



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

COAST Evidence Review 3

Programme exit strategies for sustaining climate resilience and prosperity outcomes

This brief presents key findings on how programme exit strategies can contribute to sustaining climate resilience and prosperity outcomes for coastal communities, drawing from an evidence review conducted by COAST's MEL Services team, a structured analysis of 55 sources, primarily academic and some grey literature. Findings have been shared with the COAST programme to support the development of exit strategies by implementing partners.

About the Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition programme (COAST)

Funded through the UK's International Climate Finance, COAST is a multi-year programme under the UK government Blue Planet Fund.

COAST aims to strengthen and sustain adaptive capacities, climate resilience and prosperity for vulnerable coastal communities through the equitable and sustainable management of coastal resources in selected low- and middle-income countries.



FINDING 1

Sustainability plans and exit strategies are useful tools, but only when embedded in programme design

The evidence shows that programmes that are effective in achieving outcomes are not necessarily sustainable. Many interventions struggle to sustain benefits after exit due to four common challenges: unclear sustainability goals; reliance on performance at exit as a proxy for sustainability; separation of sustainability planning from programme design; and limited evidence on how to ensure sustainability. The nature of exit has a significant bearing on effectiveness. Planned exits that engage local partners early, consider multiple pathways, and are inclusive are more likely to support sustained outcomes. In contrast, rushed or reactive exits increase risks to governance, capacity and community trust.

Sustainability plans and exit strategies function as tools to maximise the potential for sustained benefits. Four factors are associated with more effective plans: continued access to financial, human and technical resources; identification of risks and trade-offs; clarity on exit type and approach; and detailed logistical arrangements. Continued access to resources is particularly important, including alternative funding, capacity building, and maintaining stakeholder motivation. The evidence also suggests that sustaining specific activities is less important than sustaining outcome pathways. Flexibility and adaptation are critical, and phased exit models that transfer ownership gradually allow for progressive adjustment over time.

What this means in practice: Embed sustainability planning from the design stage and draw on evidence-based approaches. Phased exit models should be used to support capacity building, adaptation and continuity of outcome pathways.

FINDING 2

Without deliberate inclusion of marginalised groups, exit strategies can reinforce inequalities

Without deliberate planning, exit strategies can unintentionally reinforce existing inequalities. Marginalised groups often have limited access to resources, decision-making power and long-term benefits, even in community-driven programmes.

Evidence shows that poorer households, women and other marginalised groups are frequently underrepresented in decision-making, while local elites are more likely to benefit. In blue economy contexts, transformative change can override traditional livelihoods and cultural practices when social objectives are deprioritised. Perceptions of fairness and inclusion are closely linked to community buy-in and the sustainability of outcomes.

What this means for practice: Sustainability plans and exit strategies should ensure gradual, inclusive and equitable transitions. This includes transferring power, building capacities, preserving cultural livelihoods, recognising Indigenous leadership, and embedding inclusive governance frameworks.

FINDING 3

Environmental and ecological outcomes are often under-prioritised in sustainability planning

Sustainability plans frequently focus on socioeconomic outcomes, while environmental and ecological goals are less consistently addressed. However, these outcomes are vital for long-term ecosystem health and for the resilience and prosperity of coastal communities.

The literature suggests that when exit strategies do not include provisions for sustained environmental stewardship, ecosystem resilience and associated livelihoods may deteriorate. Although livelihood support and economic development are commonly incorporated, the sustainability of ecological interventions, such as habitat restoration and resource management regimes, is less consistently planned for. Effective governance and sustained financial support are critical for maintaining environmental and ecological outcomes over time.

What this means in practice: Exit strategies should include explicit provisions for sustaining environmental and ecological outcomes, including governance arrangements, financial mechanisms and community-led stewardship.

FINDING 4

Systemic shocks and uncertainty pose major risks to sustainability post-exit

Broader systemic conditions such as economic volatility, political and institutional change, and climate impacts, strongly influence sustainability after programme exit. These shocks are often interconnected and unpredictable, making linear planning insufficient. Economic shocks can undermine resource access and livelihoods, political change can weaken policy support, and climate change is increasing environmental risks across systems. Within complex socio-ecological systems, small disturbances can trigger disproportionate impacts, while slower structural changes may go unnoticed.

The literature suggests that resilience and transformative approaches are essential for managing uncertainty. When systems become unsustainable, transformation may be required to create new development pathways. Programmes cannot achieve system-wide transformation alone, but they can support change by targeting leverage points, facilitating coordination, and strengthening adaptive capacity.

What this means in practice: Exit strategies should explicitly account for systemic risk and uncertainty. Systems analysis can be used to identify leverage points and support multi-stakeholder coordination for adaptation and transformation.

FINDING 5

Resilience and transformative capacities are central to sustaining prosperity and adaptive capacity

Adaptation and resilience are increasingly understood as the processes through which development outcomes are sustained. Climate resilience capacities (anticipatory, absorptive, adaptive and transformative) are closely linked to prosperity outcomes, including access to resources and the ability to use them effectively. Prosperity supports resilience by enabling people to absorb shocks and adapt, while resilience capacities help protect and extend prosperity gains. These relationships are mutually reinforcing and operate across social, economic and environmental dimensions.

The literature highlights the importance of transformative capacity: the ability of individuals, institutions and systems to shift toward more sustainable and resilient pathways. Without such capacity to continue to integrate innovative and novel approaches to evolve with unanticipated changes, gains in resilience and prosperity may not be sustained.

What this means in practice: Exit strategies should incorporate resilience thinking and support the continuation of resilience and transformative capacities as part of programme theories of change.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that sustained climate resilience and prosperity do not result automatically from successful programme delivery. Exit strategies and sustainability plans are most effective when embedded throughout programme lifecycles, grounded in resilience thinking, attentive to environmental and equity considerations, and responsive to systemic uncertainty. Sustainable outcomes depend on deliberate design choices, long-term capacity building, inclusive governance and adaptive management. Exit strategies should therefore be treated as integral components of development practice, supporting learning, local ownership and long-term resilience.

The [full evidence review](#) is available here for more detail on the evidence behind the brief.



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