the expected level of sustainability are. But, the information which also needs analysis to exercise control during preparation of the project proposal and its implementation is no less important on the path to attaining sustainability. In fact, one should study the whole growth process of a project, starting from the preparation of the proposal and, only then, might it be possible to detect at an early stage whether things are moving in the right direction in ensuring sustainability. This point has also been highlighted in the study by Pathak *et al* (1993).

The points that must be checked all the time and taken particular care of during the preparation of the project proposal as well as during its implementation are:

(i) targetted community's actual demand for the generation of project-proposed benefits and services ;

(ii) Organised efforts ensuring efficient supply of intended benefits and services with acceptable level of quality so as to satisfy the beneficiaries of the targetted economic or social groups ;

(iii) (a) Organised effort ensuring maintenance of physical infrastructure (including plant and equipment) through systematic procedures ;

(b) active involvement of beneficiaries in the maintenance of physical infrastructure, including efficient recovery of maintenance cost and operating budget ;

(iv) Leadership and supporting capacity of operating agency (or agencies), determined by their long-term past experience and expertise in the relevant field, stability of staff and budget, flexibility to work in coordination with other interested agencies and community organisations including various groups of beneficiaries, readiness to adapt project design and operation, adjusting them to the changing circumstances and so on ;

(v) consistency in the flow of support from various key stakeholders like international agencies, national or state government(s) and their agencies, private bodies at national or state level, the community and different organisations in it and so forth.

The above requirements might get satisfactorily fulfilled if, first of all, the operating agencies are internally well-managed and financially sefl-reliant and also have long-term experience in working at the community level. Secondly, the project must avoid becoming politically controversial so as to enjoy consistent support from the key stakeholders. Thirdly, it must involve, in its organisational functioning, the community leaders and workers too, with well-defined powers and roles delegated to them, to make sure involvement of the targeted community in the implementation of the project and maintenance of infrastructure and other outcomes through mobilisation of local resources. Finally, a very vital requirement is systematic maintenance of a management information system to exercise necessary control over the project-initiated activities and changes in relation to the social environmental factors. Such an information system has to have the necessary flexibility and a broad management perspective so that, with changing circumstances, the project design can be meaningfully adapted on the basis of feed-back information and data and, thereby, a smooth and efficient flow of intended benefits and services to the targeted community could be ensured.

We are putting particular emphasis on serving the community's needs and interests and trying to ensure its active participation in any social sector project because sustainability might be achieved to a great extent if the concerned community could be motivated to own the project. Unfortunately, in many cases. the recipients of the benefits and services are not motivated to own the project. Thus, sometime after the project implementation and the withdrawal of the operating agencies, there remains hardly any effort to maintain the operating organisational structure and the physical infrastructure generated through the resources invested in the project.

Ultimately, the project fails to produce the intended benefits and services throughout its expected economic life. In this context, again, the study by Pathak *et al* (1993) shows how an NGO's long experience of working at village-community level could be very useful in achieving sustainability in its health programmes when it functions involving the community in its organisational structure and also cooperates with the government in bridging the gap between the government agencies and the community. There are also other studies on sustainability and a few good examples are found in Bamberger and Cheema (1990).

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