itad

COAST Evidence Review 3

# How can programme exit strategies contribute to sustaining climate resilience and prosperity outcomes in coastal communities?

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## Disclaimer

The views expressed in this report are those of the evaluators. They do not necessarily represent those of the FCDO or any individuals and organisations referred to in the report.

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| | |
|---|---|
| COAST | Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition |
| FCDO | Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office |
| GEDSI | Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion |
| ICF | International Climate Finance |
| IPCC | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| OECD | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| SES | Socio-Ecological Systems |
| UK | United Kingdom (of Great Britain & Northern Ireland) |
| UNFCCC | United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change |

# 1. Introduction

This evidence review sets out to explore how programme exit strategies can contribute to sustaining climate resilience and prosperity outcomes for coastal communities. It has been delivered under the United Kingdom (UK) Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office's (FCDO) Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition (COAST) programme to provide an evidence base that can be used by COAST implementing partners, as well as by implementers and funders beyond the COAST programme, to inform their exit planning. It focuses on considerations for sustaining outcomes in the long term, beyond programme exit.

## 1.1. Planning for sustainability in COAST

The COAST programme, funded by the UK's International Climate Finance (ICF), is a seven-year programme designed and commissioned by FCDO 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[1] in selected low and middle-income countries.[2]

To achieve these aims, COAST sets out to:

- **protect** coastal communities and marine ecosystems by building climate resilience
- facilitate enhanced **productivity** and sustainability of coastal livelihoods
- ensure equitable access and rights for **people**, specifically the most vulnerable, in coastal resource management.[3]

The programme aims to do this in an inclusive way by being gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) responsive,[4] and GEDSI transformative[5] wherever possible.

To maximise the potential of sustainable outcomes, COAST implementing partners are required to develop plans that set out: how they intend to exit from particular aspects of the programme during their funding period, in line with programme adaptations; and how they will close, at the end of their funding period, in a way that offers the best opportunity for resilience and prosperity outcomes for coastal communities to be sustained. To support, reflect on and

Box 1. Definitions associated with COAST's key aims

**Resilience** is defined as "the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses without compromising their long-term prospects" (Sturgess and Sparrey, 2016). In line with the focus of COAST, this evidence review primarily examines resilience at the individual and community levels.

**Prosperity** is defined by Moore et al. (2023) as "the value created with the wealth [individuals] have". They conceptualise a multidimensional prosperity that is "citizen-led and deeply embedded in place, culture and context". In COAST, it is theorised that prosperity will be achieved through "a more sustainable use of the marine environment".

[1] See COAST impact statement.

[2] COAST priority countries include Mozambique, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam. COAST also works in broader geographies, such as Kenya, Tanzania and Bangladesh.

[3] As captured in the COAST Theory of Change.

[4] i.e. addressing the differential needs and vulnerabilities of women and marginalised populations. Such programmes build assets, capabilities and opportunities for women and marginalised groups. These groups can voice their needs and concerns, which are listened to and addressed in the context of the project.

[5] Addressing unequal power relations and seeing institutional and societal change. Women and marginalised groups have active control over resources and decisions in the context of the project.

learn from the thinking behind these exit strategies, COAST's programme-level learning question on exit strategies ("How might we develop and implement a robust exit strategy?") has been prioritised for the financial year 2025/26. Consultations with core COAST implementing partners and FCDO have highlighted knowledge gaps and questions around exit strategies – what makes an effective exit strategy, how to stagger exit approaches, and how broader systemic conditions that might affect the sustainability of programme outcomes can be addressed.

## 1.2. Focus of the evidence review

This evidence review summarises recent literature that explores conceptual thinking and academic theory about sustainability, and discusses implications for exit strategies and sustainability plans. In terms of time horizon, this evidence review focuses on both the continuation of benefits that are already evident (actual sustainability) and the likelihood of future ones (prospective sustainability).

In the following sections, we discuss:

- the use of exit strategies and sustainability plans for **planning for sustainability in development programmes** (Section 2)
- how to **sustain long-term outcomes** (Section 3)
- the **influence of broader systemic conditions** and how this could be accounted for in exit strategies (Section 4)
- **conclusions** emerging from the review, along with **associated recommendations** for COAST stakeholders (Section 5).

# 2. Planning for sustainability in development programmes

## 2.1. Using exit strategies and sustainability plans to support sustainability

Sustainability is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2021) as the extent to which the net benefits of an intervention will, or are likely to, continue. It relates to all points of an intervention's theory of change and its wider context. Sustainability of outcomes is integral to the long-term success of international development programmes, including COAST. As a result, many programmes create – or are required to create – exit strategies and sustainability plans that detail how the benefits they bring about will continue after the conclusion of the programme.

