



CONSIDERATIONS IN SUPPORT OF SUSTAINABILITY of NATIONAL INFORMATION PLATFORMS for NUTRITION

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Acronyms

BMZ	Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (abbreviated from German)
can	capacity needs assessment
EU	European Union
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
MTR	Mid-term review
NIPN	National Information Platforms for Nutrition

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I. Introduction

Sustainable project management is critical in the design and implementation of development projects, significantly enhancing their long-term feasibility and success.

In public health, particularly in the context of nutrition, sustainability involves maintaining programme components sufficiently to achieve the desired nutrition and health outcomes.

The question is: how to plan for this knowing that project funding will soon end? Rapid changes in budgetary and political trends threaten the long-term viability of development project results. To overcome this perennial issue and secure the impact of nutrition investments over the long term, we must understand the factors that influence long-term sustainability¹.

The focus in this document is on NIPN sustainability. It builds on a rapid literature review and aims to provide a framework for establishing the long-term success of the NIPN platforms. It sets out the planning and implementing activities necessary for sustaining NIPN processes, and emphasises technical, institutional and financial dimensions.

¹ Scheirer, M.A., Dearing, J.M., An agenda for research on the sustainability of public health programs. Am J Public Health 2011;101(11):2059–67. 10.2105/AJPH.2011.300193

II. Understanding sustainability

A 2018 review² of 62 approaches to sustainability in healthcare identified five distinct definitions: continued programme activities, continued health benefits, capacity building, further development (adaptation), and cost recovery. Early identification of institutionalisation options, human resources, and budgeting is crucial to avoid negative impacts from competing priorities.

Sustainability in technical assistance projects lacks a universal definition. It³ involves the continued use of programme components to achieve outcomes. Studies emphasise the importance of identifying institutionalisation options and resource needs early to avoid competing priorities.⁴

"Sustainability bridges the gap between research and practical application, ensuring that interventions not only produce results during implementation but remain effective and relevant in the long term."

Sustainability can be defined by three operational indicators:

1. *Maintenance of a programme's initial health benefits.*
2. *Institutionalisation of the programme in a community.*
3. *Capacity building in the recipient community.*

Multiple factors influence sustainability, including intervention characteristics, organisational settings, and contextual factors. Methodologically, sustainability research requires multi-faceted approaches to capture complex factors influencing longevity.

A 2013 study presented a framework for public health programme capacity for sustainability (Figure 1)⁵. This framework helps establish a shared understanding of sustainability for practitioners, funders and researchers. Planning for sustainability should begin at a project's inception, considering adaptability and long-term impact.

According to Shelton, Brittany, and Shannon⁶, sustainability has been defined as the continued use of program components at sufficient intensity for the sustained achievement of desirable program goals and population outcomes. This understudied area has been identified as one of the most significant translational research problems.

Sustainability emphasises adaptive activities aligned with health and nutrition interventions for long-term success. Nutrition, as a critical element of public health, requires sustained efforts to ensure

² Lennox, L., Linwood-Amor, L., Maher, L., & Reed, J., Navigating the sustainability landscape: a systematic review of sustainability approaches in healthcare. *Implementation Sci* 13, 27 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13012-017-0707-4>

³ Scheirer, M.A., & J.W. Dearing. Op. cit.

⁴ Hailemariam M., T. Bustos, B. Montgomery, R. Barajas, L.B. Evans, A. Drahota. Evidence-based intervention sustainability strategies: a systematic review. *Implement Sci*. 2019 Jun 6;14(1):57. doi: 10.1186/s13012-019-0910-6. PMID: 31171004; PMCID: PMC6554955.

⁵ Schell, S.F., Douglas A.L. et al. Public health program capacity for sustainability: a new framework. *Implementation Sci* 8, 15 (2013). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1748-5908-8-15>.

⁶ Shelton, R., Rhoades Cooper, B., Wiltsey Stirman, S., The Sustainability of Evidence-Based Interventions and Practices in Public Health and Health Care (2018), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3197568>

continued access to healthy food, effective dietary interventions, and ongoing support for nutrition education and services⁷.

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) defines sustainability across social, economic, and environmental dimensions. Social sustainability emphasises the importance of improving social equity, promoting participation, and ensuring the well-being of all people involved in the project. Economic sustainability focuses on the efficient use of resources and long-term financial viability. This framework aligns well with the National Information Platforms for Nutrition (NIPN) initiative's goals.

The following sections will look at how NIPN platforms can apply evidence from the literature, while combining best practices gained from the years of NIPN implementation thus far, including the knowledge gained from the 2018 mid-term review (MTR).



Figure 1: Conceptual framework of public health programme capacity for sustainability

In the case of NIPN, sustainability is an integral part of its design. Its very purpose is to mainstream good governance principles into nutrition policy processes over time. NIPN takes the initial form of a project (capacity development, generation of evidence, improving governance structures and mechanisms) with the core objective to improve governance mechanisms in the long term.

