

Exploring strategies for post-funding sustainability of health projects: A case study of the USAID Stop GBV Now project implemented by the Zambia Centre for Communication Programmes in Zambia

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Abstract

Over the years, donor support has significantly contributed to Zambia's public health landscape. For instance, the USAID Stop GBV Now project, which is implemented by the Zambia Centre for Communication Programmes, has been instrumental in combating issues of gender-based violence (GBV) in Zambia. However, there still seems to be a prevalent challenge in sustaining the impacts of these interventions after the donor exits. This study explores sustainable strategies that ZCCP can employ to ensure the continuity of donor-funded health interventions beyond external financing. It specifically focuses on ZCCP's USAID Stop GBV Now Project. Employing an inductive qualitative case study and conducting semi-structured interviews with 30 purposively selected stakeholders, including ZCCP staff, government officials, implementing partners, peer educators, and project beneficiaries. Reflexive thematic analysis found that developing resource mobilisation teams, engaging in income-generating activities, diversifying funding sources, and aligning with national policies and budgets are essential to sustaining the impacts of the project post-funding. Furthermore, other strategies such as fostering community ownership, strengthening strategic partnerships with government and private sector actors were considered equally important in sustaining the impacts of the project. Finally, human resource practices such as staff retention, volunteer incentives, and leadership development were also identified as critical to sustaining the impacts of the project interventions. The study also has both theoretical and practical contributions. Firstly, it advances literature on post-funding sustainability in sub-Saharan Africa and offers a practical framework for NGOs and policymakers seeking to preserve the impact of health interventions amid declining foreign aid.

Keywords: Post-funding sustainability; Financial Sustainability; Resource Mobilisation; Institutional Capacity; Policy Alignment; Local Ownership

1. Introduction

Grants play a crucial role in financing health projects globally, significantly improving individual and community health outcomes [1]. Beyond Africa, donor-funded health initiatives are vital in various aid-recipient regions, including the Pacific Island States, Asia, and Eastern Europe [2]. In these regions, external funding has been instrumental in strengthening healthcare systems, responding to health emergencies such as pandemics, and combating diseases like Malaria and HIV/AIDS [1]. However, despite their positive impact, sustaining the results of these projects remains a challenge [2].

In 2021, half of the sub-Saharan African countries relied on external financial aid to cover more than one-third of their health expenditure [3]. Zambia exemplifies this trend, with external support for health expenditure increasing from 33% in 2020 to 49.5% in 2021, an increase of 16.5% [3]. However, the country has been making efforts to reduce

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dependence on external financing and work towards achieving the 15% Abuja target for public health expenditure [4]. This commitment is reflected in the 2024 Health Sector Budget, where the government increased allocations from \$17.4 billion to \$20.9 billion, representing a 6% real increase adjusted for inflation [4].

Donor-funded health initiatives have played a pivotal role in addressing Zambia's public health challenges, particularly in HIV prevention, GBV, and maternal health [5]. The Zambia Centre for Communication Programs has been instrumental in implementing these initiatives, utilising community engagement and behaviour change communication strategies to enhance public health outcomes [19].

Despite the significant impact of these programs, concerns persist regarding their long-term sustainability once donor funding ceases. Research indicates that financial dependency, limited resource diversification, and operational inefficiencies often result in the discontinuation of essential services, ultimately jeopardising sustained health improvements [6].

Given this background, this study seeks to explore strategies that can be used to ensure the sustainability of donor-funded health projects beyond donor funding. In doing so, the study will focus on the experiences of the Zambia Centre for Communication Programmes. This will be crucial to ensuring that the gains made by the projects being implemented by ZCCP are not only sustained but also potentially transferred to other geographical areas within the country.

It specifically aims to

- To assess financial sustainability strategies, including the formation of strategic partnerships and stakeholder engagement mechanisms, that ZCCP can implement to support the continuity of the project after donor support ends.
- To identify administrative and organisational strategies that can strengthen ZCCP's internal capacity for sustaining the USAID Stop GBV Now Project in the absence of external funding.
- To explore human resource management approaches that can contribute to the long-term operational and programmatic sustainability of the project.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Population, Sample, Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed an inductive qualitative case study design to explore sustainability strategies in the USAID Stop GBV Now Project implemented by ZCCP. The case was selected purposively due to its relevance as a maturing donor-funded health intervention with access to multiple stakeholder perspectives. The population comprised ZCCP project staff, government officials, implementing partners, peer educators, and project beneficiaries, individuals with firsthand knowledge of the project's implementation and sustainability dynamics.

A purposive non-probability sampling technique was used to key informants, with the final sample size determined by the principle of thematic saturation. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection tool. These interviews were guided by a pre-tested instrument aligned with the research objectives and were designed to elicit detailed insights into financial, administrative, and human resource strategies supporting post-funding sustainability. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and conducted with informed consent. Data analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis using NVivo 14, consistent with the study's inductive approach. The analysis involved systematic coding and categorisation of transcripts to identify recurring patterns and themes.

2.2. Data Analysis Procedure

This study employed reflexive thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's [18] six-phase framework, to analyse the qualitative data generated through semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen due to its flexibility and suitability for identifying, interpreting, and reporting patterns within data related to sustainability practices in donor-funded health interventions. The analysis was inductively driven, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives without being constrained by pre-existing theoretical assumptions.

NVivo 14 software was used to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. The analytic process involved familiarisation with the transcribed data, generation of initial codes, and subsequent development and refinement of themes. These initial themes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Preliminary themes generated from NVivo 14 coding. Source: Author's compilation based on thematic analysis in NVivo 14

Theme	No. of Participants	Code References
#Theme 1. Financial Sustainability And Resource Mobilisation	14	24
#Theme 2. Institutional Alignment and National Frameworks	8	9
#Theme 3. Stakeholder Engagement	25	64
#Theme 4. Strategic Planning	8	13
#Theme 5. Strong Local Ownership	14	21
#Theme 6. Strong Partnerships	4	8
#Theme 7. Human Resource	12	27

The final themes were carefully defined and named to capture key dimensions of post-funding sustainability. These included financial resource mobilisation, institutional capacity, stakeholder engagement, strategic partnerships, local ownership, and human resource management, depicted in Table 2. Each theme reflected critical perspectives on the continuity and long-term viability of the USAID Stop GBV Now Project, implemented by ZCCP.