Exit strategies and sustainability plans are important to guide implementers' and funders' exit from a programme (Ndungutse, 2019). This is because effective programmes are not automatically sustainable ones (Rogers and Coates, 2015). Studies in various sectors (e.g. agriculture, public health) show that sustainability of outcomes is influenced by a complex network of factors, including inputs, activities, organisational capacity, and external support (Rai et al., 2025; Le et al., 2023; Schell et al., 2013). As we will explore in Section 4, it is also about human and system capacities and their ability to transform in the face of insurmountable shocks and stressors.

Exit strategies and sustainability plans are complementary. Whereas **sustainability plans** aim to consider all of the elements of a project's design that relate to sustainability and ensure the continuation of a projects theory of change, **exit strategies** offer the associated "operational and logistical plan" that details how and when withdrawal of resources will occur (Rogers and Coates, 2015). Both are highly contextual and need to be developed according to programme aims and objectives. However, achieving clarity in processes for sustainability is complex and challenging. This review has identified four main difficulties in developing exit strategies and sustainability plans, as set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Difficulties in developing exit strategies and sustainability plans

| | |
|---|---|
|  | **There is a lack of clarity in sustainability goals**<br>There is a lack of clarity in what a sustainable programme looks like in different sectors and contexts. Uncertain goals in terms of the scope and time frames of sustainability may result in uncertain strategies and plans and in confusion on what constitutes an effective approach to ensure that outcomes are sustained for target beneficiaries in the long term (LeCornu et al., 2023; OECD, 2021). |
|  | **Success at the time of exit does not imply sustained benefits over time**<br>Interventions and programmes are often required to demonstrate success and impact at the time of exit, according to impact indicators. However, there is a difference between an efficient and impactful programme and one whose benefits are sustained after exit. In fact, focus on impact at exit has been found, in certain cases, to "jeopardise investment in longer-term sustainability" (Valuing Voices, 2016). |
|  | **Sustainability planning is often seen as separate from intervention design**<br>It follows from a lack of clarity on the scope of sustainability and its relationship with programme effectiveness that interventions are often designed to achieve success during a short-term window, leaving plans for exit and sustainability of outcomes as a separate process. |

**The evidence on how to ensure sustainability through design and exit is limited**

Much of the literature reviewed highlights that the evidence base on sustainability is limited (e.g. Chaplowe and Hejnowicz, 2021; Le Cornu et al., 2023; Morris et al., 2024; Uitto and Batra, 2022). *Ex post* evaluations are rare, meaning that assessment of exit strategies and approaches themselves, as well as higher-level results and longer-term consequences, are frequently left unevaluated. Where evaluations do exist, they often exclude a focus on unpredictable systemic changes that can impact outcomes, instead guiding a focus on the continuity of nearer term results (Chaplowe and Hejnowicz, 2021). This emphasis limits insight into transformational processes.

## 2.2. Accounting for different exit types

Programme exits themselves come about in different ways and have different forms. The process through which this happens can have a significant bearing on how effective an exit is in sustaining outcomes. Le Cornu et al. (2023) define a typology of exit types, which vary along three dimensions. These can be used to inform what a programme exit, and therefore an associated exit strategy, might look like (see Table 2).

Table 2. Types and dimensions of exit (LeCornu et al., 2023)

| **Exit type** | |
|---|---|
| **Embedded exits** | These are defined early in the programme and are associated with a known and pre-arranged ending. They are frequent in programmes with a set implementation time frame. |
| **Organic exits** | These are unforeseen at the time of project design, and are triggered during the implementation phase by internal and external drivers that prompt the programme to end or shift focus. |
| **Forced exits** | These are disruptive, unforeseen and abrupt terminations, which often result in rushed and unplanned closure processes. |
| **Exit dimension** | |
| **What is ending** | The specific element of the programme that is closing, e.g. a particular geography, theme, component, funding stream or other resource. |
| **At what scale** | The relative size of the programme or aspect of it being exited – i.e. the length, geography, and investment level. |
| **To what degree** | A differentiation between complete and partial exits. |

The process by which exits come about and are implemented has a significant bearing on how effective an exit is in sustaining outcomes. Considering exit strategies at early stages of intervention development and making them an integral part of the decision-making process is critical for sustaining outcomes (Ndombi et al., 2020; LeCornu et al., 2023). When planned with partners in advance of close-out, exits can ensure better programme outcomes and encourage commitment to programme sustainability (Gardner et al., 2005). A "diversity of voices, stakeholders, locales and visions" helps identify "alternative pathways to prosperity" and "additional levers for policy intervention" (Moore et al., 2023), thus contributing to effective and innovative project designs with inherent links to local organisations, national government and the private sector that are more sustainable and contextually relevant (Nuer et al., 2021).

