

Empowerment of child brides with income-generating activities

A participatory evaluation | **SUSTAIN Cameroon**

About SUSTAIN Cameroon

SUSTAIN Cameroon - Association for Sustainable Development Livelihood Initiatives - in the North West Region of Cameroon, works to improve the welfare, and promote and protect the rights of children, youth, women and other vulnerable groups. SUSTAIN places a particular focus upon children in situations of early and forced marriages (CEFM), sexual exploitation and abuse, trafficking and modern slavery. It empowers children affected by these experiences, and those at risk, with education, training, and economic empowerment.

Project evaluated: Empowerment of 30 child brides with income-generating activities

SUSTAIN received a one year grant (2019 - 2020) from AMI Foundation in Portugal to empower child victims and survivors of early and forced marriages, and sexual exploitation and abuse (child brides and at-risk girls). The project aimed to ensure economic empowerment of child brides while providing a credible alternative to early marriage for those at risk, through academic and business opportunities, such as provision of vocational training, start-up capital and business mentorship. The project offered girls and women the opportunity to be actors and leading changemakers in their communities alongside community leaders.

Key activities included:

- Providing access to education and vocational training for child brides and at-risk girls.
- Offering microcredit and start-up support for small businesses and income-generating activities for participants.
- Providing mentorship and guidance for participants to sustain their businesses and increase their income.
- Carrying out awareness and education campaigns on the issues of CEFM and sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

SUSTAIN also created a documentary about abuse suffered by child brides¹.

1. The face of Child, Early and Forced Marriages, (CEFM)
<https://youtu.be/xwftWhghQSE?si=cdkGeRXjxZpv4xUr>



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Participatory evaluation plan

Using participatory methods, SUSTAIN brought together project participants, community volunteers, community-based self-help groups, religious and community leaders and other project stakeholders for reflective gatherings relating to the project *Empowerment of 30 child brides with income-generating activities*.

To ensure transparency, accountability, and meaningful engagement, stakeholders were actively involved throughout the monitoring and evaluation process. This included:

- Setting clearly defined objectives and indicators to measure progress and track outcomes. This was done with the involvement of project volunteers, participants and community-based self-help groups.
- Regularly consulting stakeholders, including beneficiaries, local communities, collaborators and partners, to assess progress towards objectives. This was and continues to be done regularly through quantitative and qualitative processes such as meetings, surveys, focus groups and key informant interviews. SUSTAIN maintains a culture of ongoing reflection and learning with community volunteers to deepen its understanding of the intervention.
- Analysing data. Information gathered through consultation is continually reviewed and analysed to identify trends, gaps, and areas for improvement.

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Tools selected

Taking into consideration the socio-political context of the project location, SUSTAIN selected the following tools for the participatory evaluation:

- Focus Group Discussions (FGD): Project participants, community volunteers, and project stakeholders took leadership roles in facilitating these discussions. A safe and welcoming environment was created which allowed participants to openly share perspectives, ask questions and provide feedback.
- Most Significant Change (MSC) & Key Informant Interviews (KII): The MSC technique was used to collect stories of change from project participants and stakeholders, allowing for a qualitative assessment of the project's impact. Community volunteers were engaged to select the most significant stories of change and reflect on the factors that contributed to these changes.
- Reflection and Learning Sessions (RLS): Facilitated by group leaders and community volunteers, these were held regularly with project support groups (comprising community-based organisations and self-help groups), project participants and other community leaders to review progress, share lessons learned, and discuss challenges and opportunities for



improvement. These sessions provided a space for open dialogue and shared decision-making among project participants. These participatory approaches enhanced the validity and relevance of the evaluation findings and fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among stakeholders.

Evaluation outcomes

Increased enrollment and retention of child brides and at-risk girls in education programmes:

- 80% of participants indicated that they are completing their primary and secondary education, compared to a baseline of 30%.
- 90% of participants continued to vocational training programmes after completing their education.

Economic empowerment and self-sufficiency:

- 70% of participants established small businesses or income-generating activities with the support of microcredit and start-up support.
- 80% of these businesses were profitable within the first year, leading to increased household income.
- Families of child brides who were engaged in vocational training and microcredit schemes witnessed an increase in household income, improved living conditions, better access to education and healthcare, and more resilient livelihoods.

Social empowerment and community engagement:

- 95% of participants reported increased confidence and self-esteem, leading to active participation in community events and decision-making processes.
- 70% of participants became mentors to other at-risk girls in their communities, creating a ripple effect of empowerment.

Reduced instances of child marriage and gender-based violence:

- 60% of participants delayed or avoided marriage due to their economic independence and increased awareness of their rights.
- 75% of participants reported a decrease in gender-based violence in their households.

The outcomes listed above were achieved within a challenging context of long-standing conflict in the project community. In spite of this setting, the Participatory Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (PMEL) activity led to increased community engagement and ownership of the intervention, with an accompanying sense of accountability and responsibility towards the success of programmes. This can lead to more sustainable outcomes and enhanced programme effectiveness.



Lessons learnt

- Broad stakeholder engagement adds significant value to the monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEaL) process. It helps to ensure that the evaluation is comprehensive and reflects the perspectives and aspirations of all those affected by an intervention and organisation's work. It gives participants ownership of the outcomes which have direct impacts on themselves and their communities.
- Participatory processes help to build a culture of learning. The more that support groups and stakeholders are engaged in reflective processes about interventions which directly affect their lives, the more informed, empowered and motivated they will be to facilitate the success of interventions. SUSTAIN sees the need for a culture of learning within its organisation, and so encourages staff and volunteers to reflect on their work, share lessons learnt, and continually improve programme effectiveness. This can take place in the form of weekly team briefings, refresher trainings, reflection sessions and knowledge exchange between peers.
- Data is vital for decision-making. By collecting and analysing data about an organisation's activities and outcomes, informed decisions can be made about how to best achieve goals.
- In light of how effective PMEL has proved for guiding and informing interventions, SUSTAIN can benefit from building the capacity of staff, volunteers and stakeholders for PMEL.
- Taking a flexible and adaptable approach is key. Being open to learn and adjust strategies based on evaluation findings is at the heart of the PMEL approach.

By incorporating these learnings into ways of working, SUSTAIN believes it can enhance its impact and effectiveness.

Conclusion

SUSTAIN Cameroon's participatory evaluation demonstrated the positive impact of its project Empowerment of child brides with income-generating activities across areas of education, economic self-sufficiency, social empowerment and levels of child marriage and gender-based violence. The participatory nature of the evaluation led to increased community engagement and ownership of the intervention, which can lead to more sustainable outcomes and enhanced programme effectiveness.

SUSTAIN sees the need for a culture of reflection and learning not only amongst community stakeholders but also within its organisation, and as such plans to build capacity around participatory monitoring, evaluation and learning.

CONTACT DETAILS

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