Table 2 Final themes generated from refining preliminary themes and their descriptions

Name	Description
#Theme 1. Key Strategies for Financial Sustainability and Resource Mobilisation for Health Projects	The suggested strategies interviewed participants highlighted that it is crucial for achieving financial sustainability and resource mobilisation for the USAID Stop GBV Now project.
#Theme 2. Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Policy Alignment for Long-Term Viability	Aligning project goals and interventions with national frameworks and policies to ensure the project's long-term sustainability.
#Theme 3. Effective Stakeholder Engagement and Community Participation for Project Sustainability	The significance of involving key stakeholders, including government agencies, beneficiaries, and community leaders, in project planning and execution and the strategies for fostering local engagement.
#Theme 4. The Role of Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration in Project Continuation	Participants' views on the impact of forming collaborations with NGOs, government bodies, and private entities to secure resources and expertise significant to the continuity of the project after donor funding.
#Theme 5. Promoting Local Ownership and Commitment for Sustainable Health Initiatives	Strategies for fostering local engagement, promoting advocacy, and ensuring that the project remains responsive to community needs even after donor exit.
#Theme 6. Best Practices in Human Resource Management for Long-Term Project Success	The perceptions of interviewees on the human resource strategies that support projects' long-term sustainability.

The outcome of this analysis is an empirically grounded thematic structure that captures the complexity of sustaining donor-funded health projects in low-resource settings. The findings are presented in narrative form, supported by representative quotes and aligned with the study's objectives.

3. Results

3.1. Theme 1: Key Strategies for Financial Sustainability and Resource Mobilisation for Health Projects

This theme explores how organisations like ZCCP can sustain operations beyond donor funding by diversifying funding sources, establishing strategic partnerships, and developing income-generating activities. It highlights key mechanisms

such as grant applications, corporate sponsorships, and self-sustaining financial models. The theme is further broken down into six strategies for financial sustainability and resource mobilisation, as illustrated in the mind map in Table 3:

Table 3 Strategies under theme 1. Source: Author's development from NVivo 14 output

Themes and Strategies	No. of participants	No. of coding references
#Theme 1. Key Strategies for Financial Sustainability and Resource Mobilisation for Health Projects	16	35
Developing a strong resource mobilisation team	3	2
Pursuing income-generating activities	1	1
Diversifying funding sources	11	18
Innovative Leadership	2	3
Lobbying for Government support	3	3
Resource economic efficiency	8	8

The participants shared various insights on how financial sustainability can be achieved beyond donor funding. Participant 27, a government representative, emphasised that ensuring efficiency in the organisation's use of funds is essential for sustaining the project.

- Participant 27

Prioritising resource efficiency and identifying areas where resources can be conserved or repurposed ensures that sustainability efforts are not just about reducing impact but also about making the most of what is available.

Echoing the sentiments of the previous participant, Participant 3, an implementing partner, also emphasised the importance of prudent fund utilisation.

- Participant 3

Being prudent in the utilisation of funds to ensure that other remaining funds are utilised beyond the end date.

Beyond the prudent utilisation of funds, participants underscored the importance of funding diversification strategies as vital to sustaining the project. Participant 17, a community volunteer, noted that a key factor in ensuring the continuation of the project beyond donor support is investing in multiple sectors.

- Participant 17

Investment in sectors that can generate enough finances to enable the project to run smoothly, even without donor funding.

3.1.1. Strategy 1: Developing a Strong Resource Mobilisation Team

This strategy highlights the development of strong resource mobilisation as a key strategy for achieving financial sustainability and ensuring project continuation after donor exit.

Participant 28 from ZCCP noted that resource mobilisation is key to diversifying the portfolio of projects.

- Participant 28

Resource mobilisation at ZCCP is always ongoing because we want to bring in as many projects as we can.

Participant 16 emphasised the need for adaptive leadership as essential for project sustainability, adding the need for leaders to respond swiftly to changing trends with innovation and flexibility.

- Participant 16

Adaptive leadership is crucial in project continuation; leaders need to quickly adapt to the changing trends, and they need to be innovative and explore other funding sources. A strong resource mobilisation team is also crucial.

The participant also highlighted that a change of strategies is also key, and this could include exploring ventures which can attract funds into the organisation, such as offering services at a cost or consultancy work, as well as investing in strategic partnerships with corporate entities.

- Participant 28

Resource mobilisation at ZCCP is always ongoing because we want to bring in as many projects as we can.

Participant 16, a ZCCP staff member, supported Participant 28 and emphasised institutionalising resource mobilisation through regular management meetings, where dedicated teams are formed to monitor funding opportunities and respond to calls for proposals.

- Participant 16

Through ongoing management meetings, the organisation plans and sets up resource mobilisation teams to respond to specific calls for proposals. The organisation further encourages members of staff at all levels to take an interest in resource mobilisation.

3.1.2. Strategy 2: Pursuing income-generating activities

This strategy outlined the income-generating activities that ZCCP can engage in to sustain the USAID Stop GBV project interventions.

- Participant 23

To address the challenge of limited financial resources, ZCCP could explore alternative funding models, such as community-based fundraising, where local businesses, philanthropists, or community members contribute to sustaining health initiatives. Additionally, public-private partnerships (PPPs) could be forged by partnering with private sector actors, such as local businesses, to support the initiative through corporate social responsibility (CSR). ZCCP could also explore setting up income-generating programs, such as community-run services, small businesses, or micro-grants, to fund ongoing activities.

To enhance project sustainability and funding opportunities, Participant 16 emphasised the importance of actively responding to various calls for proposals and strategically engaging the private sector.

- Participant 16

Responding to various calls for proposals, engagement of the private sectors in various Programmes such as the Mining Firms, Corporate Companies.

Participant 27, a government representative, emphasised that ensuring efficiency in the organisation's utilisation of funds is critical to sustaining the project beyond donor support.

- Participant 27

Prioritising resource efficiency and identifying areas where resources can be conserved or repurposed ensures that sustainability efforts are not just about reducing impact but also about making the most of what is available.

Echoing the previous speaker, Participant 3, an implementing partner, emphasised that financial discipline and accountability are vital for sustaining donor-funded projects.

- Participant 3

Being prudent in the utilisation of funds to ensure that other remaining funds are utilised beyond the end date.

Participant 17, a community volunteer, recommended that ZCCP invest in income-generating ventures or social enterprises aligned with its mission to ensure continuity post-donor funding.

- Participant 17

Investment in sectors that can generate enough finances to enable the project to run smoothly, even without donor funding.

Participant 21 suggested that community-based funding is a viable strategy for sustaining projects.

- Participant 21

Providing small grants or community-based funding would empower local groups to organise their own awareness events, support survivor-led initiatives, and respond to urgent needs. This financial support would reduce dependence on external donors.

In addition to community-based funding, Participants 16 and 22 proposed offering consultancy services as another strategy to support project sustainability.

- Participant 16

A change of strategies is also key; this could include exploring ventures which can attract funds into the organisation, such as offering services at a cost or consultancy work, as well as investing in strategic partnerships with corporate entities.

- Participant 22

Consultancy and applying for government business contracts.