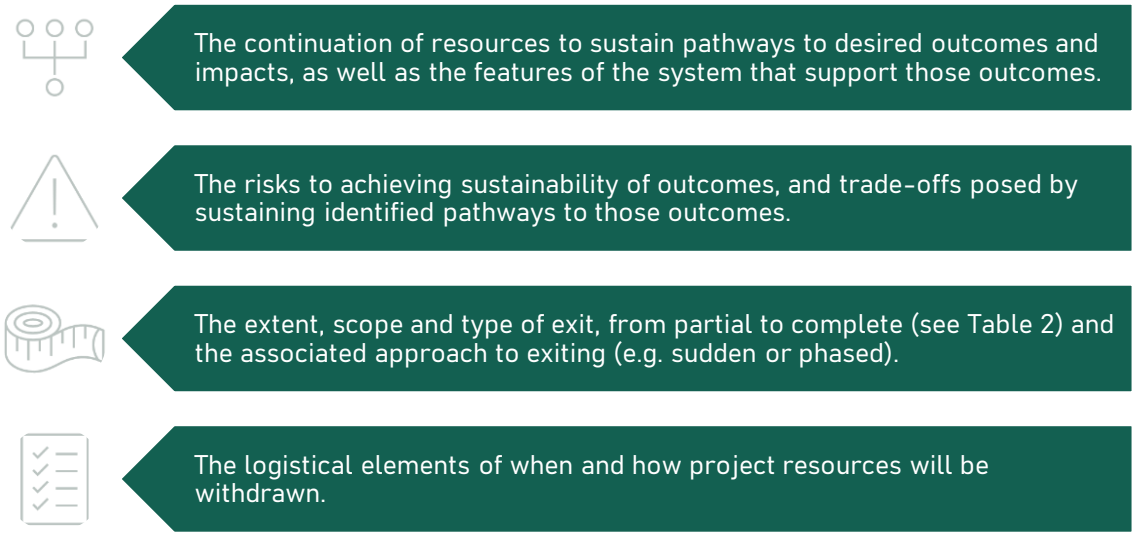
By contrast, exits that are poorly planned and executed, with rushed or reactive sustainability and exit plans, pose significant risks for the people and places that are close to the intervention.

They can result in wasted resources, weakened governance, and loss of community trust, ultimately compromising conservation goals (Le Cornu et al., 2023).

## 2.3. Elements and approaches of sustainability and exit strategies

**Sustainability and exit plans cannot guarantee the sustainability of outcomes, but they offer useful tools and processes for maximising the potential of this.** To offer the best potential for achieving sustainability, effective sustainability plans consider and address the factors presented in Figure 1 (OECD, 2021; LeCornu et al., 2023).

Figure 1. Factors considered and addressed by effective sustainability plans




**The focus of sustainability plans is often on what is required to maintain or sustain a specific intervention or initiative.** It is held that, to sustain its net benefits, an initiative requires a continued source inputs for the delivery of its activities and its independent operation after the programme ends (Noltze et al., 2018; OECD, 2021; Rogers and Coates, 2015). According to Valuing Voices (2016), a dependable flow of resources must be identified before a project ends and is a precondition for its sustainability. This includes financial, human and technical inputs and resources, as well as stakeholder motivation to continue to engage (see Table 3).

Table 3. Resources to be identified before a project ends

| | |
|---|---|
| **Financial inputs** | The financial sustainability of interventions is a high priority in any exit planning. There are various models for this, with varying implications for sustainability – from immediate options of alternative donor support and fees for services, to more embedded, scalable models that include establishing profitable businesses for services and securing government budgets through gaining institutional and policy support (Rogers and Coates, 2015; Khan and Khan, 2021). Approaches need to be tailored to context to ensure their acceptability. For instance, where a service has been provided free of charge through a development programme, communities may not be willing to start paying to access it, thus jeopardising the financial resources to sustain the programme (Coates et al., 2016). |
| **Human resources** | Sustaining stakeholders' engagement in achieving a particular outcome is necessary for sustainability. Maintaining a behaviour initiated by an initiative, such as the use of a nature-based solution or the respect of a protected area for fishing, is closely linked to the continued delivery of programme ambitions (Moore et al., 2017; Moore and Boldero, 2017). This is complex in that it requires sustaining motivation among multiple stakeholder groups that work together towards a goal. Critical factors for sustaining this motivation include meaningful participation throughout the programme life cycle (Rogers and Coates; Nuer et al., 2021), which can foster a sense of ownership, and delivery of |

| | |
|---|---|
| | tangible benefits, which can support stakeholder buy-in. In Vietnam, for example, fishing communities helped shape sustainable fishing regulations, demonstrating the power of inclusive rule-making (Chen et al., 2020). |
| **Technical resources** | Ongoing capacities are required to ensure that outcomes can be sustained. This can be through training, sustained mechanisms for capacity support (Valuing Voices, 2016), and participatory approaches (Funk et al., 2022), introduced during programme implementation and further supported through phased exits. These mechanisms focus on building the capacities at individual, community and institutional levels. Capacity building that also empowers communities to have some control natural resources has been shown to be critical to maintaining socio-economic outcomes in coastal fishing communities (Rwamugira and Mziray, 2022). |

**Although some form of ongoing input to support pathways to achieving outcomes is essential, there is a question about how realistic or valuable it is for specific activities and interventions to be sustained in the long-term.** For example, in a meta-synthesis of German Development Cooperation evaluations, Noltze et al. (2018) found that three to five years post-programme, partner capacities were much more likely to be sustained than specific implementation structures.