III. Components of sustainability

In a mid-term review of the NIPN platform in Bangladesh (European Union (EU) ROM Mission, Jan. 2020) the authors highlighted 3 main components of sustainability relevant for the initiative: technical, institutional and financial sustainability (Figure 2). These principles ensure that NIPN's work is

⁷ Roger Walugembe, D., Sibbald, S., Janzen Le Ber, M., Kothari, A., et al. Sustainability of public health interventions: where are the gaps?. *Health Res Policy Sys* 17, 8 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12961-018-0405-y>

sustained after the principle external donor funding ends.⁸ NIPN sustainability is based on three core principles:

- Financial sustainability
- Institutional sustainability
- Technical sustainability



Figure 2: Core principals of financial, institutional and technical sustainability

1. Financial sustainability

Securing long-term funding is essential for NIPN's sustainability. This means developing strategies to ensure continuous financial support from government budgets and perhaps external donors. To achieve this, clear cost estimates and persuasive arguments to gain the relevant institutional agreement should be developed. Depending on the options identified for financing, the discussions can be complex. If multiple ministries are involved, this will require adequate time planning.

1.1 Securing long-term funding

For effective resource mobilisation, it is essential to develop a clear strategy and advocacy plan that highlights the significant contributions and added value of NIPN for the host institution, as well as its importance in supporting national initiatives such as national nutrition action plans and food security and nutrition strategies.

Since different stakeholders and target groups may respond to different arguments, it is important to tailor and prepare messages in advance to maximise impact.

Engaging with donors early helps to develop working relations steadily and sets the project up for potential bridge-funding opportunities during transitions or longer-term perspectives.

1.2 Budget planning and management

Accurate cost estimation and effective budget management are crucial. Early financial discussions are essential, as delays can impact funding. A contingency strategy, including potential bridge funding, can help maintain operations during fiscal uncertainties.

To support this process, early and detailed financial discussions are essential to avoid delays that may affect funding and project continuity. These discussions should include:

- Developing detailed budget forecasts: These should account for all operational costs, staffing and ongoing technical support. Breaking down the budget into specific line items helps provide clarity and transparency.

⁸ The NIPN initiative was supported by the EU, the United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) and Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in Phase I and by the EU, GIZ and UNICEF in Phase II.

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- Setting up financial tracking systems: Implement robust financial management tools that allow for real-time tracking of expenses against the budget. This ensures that deviations can be identified early, and corrective measures can be taken.
- Establishing a contingency strategy: It is important to plan for potential shortfalls or delays in funding by identifying sources of bridge funding, such as tapping into reserves or securing short-term grants. This contingency strategy ensures that operations can continue even during fiscal uncertainties.
- Engaging with donors and government bodies early: Ensure alignment between donor funding cycles and the project's budget planning. Early engagement with financial stakeholders, including government bodies and ministries, helps to secure long-term commitments and minimise funding gaps.

By following these steps, NIPN platforms can improve financial stability and support their long-term sustainability, even during challenging financial periods.

As an example of diversifying funding, NIPN Niger received several policy questions in 2023, of which only three could be prioritised and directly financed by the platform, given the available human and financial resources. Following discussions with partners, UNICEF agreed to finance one of the remaining questions, while FAO funded another. The last two questions were financed through a local subsidy in collaboration with a university, which provided scholarships to doctoral students to support the research.

2. Institutional sustainability

Institutional sustainability refers to the capacity and willingness of institutions to maintain the NIPN activities, either through the NIPN platform or through other means. It often involves integrating NIPN into formal systems, such as government departments, and aligning with government priorities.

2.1 Integrating NIPN into existing institutions

From their inception, NIPN's activities and processes should be strategically embedded within existing structures to enhance sustainability. It is crucial for NIPN teams to assess early on whether NIPN can be integrated into existing institutions. In most countries, this has been achieved in specific government institutions. Maintaining this institutional arrangement is the most logical option for sustaining the planning and implementation of NIPN activities and its operational management. However, this will require the agreement of senior management officials within the host institutions and most likely the provision of additional resources (operational budget and human resources) after the withdrawal of external funding support.

It is important to understand government procedures for the creation of civil servant positions and allocation of budgets (by the Ministry of Finance and/or others) to ensure that the necessary procedures are undertaken in a timely way.

Another option is for NIPN activities and human resources to be allocated to other departments or units. If such a transition implies new roles or functions, recruitment and budgetary processes should be started early to avoid gaps at the end of the project.

2.2 Collaborative strategic partnerships and local ownership

Building partnerships with national stakeholders, including academic institutions and local governments, strengthens NIPN platforms by bringing in diverse and established national expertise.

Forging such strategic partnerships can enable synergies with existing technical capacity and help to navigate institutional barriers. If well-established, these partnerships can foster ownership and ensure long-term viability.