Participant 6 suggested income-generating activities such as stock trading, farming, real estate, and investing in or constructing office infrastructure to enhance sustainability.

- Participant 6

Sustainability is not easy to achieve especially when dealing with time bound projects, however as the project is running it's imperative to note that, funding can stop any time hence involving in income generating activities like stock buying, farming, real estate and also build or own structures to avoid certain bills when funding stops.

3.1.3. Strategy 3: Diversifying funding sources

Participants' perspectives on diversification strategies to achieve financial sustainability for the long-term continuity of the project were captured here.

Participants 1, 6, 12, 16, and 29 all shared similar views on the importance of diversifying funding sources.

- Participant 1

Having other alternative sources of income, such as business entities

- Participant 12

Have own investments locally and income generation projects

Participant 16, a ZCCP staff member, stressed the importance of engaging multiple donors rather than relying on a single source to ensure the sustainability of project interventions.

- Participant 16

It is important for organisations to have several donors and sources of funding as opposed to relying on a single donor.

Participant 29 also emphasised that diversifying funding sources is essential for sustaining the project's impact beyond the donor funding period, an idea also supported by Participant 6.

- Participant 29

Diversify funding sources (e.g., grants, private donors).

- Participant 6

For financial sustainability, an organisation needs to have alternative resources of income or support to maintain operations. The organisation can also integrate the project into existing health systems that have sustained themselves over time, having trained staff and owning infrastructure so that the project can run independently.

3.1.4. Strategy 4: Innovative Leadership

This strategy highlights the critical role of innovative leadership strategies in ensuring financial sustainability and mobilising resources for health projects. It emphasises the importance of visionary leaders in driving effective resource mobilisation.

Participants 16 and 22 agree on the significant role that innovation plays in leaders and leadership structures.

- Participant 16

Adaptive leadership is crucial in project continuation; leaders need to quickly adapt to the changing trends, they need to be innovative and explore other funding sources.

- Participant 22

Innovation is very important for every organisation to succeed. Working through the Government is an equally good sustainability approach.

3.1.5. Strategy 5: Lobbying for Government support

This strategy focuses on the important role of government support in sustaining the Stop GBV Now project. It also highlights strategies for lobbying the government to ensure project sustainability after donor funding ends.

Participant 24 stated that government support is crucial to ensuring the continuation of the project beyond the donor funding cycle.

- Participant 24

Also, Government support and integration of project services into existing health, social, and legal systems help to ensure continuity.

Participant 3 added that the government should allocate funds to support volunteers and other skilled staff to help sustain project activities.

- Participant 3

The government must secure funds for volunteers and other skilled staff for salaries and other fringe benefits.

Participant 25 suggested that the government should increase funding to ministries responsible for the sustainability of health projects.

- Participant 25

There is a need to increase funding to the ministries of community development and the Ministry of health to help sustain and supplement what ZCCP is doing.

Participant 27 highlighted the government's role in co-financing the project to support its sustainability.

- Participant 27

Government co-financing is used as the project builds up to show commitment.

Participant 10 acknowledged the challenge of lobbying for government support.

- Participant 10

Plus, there's the challenge of convincing the government to keep supporting these projects and showing their long-term impact.

Participant 22, however, noted that despite the challenges of securing government support, as acknowledged by Participant 10, ZCCP has established strong working relationships with the government, which can facilitate sustainability efforts.

- Participant 22

ZCCP built good working relationship with the Government of Zambia who are facilitating the organisation to get private sector contracts. These contracts are helping the Organization to continue providing health related services.

Participants 3 and 10 suggested strategies for lobbying government support to sustain the USAID Stop GBV Now project.

- Participant 3

Reducing of indicators and scope of work when handing projects to the government when the project ends.

- Participant 10

ZCCP plans for resource mobilization by strengthening partnerships and aligning its programs with national priorities to attract government and donor support.

3.1.6. Strategy 6: Resource economic efficiency

This strategy highlights the role of efficient resource utilisation in sustaining the Stop GBV Now project. Participants also suggest strategies and actions for making the most of existing resources.

Participant 3 highlighted that prudent utilisation of resources is key to ensuring the project's sustainability beyond the donor funding cycle

- Participant 3

Being prudent to the utilisation of funds to ensure that other left funds are utilised beyond the end date.

Participant 27, a government representative, stated that utilizing resources means making the most of what the organization has left

- Participant 27

Prioritizing resource efficiency and identifying areas where resources can be conserved or repurposed ensures that sustainability efforts are not just about reducing impact but also about making the most of what is available.

Participant 16, a ZCCP staff member, suggested cross-project deployment as a strategy for financial sustainability, enabling projects to continue after funding withdrawal.

- Participant 16

The organisation has invested heavily in capacity building of staff and volunteers. After donor exist, it still looks within the pool of staff for placement on new projects.

Participant 22's views demonstrate how efficiency in the use of existing resources is closely linked to resource mobilization at ZCCP.

- Participant 22

ZCCP saved enough resources to keep talented staff for period of two years who will continue working on winning proposals.

3.2. Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Policy Alignment for Long-Term Viability.

This theme emphasises the importance of aligning project goals and interventions with national frameworks and policies. It also highlights the need to align organisational structures with these frameworks to ensure long-term sustainability. The theme examines governance improvements, compliance with health-sector regulations, and the establishment of adaptive institutional structures that support project continuity.

Table 4 The strategies under institutional capacity and policy alignment

Theme and Strategies	No. of Participants	No. of coding references
#Theme 2. Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Policy Alignment for Long-Term Viability	13	29
Aligning interventions with the National Developmental Plans	2	2
Aligning project activities with host institutions and systems	2	2
Alignment with national legislation and policies	4	7
Focus on integrating programs into government's national budgets	3	3
Strategic Planning	8	13

3.2.1. Strategy 1: Aligning interventions with the National Developmental Plans

This strategy underscores the importance of aligning project goals and interventions with national development plans to sustain the project beyond the funding cycle.

Participant 24, an implementing partner, advocates for increased government budget allocation to health and GBV services by integrating project activities into district development plans

- Participant 24

By Advocating for increased government budget allocation to health and GBV services, including integrating project activities into district development plans and the national

Participant 27, a government representative, explains that ZCCP aligns its communication and behavior change interventions with national frameworks as well as national development plans.

- Participant 27

ZCCP aligns its communication and behavior change interventions with national frameworks like the National Gender Policy, Gender-Based Violence Act, and National Development Plans.

3.2.2. Strategy 2: Aligning project activities with host institutions and systems

This strategy consolidates key findings on participants' perceptions of the significant impact that aligning project activities has on the sustainability of the Stop GBV Now project. An implementing partner emphasised that government support and the integration of project services into existing health, social, and legal systems are essential for ensuring continuity.