**Instead, the focus might be better placed on the outcomes that need to be sustained, acknowledging necessary flexibility and adaptation in the specific pathways for achieving those, especially in the context of long-term sustainability.** Frameworks such as the Dynamic Sustainability Framework suggest that adaptation of activities, rather than strict maintenance, can support sustainability and fit operations to changing contexts while still achieving desired outcomes (Chambers et al., 2013). The capacity of interventions to adapt over time (both during implementation in its original form and after exit) is recognised as a key factor in sustaining benefits (Moore et al., 2017; Chambers et al., 2013).

**Phased exit models, in which the responsibility and ownerships of activities is gradually transferred to local stakeholders, can allow for this progressive adaptation.** In doing this, phased approaches can build the technical and operational capacity of local stakeholders to take ownership of processes in a supported environment (Rogers and Coates, 2015). Phased models usually incorporate the use of milestones to mark the readiness of local stakeholders to take on progressive ownership and responsibility. These can informed through regular surveys and explicit assessments that establish a benchmark for taking exit strategies forward (Khan and Khan, 2021; Noltze et al., 2018), and can include indicators for participation in mobilisation and training (Rogers and Coates, 2015). However, participation alone does not guarantee sustainability. Superficial engagement that is focused solely on incentives or disincentives may fail to address the deeper values, beliefs and worldviews that drive long-term behavioural change (Wamsler et al., 2020). Moreover, some community-driven interventions risk losing momentum over time if not adequately supported (OECD, 2021).

# 3. Sustaining long-term outcomes

## 3.1. Sustainability of climate resilience and prosperity outcomes

**In order to maximise potential of sustaining programme outcomes, sustainability plans must include resilience thinking as a key element. Exit strategies should set out how to exit in such a way that resilience and transformative capacities might themselves be sustained as a mechanism through which to sustain programme outcomes.**

The evidence reviewed indicates that **the sustaining of resilience and prosperity outcomes is closely intertwined.** Adaptation and resilience are increasingly conceptualised as the fundamental process through which development outcomes, such as prosperity, are sustained (Ungar, 2018). Similarly, capacities required for building resilience are reliant on being prosperous, i.e. having adequate resources to adapt effectively, and choosing to use those to adapt (see Section 1.1, which defines prosperity as a citizen-led approach to creating value with the resources available to them (Moore et al., 2023)). For example, in small-scale fisheries of Tanzania, it was found that wealthier fishers had a greater capacity to absorb short-term shocks and losses during fisheries closures than poorer fishers (Taylor et al., 2021), illustrating the socioeconomic dimensions of resilience capacities. Prosperity itself is multidimensional, and it is essential for initiatives seeking to sustain prosperity to explore the intersections between and across prosperity dimensions (Moore et al., 2023).

**Community resilience outcomes can be understood as a set of interconnected capacities which need to be sustained for resilience outcomes to be sustained.** In relation to climate resilience, these capacities are often conceptualised as anticipatory, absorptive, adaptive and transformative capacities (e.g. Bahadur et al., 2015) (see Box 3). More general resilience capacities have been defined as related to social capital, economic development, information and communication, and community competence (Folke, 2016).

Box 3. Climate resilience capacities

**Anticipatory capacity** – "the ability of social systems to anticipate and reduce the impact of climate variability and extremes through preparedness and planning" (Bahadur et al., 2015, p. 23). Bahadur et al. explain that anticipatory capacity shows that people recognise or predict shocks, stresses or disturbances, and take proactive steps to prevent them and/or protect themselves. An example would be to cultivate mangroves and build sea walls to protect a coastal zone from storms and sea level rise.

**Absorptive capacity** – "ability of social systems to absorb and cope with the impacts of climate variability and extremes […] it is concerned principally with functional persistence, that is, the ability of a system to bear, and endure the impacts of climate extremes" (Bahadur et al., 2015, p. 30).

**Adaptive capacity** – "the ability of social systems to adapt to multiple, long-term and future climate change risks, and also to learn and adjust after a disaster. It is the capacity to take deliberate and planned decisions to achieve a desired state even when conditions have changed or are about to change" (Bahadur et al., 2015, p. 13). An example is fishers diversifying the species they catch in order to reduce vulnerability to impacts on specific species. Bahadur et al. comment that awareness of changing conditions is key to their interpretation of adaptive capacity, so that communities can guard against weather shocks and stresses.