Additionally, effective communication, coordination and collaboration across various sectors are fundamental when integrating NIPN activities into different institutions or sectors within existing structures. The NIPN approach, which emphasises multi-sectoral collaboration, can present significant challenges for institutionalisation. Overcoming these challenges requires well-coordinated strategic partnerships that enhance technical capacity and help navigate institutional barriers.

3. Technical sustainability

Technical sustainability involves developing the skills and capacities needed to manage NIPN activities independently. It relies on a well-structured capacity-building framework, robust technical infrastructure, and continuous monitoring and evaluation.

3.1 Capacity needs assessment and capacity development plans

Capacity needs assessment (CNA) identifies current technical capabilities, desired skill-sets and highlights gaps. Regular CNAs ensure ongoing relevance and foster targeted capacity development plans, outlining specific training and capacity-building activities for the sustainable management of NIPN. This assessment must be institutionalised and carried out periodically to achieve longer term sustainability.

The development of specialised training manuals and materials, along with the involvement of public training institutions in NIPN capacity-building activities, can facilitate the sustainability of technical expertise. However, to achieve this, there need to be regular training schedules for staff in key positions across sectors. This may also require incorporating these training requirements as long-term components of relevant job descriptions.

3.2 Sustainable technical infrastructure

Maintaining technical infrastructure means updating essential hardware and software tools. Equipping provincial authorities with necessary information communication technology equipment enables decentralised data collection and analysis, strengthening resilience.

3.3 Monitoring and evaluation

A comprehensive monitoring and evaluation system ensures regular updates to the NIPN dashboard and data repositories, performance is tracked, and eventually this leads to informed decision-making. A robust monitoring and evaluation system ensures the platform adapts to emerging needs and challenges efficiently.

IV. Conclusion

The three components of sustainability – financial, institutional and technical – are closely interlinked (Figure 3). Financial sustainability is reliant on both institutional and technical sustainability. Without sufficient technical capacity, organisations may struggle to maintain institutional commitment or allocate the necessary resources for NIPN in the long term. The figure below illustrates how the NIPN operation cycle ensures engagement with stakeholders, which can lead to more demand for NIPN

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analytical outputs and communication of evidence, and in turn support the NIPN platform's sustainability.

In conclusion, ongoing efforts are needed for the long-term sustainability of NIPN and to integrate its work within broader national systems and policies, such as national nutrition strategies. By embedding

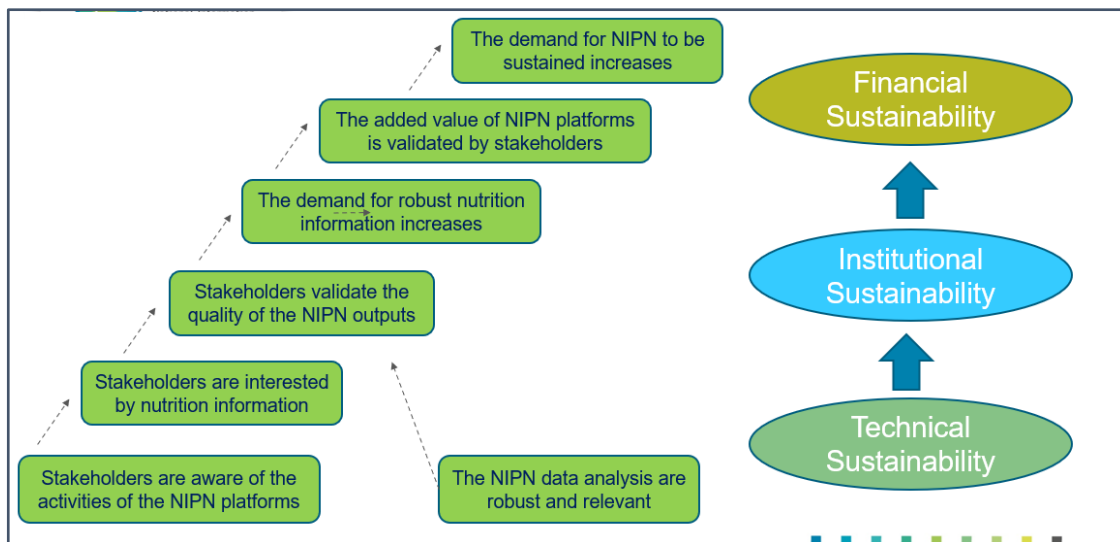


Figure 2: How to move from technical to financial sustainability

NIPN activities into these systems and securing political and institutional commitment, we can ensure that NIPN remains a valuable resource for evidence-based decision-making in nutrition.

Sustained capacity-building, regular advocacy and clear communication of NIPN's added value will further enhance its ability to influence policy and attract the funding needed to ensure its lasting impact on national nutrition programmes.