Participant 24, a government representative, explains that ZCCP aligns its communication and behavior change interventions with national frameworks as well as national development plans. This idea is further supported by Participant 7, and a government representative (Participant 11) also shares this view.

- Participant 24

The key factors are strong local ownership, where communities and local institutions take responsibility for sustaining activities. Also, Government support and integration of project services into existing health, social, and legal systems help to ensure continuity.

- Participant 7

Stakeholders' engagement during the project, training and development, capacity building at all levels, monitoring and evaluation and integrating existing systems and structures.

- Participant 11

Embedding the project into existing government systems, local institutions, or policies increases the chance of long-term support and funding.

The participants further proposed that integrating project strategies and interventions into mainstream government systems and institutions such as health, education, and social welfare departments, is key to ensuring project continuity beyond the end of donor funding. Similar to Participant 24's views, Participant 10, a ZCCP staff member, shares the same position

- Participant 10

Key factors include strong local ownership, integration into existing government systems, sustainable financing mechanisms, and continued capacity building of local stakeholders.

Participant 6 also emphasized the critical role of aligning with host institutions and systems to ensure project continuity after the funding cycle.

- Participant 10

By involving ministries whose goals are in line with the project for instance Ministry of Health, Gender division, the police etc the Organisation makes sure it incorporates stakeholders in activities that deal with GBV or are in line with, for instance women's days, world Aids day, 16 days of Activism Against GBV.

3.2.3. Strategy 3: Alignment with national legislation and policies

This theme encapsulates the significant role of aligning project goals and initiatives with the country's national legislation and policies to sustain the project beyond the funding period. Participants also outlined the specific policies and legislation with which ZCCP complies.

Participant 1 highlighted the importance of integrating community-based solutions, such as those provided by the ZCCP Stop GBV Now project, into national policies and services.

- Participant 1

Community-based solutions are essential, they must be integrated into national policies and services.

Participant 27, a government representative, revealed that ZCCP's goals align with the National Gender Policy and the Gender-Based Violence Act. This alignment is further confirmed by Participant 1, a ZCCP staff member.

- Participant 27

ZCCP aligns its communication and behavior change interventions with national frameworks like the National Gender Policy, Gender-Based Violence Act.

- Participant 1

ZCCP ensures project goals align with national strategies such as the National HIV/AIDS Strategic Framework, National Gender Policy, and Health Sector Strategic Plan. Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) or partnership agreements are signed with ministries and local authorities (e.g., the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Community Development,

Ministry of Gender). These define roles, resource contributions, reporting structures, and co-implementation frameworks. ZCCP trains frontline workers (e.g., health workers, social welfare officers, police), including Gender Division staff.

3.2.4. Strategy 4: Focus on integrating programs into the government's national budgets

Participants' perspectives on integrating the ZCCP project programs into government national budgets as a strategy for sustaining program interventions are analysed under this strategy. An implementing partner suggested that the government should formulate a deliberate policy to include GBV prevention and response programs in the national budget, ensuring the project's impact on the community is sustained.

- Participant 4

The Government should have a deliberate policy in place to include GBV prevention and response programmes in the national budget in order to sustain the USAID Stop GBV Now Project.

This view is also shared by Participant 8, a government representative, who noted that sustaining the project becomes easier when the government fully embraces it, particularly by including it in the national budget.

- Participant 8

The government embracing the project, plan and include it in national budget.

Another government representative, Participant 9, also emphasised that integrating the project into the national budget requires "involving the ministry of finance and national planning."

Reflecting on the experiences of sudden global donor fund cuts, a ZCCP staff member emphasized that future sustainability planning should prioritize securing government commitment to integrate programs into national budgets.

- Participant 1

Government commitment to integrating programs into national budgets

3.2.5. Strategy 5: Strategic Planning

This strategy illustrates the role that strategic planning plays in ensuring the sustainability of the project.

Participant 29, a ZCCP staff member, stated that the organisation needs a clear plan in place to guide the transition of the project once donor funding ends.

- Participant 29

Plan ahead for future funding. Have a clear plan for transitioning.

In their response, Participant 26 defined a transition plan as follows:

- Participant 26

Sustainable transition is a mechanism through which domestic resources are increasingly responsible for funding programmes that were previously funded by external donors.

Participant 24, an implementing partner, also noted that sustainability should be proactive, emphasizing the importance of developing a sustainability plan well before donor funding ends.

- Participant 24

Sustainability should be built into project design from the outset, not left until the end of donor funding. Also, engaging government and communities from the beginning strengthens ownership and increases the likelihood of integration and continuity.

Agreeing with Participant 24's views, Participant 10, a ZCCP staff member, emphasised that in addition to incorporating sustainability planning from the onset, projects should be designed with flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.

- Participant 10

Projects should be designed with flexibility to adapt to changing political, economic, or environmental conditions, and sustainability should be integrated into the project's core design from the beginning.

Participant 23 stressed that lasting sustainability requires addressing GBV's root causes, poverty, education gaps, and power imbalances by integrating economic, educational, and legal support with core health services.

- Participant 23

Sustainability planning should incorporate a broader approach that addresses the underlying social and economic determinants of gender-based violence (GBV). These include factors such as poverty, limited education, and unequal power dynamics. The Stop GBV Now project should work to not only prevent GBV but also reduce the structural factors that enable it. Sustainable change will be limited without addressing these root causes.

3.3. Theme 3. Effective Stakeholder Engagement and Community Participation for Project Sustainability

This theme highlights the significance of involving key stakeholders, including government agencies, beneficiaries, and community leaders, in project planning and execution. It discusses strategies for fostering local engagement, emphasises the importance of advocacy, and underscores the need for the project to remain responsive to community needs. Various participants agreed that involving stakeholders from the outset is a game-changer in ensuring the project's sustainability beyond its funding cycle.

Participant 23, an implementing partner, emphasised that early involvement of traditional, religious, and political leaders, community members, and government is crucial to fostering strong local ownership of the project.

- Participant 23

Empowering Local Leaders: Local leaders, including traditional, religious, and political figures, can be powerful champions of health initiatives. By engaging them early, building their capacity, and showing how the initiative aligns with their valuesensures that the initiative is grounded in the local context and meets the real needs of the community..... Also, engaging government and communities from the beginning strengthens ownership and increases the likelihood of integration and continuity.

Another implementing partner noted that government involvement, particularly through the MoH, is key to ensuring the sustainability of the USAID Stop GBV Now project beyond the funding cycle.

- Participant 3

Government involvement from the first day to ensure sustainabilitygetting them involved from the first day of implementation.....MoH involvement at all stages of project implementation.

Participant 4 also shares similar perspectives on the early involvement of stakeholders in the project, as cited.

- Participant 4

Community involvement at all stages of project management (planning and implementation) fosters Community buy-in. We ensure that Community members are well informed about the project through capacity building.