**Transformative capacity** – resilience includes the ability to "transform with change – to create a fundamentally new system" (Reyers et al., 2022). "Fundamental transformative capacity" for

resilience denotes "the capacity of individuals and organizations to be able to both transform themselves and their societies in a deliberate, conscious way" (Asadzadeh et al., 2022).

**Improved climate resilience capacities are framed as a way of managing and even thriving when faced with climate impacts. In doing so, these capacities can contribute to sustainable development.** Cinner et al. (2018) outlined five key domains that can enhance adaptive capacity to climate change: the physical assets that people draw upon; the flexibility to change strategic approaches; the ability for stakeholders to organise and act collectively; learning approaches that recognise and respond to change; and the agency to determine whether to change or not. Early seminal work by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggested that processes intending to strengthen adaptive capacity are comparable to those for sustainable development. These include: engaging meaningful stakeholder participation and local experience; reducing inequities (i.e. related to differential resources and wealth among groups, intergenerational inequities, and long-standing structural inequities); delivering integrated approaches; and improving access to resources, institutional capacity and efficiency and infrastructure. The same report highlighted that aligning climate adaptation with broader development goals is key to enhancing adaptive capacity (IPCC, 2001). For example, adaptation is anticipated to be most effective when integrated into existing frameworks, including coastal zone management and sustainable development strategies.

However, **although international development programmes aim to strengthen resilience capacities of individuals and communities during the programme's lifetime, they are often limited in accounting for ongoing and future climatic risks and impacts**, and the resilience of stakeholders to those after programme exit (IPCC, 2001). The high vulnerability of tropical marine fisheries and aquaculture to climate change necessitates an understanding of future climate risks, effective adaptation, and longer-term mitigation to inform climate resilient sustainable development pathways (Lam et al., 2020; Maulu et al., 2021).

**Current thinking in academic literature is that not only do resilience capacities need to be sustained in order for people, communities and systems to continue to be resilient to ongoing shifts in the system, but that "fundamentally transformative pathways"** (see Asadzadeh et al., 2022) **are required to achieve sustainability and ongoing resilience.** Transformative capacities are associated with the capability to promote systemic change – to shift the existing system to one that is more sustainable and resilient (Asadzadeh et al., 2022). They facilitate the deliberate integration of innovative and novel approaches to achieve transformative pathways to resilience. Transformation at the level of the system is discussed further in Section 4.

## 3.2. Sustaining environmental and ecological outcomes

**In the context of coastal resource interventions, and in that of other interventions engaging in the natural resource space, exit strategies must include provisions for sustaining environmental and ecological outcomes post-intervention.** Fisheries and other marine systems are dynamic and intricate, blending both social and ecological factors, and are influenced by oceanographic shifts and biological responses alongside socioeconomic conditions and interactions (Taylor et al., 2021). The literature suggests that when interventions do not explicitly include provisions for sustained environmental stewardship, ecosystem resilience, as well as monetary benefits, may deteriorate. For example, Lam et al. (2020) suggest that climate change scenarios and ecosystem resilience are not well incorporated into tropical fisheries management initiatives, and so these ecosystems and the communities they support are at risk.

**However, although livelihood support and economic development are commonly incorporated into sustainability planning, the sustainability of ecological interventions – such as habitat restoration or resource management regimes – is less consistently addressed.** Many climate and development programmes treat environmental outcomes as secondary to socioeconomic gains, with environmental or ecological goals less well defined or planned for; yet coastal ecosystems are integral to both resilience (through natural buffers and adaptive capacities) and prosperity (through fisheries, tourism, and ecosystem services). For example, Veitayaki (2014) explains that in Fijian communities, sustainable management of the marine environment is overlooked by an emphasis on production in order to engage in the cash economy. This has led to overexploitation of resources and the marine environment.

**Effective governance and financial support are considered critical for sustaining environment and ecological outcomes.** Morris et al. (2024) highlighted the critical overarching need to develop a coherent governance structure and financial support for nature-based coastal protection initiatives that would ensure outcome sustainability. More specifically, Evans et al. (2023) found that integrated governance structures that support community-led interventions contributed to sustaining both ecological *and* economic outcomes across different sectors in the coastal blue economy. Focusing aid towards provision and preservation of the 'global commons' highlights the need to integrate development with the wider environment, given their interdependence and the transboundary nature of the environment (Lazell and Petrikova, 2025).

## 3.3. Sustaining outcomes for marginalised groups

**Exit strategies play a critical role in ensuring that development interventions do not inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities.** Without deliberate planning, the most vulnerable groups – those with limited access to resources, decision-making power, or social capital – can be excluded from the long-term benefits of climate resilience and prosperity initiatives.

**Community-driven programmes, although promising, do not automatically lead to equitable outcomes.** A synthesis of 23 programmes across 21 low and middle-income countries found that the poorest community members often remain underrepresented in decision-making processes. Women, in particular, participate less actively, and local elites are more likely to benefit, because of their greater capacity to navigate project systems (White et al., 2018).