Another government representative, Participant 27, shared insights on how stakeholders can be engaged on the USAID Stop GBV Now project.

- Participant 27

Stakeholders' engagement during the project, training and development, capacity building at all levels and participation in decision-making, building trust and relationships as well as ensuring stability.

A community volunteer (Participant 14) posited that orienting key individuals at the community level is a crucial strategy for enhancing stakeholder engagement. This view is supported by Participant 18.

- Participant 18

The proper orientation of members of the community by the community activists

The participant further acknowledges the challenge of engaging stakeholders, stating that “Engaging all stakeholders (communities, businesses, governments) early and consistently is crucial. Their input not only increases the relevance and impact of the plan but also builds a sense of ownership and commitment to its success.”

Participant 21, a project beneficiary, shared their insights on engaging stakeholders such as NGOs, faith-based organisations, and the private sector.

- Participant 21

Collaborating with NGOs, faith-based organisations, and private sector partners can open new avenues for technical and financial support. Multi-stakeholder engagement also strengthens shared accountability for results.

In addition to Participant 1’s views on ZCCP’s current strategic practices, Participant 10, another ZCCP staff member, noted that the organisation employs various strategies to ensure active stakeholder participation.

- Participant 10

ZCCP engages local stakeholders by involving them from the project design stage, building ownership through capacity strengthening, and encouraging contributions such as venue provision, volunteer time, logistical support, involving stakeholders in planning, review meetings, joint implementation, capacity building, and regular communication to foster ownership and commitment.

Another staff member of the organisation revealed that engagement meetings are a significant avenue for securing local stakeholder buy-in.

- Participant 16

Local stakeholders are brought on board through engagement meetings, which provide a platform for their buy-in can consequent support.

The respondent also highlighted that the organisation keeps stakeholders informed about the project’s progress to maintain ongoing engagement.

- Participant 29

The organisation works closely with community leaders, government departments, and other stakeholders to ensure their voices are heard and their needs are met. This is done by involving them in key decisions, keeping them informed about progress, and encouraging their active participation.

An implementing partner emphasised that government involvement through the MoH is key to ensuring the USAID Stop GBV Now project’s sustainability beyond the funding cycle.

- Participant 5

MoH involvement at all stages of project implementation.

- Participant 29

Project activities are integrated into the routines of host institutions or government systems through capacity building, training, and collaboration. In this regard, ZCCP works closely with organisations and government agencies or ministries to ensure the organisation’s vision and mission are adopted and sustained over time.

Participant 8, an implementing partner, emphasised the importance of community engagement at every phase of project implementation.

- Participant 8

Involve the community in every stage of the project. Include them in planning, budgeting, implementing, monitoring and evaluation for the project to achieve its goals.

Participant 10 further proposed early and ongoing community engagement as a key strategy to foster ownership.

- Participant 10

Key lessons for future sustainability planning include early and ongoing community engagement to foster ownership, investing in local capacity through training and leadership development.

- Participant 4

Community involvement at all stages of project management (planning and implementation) fosters Community buy-in. We ensure that community members are well informed about the project through capacity building.

- Participant 29

ZCCP engages local stakeholders by building strong relationships and involving them in project planning and decision-making. In this sense, by showcasing the project's impact and highlighting shared goals, they foster a sense of ownership and responsibility.

A ZCCP staff member revealed that the organisation conducts stakeholder assessments to identify key stakeholders and provided an in-depth explanation of the current stakeholder engagement strategies.

- Participant 1

ZCCP begins each project with a stakeholder mapping exercise to identify key influencers, institutions, and decision-makers at all levels. Community leaders (traditional, religious, and civic) and government departments are consulted during Baseline assessments, Workplan development, setting priorities and targets. ZCCP forms or strengthens multi-stakeholder forums such as District GBV Committees, Anti-GBV Task Forces. ZCCP trains community and government stakeholders on: GBV case management and referrals prevention, Gender norms transformation and Data collection and use

Participant 7 emphasised that capacity building should occur at all levels of project implementation and that strategies to build trust must be employed.

- Participant 7

Stakeholders' engagement during the project, training and development, capacity building at all levels and participation in decision-making, building trust and relationships, as well as ensuring stability.

Participant 14, a community volunteer, posited that "ground orientation of key individuals is a crucial strategy for enhancing stakeholder engagement"

This view is supported by Participant 18.

- Participant 18

The proper orientation of members of the community by the community activists

In the same vein, another community volunteer proposed that, alongside community engagement, forming SASA! Groups could help sustain the project's impacts.

- Participant 20

Community engagement and forming SASA! Groups to help in the community work with or without Funding

Participant 11, a government representative, suggested collaborating with civil society, the private sector, and government as key stakeholders to enhance resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing.

- Participant 11

Collaboration with diverse stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and the government, enhances resource mobilisation and knowledge sharing.

3.4. Theme 4. The Role of Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration in Project Continuation

This theme examines the impact of forming collaborations with NGOs, government bodies, and private entities to secure resources and expertise. It underscores the importance of building strong alliances that enhance project resilience and ensure continuity beyond donor funding cycles. Additionally, the theme consolidates participants' views on the strategic partnerships necessary to sustain the Stop GBV Now project in the long term.

Table 5 The strategies under the strategic partnerships and collaboration theme

Theme and Strategies	No. of participants	No. of coding references
#Theme 4. The Role of Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration in Project Continuation	15	75
Partnerships with banks	4	4
Partnerships with government and local institutions	5	15
Partnerships with mines	3	3
Partnerships with other organisations and NGO's	4	6
Private Sector Partnerships	13	23
Memorandum of understanding	2	16

3.4.1. Strategy 1: Partnerships with banks

This strategy highlights the importance of forming strategic partnerships with banks to sustain the USAID Stop GBV Now project beyond donor funding. Participants emphasised engaging banks at multiple levels, suggesting collaboration with institutions such as the Bank of Zambia (BoZ) and Stanbic Bank to leverage available resources. One participant shared that building capacity for BoZ staff in GBV prevention and response was an activity already conducted, illustrating how such partnerships can support project sustainability.

ZCCP participants 16, 26, 28, and 29 all suggested establishing partnerships with banks at all levels of the project to support implementation and sustainability efforts.

- Participant 16

Partnerships with corporate entities such as Mines and Banks and the government, community and leaders at all levels.

- Participant 26

Partnering with Banks

Furthermore, Participants 28 and 29 mentioned specific banks that ZCCP should consider partnering with to enhance project sustainability, including the Bank of Zambia and Stanbic Bank.

- Participant 28

Bringing on board different players, e.g BOZ, Stanbic and partnering with them so that we are able to leverage the limited resources at hand.

- Participant 29

Strategic partnershipsfor example, building capacity for Bank of Zambia staff in GBV Prevention and Response is an activity that was conducted.

3.4.2. Strategy 2: Partnerships with government and local institutions

This strategy emerged from the broader theme of Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration. Most interviewees emphasised the importance of partnering with the government and local institutions to ensure project continuity. For instance, Participant 2, a community volunteer, noted that strengthening partnerships with local government is key to sustaining the project.

Other participants, 16, 22, 29, and 6, also emphasised in their responses that ZCCP should strengthen partnerships with government agencies and other local institutions to enhance the sustainability of the project.

- Participant 16

Partnerships with the government.....at all levels.

- Participant 22

Government institutions.....and the House of Chiefs

Participant 29 also highlighted that building partnerships with local organisations and government agencies is a key strategy for ensuring project continuity. They further elaborated on existing partnerships that ZCCP has established to support the sustainability of its interventions.

- Participant 29

Build partnerships with local organisations and government agencies. The project has partnered with local groups, government agencies, and community organisations to ensure its work continues beyond the initial funding. These partnerships include the partnership with the Ministry of Health, Gender Division, the Ministry of Youth Sport and Art, the Ministry of Education, First Quantum Minerals and the Bank of Zambia.

The ZCCP staff member further emphasised that building strong partnerships and collaborations is essential, noting that project sustainability depends on more than just funding.

- Participant 29

Sustaining the Stop GBV Now project requires more than just funding. It needs strong community support, government partnerships, and a capable organisation. By building a sense of ownership and continuously monitoring progress, the project can remain effective and sustainable over time.

Another staff member, Participant 6, suggested that in addition to partnering with the government, as noted by other participants, ZCCP should also extend its partnerships to local entrepreneurs to support project sustainability.

- Participant 6

..... Partner with local entrepreneurs and government.....through partnering with private stakeholders, different government line ministries.

3.4.3. Strategy 3: Partnerships with mines

Throughout the interview responses under the theme Role of Strategic Partnerships and Collaboration in Project Continuation, a strategy emerged emphasising the importance of engaging in strategic partnerships with other organisations and NGOs. Participants 1, 26, and 29, all from ZCCP, expressed agreement on the need to strengthen such partnerships to support project sustainability.

- Participant 16

Partnerships with corporate entities such as Mines and Banks and the government, community and leaders at all levels.

- Participant 26

Partnering with local mines.....

- Participant 28

Sourcing for projects with the mines, etc

3.4.4. Strategy 4: Partnerships with other organisations and NGOs

Another major strategy under the role of partnerships and collaborations emerged from a diverse group of participants, including implementing partners, ZCCP staff members, and project beneficiaries. Participants 1, 5, 6, 10, 12, 22, 23, 24, 29, and 30 all contributed to this perspective.

- Participant 1

Engage in strategic partnerships with other NGOs.....engage in strategic partnerships with other NGOs

- Participant 26

Partnering with..... and agriculture

- Participant 29

Build partnerships with local organisations and government agencies. In this regard, ZCCP works closely with organisations and government agencies or ministries to ensure the organisation's vision and mission are adopted and sustained over time.

Participant 29 further noted that building partnerships is an effective way to facilitate the sharing of resources and expertise.

3.4.5. Strategy 5: Private Sector Partnerships

This strategy emerged from the broader theme on the role of strategic partnerships and collaboration in project continuation. Participant 1, a ZCCP staff member, highlighted the importance of establishing a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Health, Community Development, and Gender. Such an agreement should clearly define roles, resource contributions, reporting structures, and co-implementation frameworks to strengthen collaboration and ensure project sustainability.

- Participant 1

Partnerships with the Private sector.....ZCCP has started engaging the private sector for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) partnerships.....CSR partnerships with the private sector.

Participant 23 also suggested forging public and private sector partnerships to support project interventions through CSR initiatives.

- Participant 23

..... Public-private partnerships (PPPs) could be forged by partnering with private sector actors, such as local businesses, to support the initiative through corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Another participant suggested that partnerships with the private sector not only generate income but also serve as a means to mobilise community-led resources.

- Participant 24

Supporting community-led resource mobilisation efforts, suchpartnerships with private sector actors..... to maintain services post-donor support.

To maintain project services after donor support ends, Participant 12, a project beneficiary, suggested that the project should establish more partnerships with media houses.

- Participant 12

More.....partnerships with different media houses.

Participant 10, a ZCCP staff member, agreed with Participant 24's view that partnerships are a vital strategy for mobilising resources to support the project.

- Participant 10

ZCCP plans for resource mobilisation by strengthening partnerships.....to attract government and donor support.

Participant 16, a ZCCP staff member, suggested a strategic shift toward investing in relationships with corporations as a means to strengthen project sustainability.

- Participant 16

A change of strategies is also key, this could include.....investing in strategic partnerships with corporate entities.

Participants 22, 29, 30, 5 and 6, all ZCCP staff, mention partnering with the private sector, among other partnerships, as key to both continued funding of the project and overall sustainability.

3.4.6. Strategy 6: Memorandum of understanding

This strategy emerged from the broader theme on the role of strategic partnerships and collaboration in project continuation. Participant 1, a ZCCP staff member, emphasised the importance of establishing a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of Health, Community Development, and Gender. The memorandum should clearly define roles, resource contributions, reporting structures, and co-implementation frameworks to enhance coordination and ensure the sustainability of the project.

3.5. Theme 5. Promoting Local Ownership and Commitment for Sustainable Health Initiatives

This theme emerged as a major focus, with participants discussing strategies for fostering local engagement, promoting advocacy, and ensuring that the project remains responsive to community needs.

Table 6 Strategies under the local ownership and commitment theme

Theme and Strategies	No. of Participants	No. of Coding reference
#Theme 5. Promoting Local Ownership and Commitment for Sustainable Health Initiatives	14	21
Strong community support	1	1
Public Awareness and Advocacy	3	4

3.5.1. Strategy 1: Strong community support

In promoting local ownership and commitment for sustainable interventions in the Stop GBV Now project, strong community support emerged as a major strategy. Throughout the interview responses, participants consistently emphasised that strong community backing is essential for fostering a sense of ownership. Participant 29, a ZCCP staff member, particularly highlighted this point in their response.

Participant 29

Sustaining the Stop GBV Now project requires more than just funding. It needs strong community support, By building a sense of ownership and continuously monitoring progress, the project can remain effective and sustainable over time.

3.5.2. Strategy 2: Public Awareness and Advocacy

Another major strategy that emerged within the theme of promoting local ownership and commitment for sustainable health initiatives is the role of creating public awareness and advocacy. Participants 7, 12, and 27 all agreed on the importance of these activities in fostering local ownership and commitment.