**Transformative changes, especially in blue economy contexts, can disproportionately affect marginalised groups**, sometimes overriding traditional rights, livelihoods, and cultural practices. This is particularly true when economic growth is prioritised over social objectives (Evans et al., 2023). A lack of equity in the distribution of benefits derived from transformative changes is problematic from both an ethical and a sustainability perspective. Funk et al. (2022) show how the perceptions of equity are closely linked to community buy-in, using the example of an aquaculture project in Madagascar to highlight the importance of access mechanisms for ensuring equitable participation. This aligns with OECD (2021) guidance, which explicitly links sustainability and inclusion and encourages the consideration of the links between sustainability and inclusion, including the capacity and commitment from diverse stakeholder groups to generate and maintain an environment that is conducive to equality and empowerment over the medium to long term.

The literature offers several guiding principles, despite a general focus on inclusive processes and limited evidence on inclusive outcomes (Funk et al., 2022). These are presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Guiding principles from the literature

1. **Design exit strategies and sustainability plans that ensure a gradual, inclusive and equitable transition**, with mechanisms to distribute the costs and benefits of transformation fairly (Termeer et al., 2024; Evans et al., 2023).
2. **Share and transfer power to marginalised groups** by building their skills, capacities, and access to resources and platforms for meaningful participation in the transition process (Matin et al., 2018).
3. **Preserve cultural traditions and livelihoods** as part of sustainability planning (Termeer et al., 2024).
4. **Recognise and elevate Indigenous knowledge and leadership** as drivers of innovation and resilience, as seen in coastal communities in China, Vietnam and Samoa (Chen et al., 2020).
5. **Institutionalise inclusive governance and legal frameworks** that embed the rights and participation of marginalised groups (Ndombi et al., 2020).

**This calls for a shift from a "blue economy" to a "blue community" approach** – one that has at its centre equity, local leadership, and community-defined prosperity (Campbell et al., 2021). By embedding these principles into exit strategies, COAST and similar programmes can ensure that the most marginalised are not only included but also have power and agency to sustain and shape the outcomes that affect their futures. By centring equity and the needs of marginalised groups in the design and implementation of exit strategies, transformative changes can be more likely to sustain positive outcomes for these communities over the long term.

## 4. Influence of broader systemic context and conditions post-exit

**Addressing post-exit external systemic conditions and shocks is essential to sustaining programme outcomes. Processes of resilience and transformational change need to be integrated into sustainability plans and exit strategies in order to address the uncertainty posed by these conditions.**

External conditions pose risks to the sustainability of project outcomes – some more than others (Reyers et al., 2022). For example:

- **Economic shocks** impact upon resource access, price stability and availability of inputs. Economic shocks can be triggered by a diversity of influences, from environmental to political and social shifts. For example, COVID-19 imposed unforeseen stresses on productive and human capital, impacting on financial capacity for sustainable development progress (Aly et al., 2022).
- **Political and institutional change** can have implications for policy support, management, resources and networks required for sustaining outcomes. For example, small-scale fisheries are often reliant on fishing for survival, making them vulnerable to the effects of industrial overfishing (Funk et al., 2022). Some fishers are more able than others to absorb these kinds of changes. Moreover, Taylor et al. (2021) found that fishers who targeted fewer species were less able to absorb changes in management measures which may be species or area-focused.
- **Climate change impacts** are growing and are increasingly unpredictable, posing significant risk of shocks across all sectors of a system. Impacts on aquaculture, for example, include direct influences on the physiology of fish stocks in production systems, and indirect influences on primary and secondary productivity, ecosystem structure, input supplies, and costs of essential goods and services for aquaculture producers (Maulu et al., 2021). It follows that these impacts will have negative economic consequences for those engaged, in particular for poorer communities.

**Such conditions are highly interlinked and unpredictable within a given system and therefore require a combined response within sustainability plans and exit strategies.** Within complex systems, cause and effect are disproportional and non-linear, making it impossible to predict when shifts and changes might occur and the extent of their impact (Folke, 2016). This relates not only to shocks and extremes but also to slower and less visible dynamics. Such uncertainty can make it hard to plan and implement exit strategies; as the system evolves, the rules of the game change (Hoque et al., 2017).

**Recognising these interconnected challenges and factoring them into sustainability planning and exit strategies is essential, as is understanding and clearly communicating the likely associated constraints to programme sustainability.** In the context of increasingly turbulent, complex and interconnected systemic challenges, Reyers et al. (2022) state that current approaches to sustainable development are not sufficient to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes. In the context of "true uncertainty and unknown unknowns" (Folke, 2016) presented by broader systemic conditions, resilience is suggested as the most effective approach to mitigating risks (e.g. Gardner et al., 2005; Folke, 2016; Reyers et al., 2022; Aly et al., 2022).

**Transformative resilience of socio-ecological systems (SES) is proposed as an approach that may allow for unanticipated risks to be withstood.** The concept of SES resilience represents the

ability of systems – and the people, communities and societies within them – to evolve with unanticipated and multi-temporal change (Reyers et al., 2022). Where systemic conditions become too difficult to sustain sound SES, transformation becomes essential to achieve sustainability (Folke, 2016; Wamsler et al., 2020). SES resilience thinking discusses going beyond absorbing and adapting, to transforming in order to create a *fundamentally new system* (Reyers et al., 2022).

Similarly, in responding to the effects of climate change, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (2024) argues for the need for adaptation measures that change the fundamental attributes of natural and human systems. This is defined as 'transformational adaptation'. It requires widespread, rapid and novel transformation that expands beyond the often-seen focus of adaptation efforts on individuals and households, limited geographical areas and single-sector activities and policies (UNFCCC, 2024). These newly transformed systems would be positioned to withstand the broader systemic shocks that might be experienced post-exit.

**Conceptions of transformational change allow for an optimistic view of systemic shocks, whether economic, political, social or otherwise.** They see such shocks as windows of opportunity for abrupt change (Termeer et al., 2024) and as crises that can create space for new ways of thinking and operating (Folke, 2016), enabling resilience of the system and people within it.

**For sustainability plans and exit strategies to contribute to sustaining outcomes through processes of transformational change, they will need to deliberately promote such processes and address exit at all levels of the system.** Deliberate transformation is about breaking down the resilience of the existing system to generate a new, resilient system (Folke, 2016). This requires alignment within the system at different levels, and involves crossing thresholds and shifting towards new and novel trajectories of development. It requires that we look beyond interventions as the main agent of change and instead consider them as one of many interrelated factors (Chaplowe and Hejnowicz, 2021).

**The question of how to promote deliberate transformation can be explored through a number of theoretical frameworks.** Small-scale actions – for example local experiments, good practices, and 'seeds of change' – can play a role in *demonstrating* transformative potential. However, they are insufficient for society-wide transformative change (Sulistyadi et al., 2024). Existing research on transformative adaptation for resilience is either focused on single sectors such as governance, infrastructure or planning, or linked to small case studies focused on specific climatic shocks or stresses (Asadzadeh et al., 2022). It may be useful to refer to some frameworks for broader, system-level transformational change to identify how to build this into sustainability planning. Frameworks such as the World Bank Climate Investments Funds' dimensions of transformational change in climate action can offer a useful reference point.[6]

**Sustainability plans and exit strategies may benefit from a focus on system leverage points and multi-stakeholder facilitation to promote transformational change in the context of highly challenging, and potentially impossible, requirements for achieving simultaneous strategies for transformational change.** Systems are stronger when more elements across more systems participate (Ungar, 2018). However, Termeer et al. (2024) propose that simultaneous strategies that might trigger transformational change – including in-depth change (doing things in a

[6] Climate Investment Funds (2021) Transformational Change Concepts. tclp_workshop_updated_tc_concepts_may2021.pdf

radically different way), system-wide change (a broad scope), and quick change (in the form of sudden or abrupt change) – are impossible to achieve, because of trade-offs between them. Rather than aiming at such impossibilities, the focus of interventions' associated sustainability plans and exit strategies can be on systemic "leverage points" (Wamsler et al., 2020). These identify where interventions can be targeted to bring about sustainable transformation. Shallow leverage points consist of parameters, such as taxes or incentives, and associated feedback between different system elements; these have tended to be the focus of sustainability policies to date. Deep leverage points include the design and intent of the system; these are the underlying values, beliefs and worldviews of people within the system. These leverage points are more difficult to influence but have potential to lead to more substantial change. Facilitation of processes and strategies for transformational change may also provide an entry point. Engagement by multiple stakeholders across sectors is required to achieve transformational change, but some actors can play the role of "stewards" who help to visualise transformation and facilitate coordination between the many contributing actors (Fazey and Leicester, 2022).

# 5. Conclusions and recommendations for COAST

This evidence review has surfaced considerations that need to be made at different levels of a programme theory of change in order to promote sustainability through associated plans and exit strategies. It is important to note that exit strategies are not an isolated tool or simply a plan to be developed and delivered at exit. They are part of much broader sustainability plans, and should reflect those. They are living processes that require careful ongoing consideration, evolution in line with programmatic and systemic shifts, and implementation throughout the course of the programme. In situations in which an intervention gets built into another programme, the exit approach may live on and be further developed in this next stage.

## 5.1. Planning for sustainability of outcomes

Although sustainability has traditionally focused on the continuation of specific activities and interventions to achieve outcomes, there is a growing understanding in the resilience arena that sustainable outcomes require flexibility in the pathways for achieving those over time. Sustainability planning and exit strategies can focus on embedding the specific resources needed to continue engaging in an ambition rather than a specific activity, including through strategic and phased exit approaches.