- Participant 27

Sustainability requires a shift in mindset. Fostering education and awareness, especially at the grassroots level, empowers people to adopt sustainable practices. Programs that promote continuous learning help ensure that sustainability practices are maintained long-term.

- Participant 12

By creating awareness on different media platforms and community engagements.....by creating a platform for GBV awareness programs.

Participant 6 also emphasised that “the USAID Stop GBV Now project should continue as it has significant benefits for both the community and the country”

3.6. Theme 6. Best Practices in Human Resource Management for Long-Term Project Success

This theme captures participants’ reflections on human resource strategies that support sustainability, including staff retention, succession planning, and workforce motivation. It discusses the crucial role of well-trained personnel in ensuring consistency and efficiency in project implementation. Eight strategies emerged from this theme: employee retention, leadership development, fostering a positive workplace environment, cross-project deployment, offering incentives to staff, providing stipends to local volunteers, conducting regular appraisals, and creating training opportunities.

Table 7 The strategies under the Human Resource Management theme

Themes and Strategies	No. of Participants	No. of coding references
#Theme 6. Best Practices in Human Resource Management for Long-Term Project Success	12	27
Employee retention	7	18
Cross-Project deployment	5	7
Offering incentives to staff	1	1
Offering stipends to local volunteers	1	1
Regular appraisals	3	8
Training opportunities	1	1
Leadership Development	6	7
Positive Workplace Environment	1	2

3.6.1. Strategy 1: Employee retention

This part of the Best Practices in Human Resource Management for Long-Term Project Success theme gathers participants’ views on strategies for retaining employees to sustain the interventions of the USAID Stop GBV Now project. Insights are provided by government representatives and ZCCP staff on effective retention approaches.

Participant 27, a government representative, emphasised that retaining trained staff is essential for sustaining the USAID Stop GBV Now project.

Another staff member also highlighted the importance of retaining trained staff for effective resource mobilisation after donor funding ends.

- Participant 22

ZCCP has a multi-faceted plan for resource mobilisation after donor funding ends, including retaining trained technical staff.

A ZCCP staff member mentioned the challenge of retaining trained personnel.

- Participant 1

After the project ends, trained staff may leave for better-paying opportunities, especially in the absence of clear career advancement or financial incentives, weakening the sustainability of the program.

3.6.2. Strategy 2: Cross-Project deployment

This includes specific cross-deployment strategies for employee retention. Participants recommended various approaches to retain trained staff. For instance, Participant 1, a ZCCP staff member, mentioned cross-project deployment as an effective strategy for retaining a trained workforce.

- Participant 1

Cross-project deployment.....skilled project staff (e.g., Program Officers, MandE Officers) are often reassigned to other ongoing ZCCP projects funded by different donors.

- Participant 10

Key Staff are placed on other projects, and volunteers are released after their dues are paid.

3.6.3. Strategy 3: Offering incentives to staff

Under this strategy, participants highlighted the importance of providing additional motivation to retain skilled personnel within the USAID Stop GBV Now project. One ZCCP staff member noted that giving incentives to staff was a key strategy in maintaining employee commitment and reducing turnover.

Participant 30

Giving incentives to staff is a major strategy for retaining staff.

3.6.4. Strategy 4: Offering stipends to local volunteers

Participant 30 also shared that providing stipends to local volunteers is a key strategy for retaining them.

- Participant 30

Giving stipends to local volunteers is a key strategy for retaining local volunteers.

3.6.5. Strategy 5: Regular appraisals

Regular appraisals emerged as a key human resource strategy for sustaining the USAID Stop GBV Now project. One ZCCP staff shared that the organisation uses various performance management tools, including regular appraisals and 360-degree feedback, to assess and enhance staff performance. Another staff member noted that the organisation recognises and rewards staff and volunteer contributions.

- Participant 1

Other strategies shared include using performance management tools, regular appraisals, and 360-degree feedback.

- Participant 29

The organisation recognises and rewards staff and volunteer contributions, which ensures that volunteers.

3.6.6. Strategy 6: Training opportunities

Participant 29 also shared insights on how providing training opportunities helps retain staff.

- Participant 29

Retaining skilled staff can be achieved by offering or training opportunities.

3.6.7. Strategy 7: Leadership Development

Another major strategy that emerged from participants' responses within the Best Practices in Human Resource Management for Long-Term Project Success theme is leadership development. Six ZCCP participants shared their perspectives on this topic. For example, Participants 16 and 6 explained that leadership development is fostered by identifying strengths in mid-management leaders and providing them with mentoring.

- Participant 16

These are done through mentorship of mid-management leaders by the senior management teams. Strengths are identified and built on.

- Participant 6

By following performance and mentorship

- Participant 22

Every team member is valued, engaged at every level. Decisions are made collectively without undermining any member.

In alignment with Participant 16, Participant 26 also noted that the organisation inducts potential leaders to ensure continuity of the project.

- Participant 26

The top management has inducted potential leaders to continue with the project.

Participant 28 explained that a succession plan is in place to address potential vacancies, ensuring continuity in project leadership and implementation.

- Participant 28

We have in place a succession plan and when a vacancy arises, the line manager tables the case before management and this is deliberated upon. The ED has the final say with input from the line in cases of replacements or filling of new vacancies.

3.6.8. Strategy 8: Positive Workplace Environment

This strategy also emerged as essential for retaining employees and sustaining the project's impact.

- Participant 29

The organisation fosters a positive work environment and team culture. This positive culture helps key staff to stick together even after the donor's exit.

4. Discussion

4.1. Financial Sustainability and Resource Mobilization

The study revealed that financial sustainability is a central concern for the ZCCP's USAID Stop GBV Now Project, particularly as the project approaches the end of its donor funding cycle. Across the diverse participant groups, ZCCP staff, implementing partners, government representatives, community volunteers, and project beneficiaries, there was a consistent emphasis on the necessity of sustaining the project's interventions. Participants identified several key strategies for mobilising resources and maintaining financial viability, including funding diversification, income-generating activities, public-private partnerships, and prudent financial management.

Beyond the conventional call for diversified funding, participants described a dynamic and multi-layered "resource mobilisation ecosystem." This ecosystem encompasses not only traditional grant-seeking but also corporate sponsorships, community-based micro-grants, consultancy services, and strategic investments in treasury bills and real estate. This broader approach aligns with Chepkemai and Kisimbii's [1] assertion that NGOs must develop

entrepreneurial revenue streams to ensure long-term viability. At the same time, it echoes concerns raised by Lewis [9] about the ethical and operational implications of financialisation within the development sector, cautioning against over-commercialisation.