**Recommendation 1: During programme implementation, secure dependable and diversified resource flows and integrate phased exit strategies, to maximise potential for sustaining outcomes post-exit.**

To avoid premature abandonment, and to ensure continuity of benefits, COAST implementing partners should identify sustainable financial, human and technical resources during programme design and embed strategies for securing these across all programme phases, including:

- securing dependable and diversified financial resource flows before programme closure that are tailored to the local context and acceptability
- ensuring that local communities and their organisations are meaningfully involved in all phases of programme interventions to build a sense of ownership and buy-in
- embedding long-term capacity strengthening to ensure that local organisations and community groups can independently manage and adapt interventions over time.

COAST implementing partners should adopt a phased exit approach that gradually transfers responsibility to local stakeholders. This should include clear milestones – such as participation in training, demonstration of independent operations, and readiness assessments – to ensure that local actors are equipped to sustain activities post-exit.

## 5.2. Sustaining long-term outcomes

Sustainability, resilience and prosperity are closely intertwined, and their interrelation is complex. Resilience offers a process through which prosperity and sustainability can be achieved. It follows that resilience thinking at different levels needs to be built into sustainability and exit plans. This includes consideration of transformational change. However, although transformation holds promise for sustaining resilience outcomes, it poses challenges in ensuring equity in the distribution of benefits. This emphasises the need to put marginalised groups at the front and centre of exit approaches.

In the context of coastal communities, sustaining environmental and ecological outcomes is not only critical for biodiversity and ecosystem health but is also foundational to long-term climate resilience and prosperity. There is increased recognition of the interdependence between sustainable intervention outcomes and sustained enviro-ecological outcomes.

**Recommendation 2: Mainstream a resilience approach within exit strategies that facilitates ongoing capacities for resilience, ensures inclusive, equitable transitions, and accounts explicitly for sustainable environmental and ecological outcomes.**

We recommend that COAST implementing partners review their exit strategies and mainstream a resilience approach within these, drawing on resilience approaches already defined in their strategies and emphasising capacities for marginalised groups. This includes developing the skills and systems needed to adjust interventions to changing environmental, social and economic conditions; and mechanisms to equitably distribute the costs and benefits of transformation and to support a gradual transition that accounts for disparities in access to resources, capacities, and decision-making power. We recommend that COAST implementing partners ensure that exit strategy development accounts explicitly for sustainable environmental and ecological outcomes, and that these aim to empower communities to engage in sustainable costal management. COAST implementing partners should ensure that they identify the necessary resources – both material and on-material - to achieve this, during the programme life time.

## 5.3. Addressing influence of broader systemic conditions

Uncertain broader systemic conditions can impact upon the potential for sustainability of international development programmes, including climate resilience programmes in which resilience capacities may have been strengthened. In this context, systems transformation becomes essential for sustainability of resilience, prosperity and well-being outcomes for societies. Although achieving transformational change is an unrealistic aim for a single development programme, a comprehensive understanding of the systems and targeting of particular leverage points may present a more tangible and achievable approach that can be integrated into sustainability plans and exit strategies. These should focus on deep leverage points that aim to shift values, beliefs and worldviews, in order to achieve more substantial deliberative transformation.

**Recommendation 3: Integrate a comprehensive understanding of the systems of focus and transformation pathways into exit strategies.**

We recommend that COAST implementing partners integrate a comprehensive understanding of the systems in which they are working and aiming to transform into their exit strategies, in order to enhance the effectiveness of their sustainability plans in the face of unpredictable systemic shifts. This should involve identifying leverage points at different levels of the system and determining how interventions can target these to influence sustainable transformation. It should identify the resources needed to intervene in the system post-exit, including the multi-stakeholder effort that will be required to do so.

## 5.4. Evidence for sustainability

Evidence for sustainability is limited, and few *ex post* evaluations of long-term sustainability of programme outcomes have been commissioned. This has significant implications for building a

depth of understanding of what is needed to ensure long-term sustainability and to build considerations for resilience and transformation into sustainability plans and exit strategies.

**Recommendation 4: Monitor and evaluate sustainability post-exit.**

We recommend that, to build the evidence base on sustainability and what works to promote long-term outcomes, FCDO and other funders consider enhancing their focus on post-exit sustainability monitoring, evaluation and learning. Robust evidence and learning on how to achieve this, and on the risks and trade-offs involved, will maximise the value of ICF spending. Recognising the impacts of systemic shifts on stakeholders' ability and motivation to remain engaged in an ambition, funders should explore mechanisms for periodic follow-up post-exit to support stakeholders to remain engaged and adapt to emerging challenges.

Similarly, to address challenges for marginalised groups, programmes should consider tracking community perceptions of fairness, inclusion and empowerment into their monitoring and evaluation systems. These perceptions are closely linked to long-term buy-in and the sustainability of outcomes, particularly in contexts where power dynamics and social divisions are pronounced.

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