Establishing a dedicated resource mobilisation unit, equipped with targeted training in areas such as proposal writing, financial management, and monitoring and evaluation, was viewed by participants as a practical step toward enhancing institutional resilience. Such a unit could help mitigate the so-called “revenue cliff” commonly experienced after donor exit [7]. However, while these strategies may increase financial autonomy, they must be implemented with care to avoid mission drift. As Katongo and Phiri [8] warn, the pursuit of alternative income streams could inadvertently lead organisations away from their core values and community-centred priorities.

4.2. Strategic Partnerships and Collaborations

The study revealed that partnerships formed between ZCCP and various stakeholders, such as government ministries, financial institutions, mining firms, and peer NGOs, are not merely transactional or ad hoc. Rather, they function as strategic ecosystems designed to facilitate knowledge exchange, provide technical support, and secure co-financing for sustained GBV prevention and response initiatives. These partnerships are often formalised through MoUs, which delineate responsibilities, reporting structures, and shared objectives. Such institutional arrangements serve to anchor long-term collaboration and ensure continuity beyond the project’s donor funding cycle.

This approach extends Kaufmann’s [10] emphasis on alliance-building by offering concrete illustrations from the field. These include capacity-building workshops on gender for Bank of Zambia personnel, CSR collaborations with local companies, and inclusive multi-stakeholder forums that regularly review and refine project outcomes. These examples reflect a shift from conventional donor-recipient models to multi-sectoral consortia that leverage the comparative advantages of each actor.

However, the findings also underscore inherent risks in these alliances. In particular, partnerships with powerful private-sector entities, such as mining firms, may introduce asymmetrical power dynamics that threaten the community-centred ethos of GBV interventions. When corporate interests begin to shape agendas, there is a danger that core project goals may be compromised or redirected. Therefore, while strategic collaborations can enhance project resilience and extend impact, NGOs must maintain vigilance to safeguard their mission integrity. Mechanisms for accountability, transparency, and mutual benefit should be embedded within all partnership frameworks to ensure that such collaborations advance, not dilute the collective objectives of combating GBV.

4.3. Institutional Capacity and Policy Alignment

The thematic analysis of the interview data reinforces the critical role of aligning project activities with national frameworks, legislation, and development plans as a core strategy for sustaining the interventions of the Stop GBV Now project. This emphasis is echoed in the scholarship of Ilesanmi and Afolabi [11] and Kabwere [13], who underscore the sustainability benefits of embedding development projects within existing policy and institutional structures. Participants in the study consistently highlighted the importance of aligning the project with Zambia’s national development frameworks, particularly the National Development Plan, the National Gender Policy, and sectoral strategies relevant to health and gender-based violence.

Such alignment increases the likelihood of institutional buy-in and facilitates the integration of project activities into government budgets and public service delivery systems. In practice, the establishment of formal memoranda of understanding and the implementation of joint budget advocacy efforts were seen as effective mechanisms for embedding the project within government systems. This approach resonates with findings by Gizaw [12] and further substantiates Ilesanmi and Afolabi’s [11] argument that policy congruence fosters project continuity by creating a more stable institutional environment.

However, this strategy is not without challenges. While policy alignment can enhance resource flows and institutional support, it may also introduce bureaucratic rigidity and expose health interventions to political dynamics. The tension between top-down institutional integration and bottom-up community ownership emerged strongly in participants’ narratives. While partnerships with government can secure long-term support, they risk marginalising local actors if those communities are reduced to passive implementers rather than active co-creators of the project. Kabwere [13] cautions against such dynamics, warning that centralised control can erode local agency and undermine the participatory ethos essential to community-driven development.

The findings also underscore the need for strategic planning from the outset of a project's lifecycle. Many participants stressed that sustainability should be embedded from inception, not treated as an afterthought. This aligns with recommendations by Thomas and Majola [14] and Mapfumo [15], who argue for early integration of sustainability considerations into project design and execution. Proactive planning can help to mitigate the abrupt discontinuity often experienced when donor support ends, thereby fostering a more durable and locally owned impact.

4.4. Stakeholder Engagement and Community Participation

Early and iterative stakeholder engagement emerged as a decisive factor in fostering local ownership and long-term sustainability of the Stop GBV Now project. Unlike symbolic or one-off consultations often seen in donor-funded programs, ZCCP's approach to stakeholder engagement is deeply embedded in its operational model. Through practices such as stakeholder mapping, joint planning workshops, steering committees, and ongoing feedback loops, the organisation ensures that stakeholders, ranging from government agencies and traditional leaders to community volunteers and beneficiaries, are meaningfully involved throughout the project cycle. These practices align with what Thomas and Majola [14] term "participatory institutionalisation," wherein community members are not merely recipients of interventions but are embedded within the decision-making structures of the project. This participatory approach helps mitigate the frequent critique that donor-driven initiatives often sideline local priorities in favour of externally determined agendas. By cultivating local champions who have ownership over both the process and outcomes, the ZCCP model significantly enhances the likelihood that project activities and values will persist beyond the donor funding period.

However, sustaining such a robust stakeholder engagement framework poses practical challenges. It requires significant time, capacity, and financial investment, resources that may become scarce once external funding ceases. Without dedicated funding streams or institutionalised mechanisms for continued engagement, there is a risk that these participatory structures could devolve into extractive, top-down processes that alienate communities and reduce program relevance. The findings thus underscore the need for donor agencies and NGOs to consider long-term stakeholder engagement not as an ancillary activity but as a core component of sustainability planning, one that should be resourced, monitored, and adapted as context evolves.

4.5. Local Ownership and Commitment

The findings underscore the pivotal role of community support, public awareness, and advocacy in sustaining the long-term impacts of the USAID Stop GBV Now project. Participants consistently emphasised the importance of community mobilisation strategies and public advocacy efforts as foundational pillars for project sustainability. Through initiatives such as the establishment of SASA! Groups, the active engagement of traditional and religious leaders, and strategic media campaigns, ZCCP has fostered a grassroots movement that positions GBV prevention as a collective societal responsibility rather than a donor-imposed intervention.

This community-centred approach reflects Mapfumo's [15] contention that bottom-up financing and participatory governance models strengthen local agency and institutionalise long-term support mechanisms. By embedding project values within the cultural and social fabric of the community, ZCCP has arguably enhanced the legitimacy and durability of its interventions.

Nonetheless, the study also illuminates a core challenge inherent to advocacy work: sustaining momentum. Advocacy efforts are often resource-intensive and require both supportive legal frameworks and deep-seated cultural transformations, processes that rarely occur in tandem. While legal reforms can be enacted relatively swiftly, changing societal norms around gender and violence tends to unfold incrementally and unevenly. This disjuncture calls for sustained investment in community leadership, flexible timelines, and adaptive communication strategies that reflect evolving local contexts.

4.6. Human Resource Management Approaches That Can Contribute to The Long-Term Operational and Programmatic Sustainability of The Project

Several participants underscored the importance of human capital retention, leadership development, succession planning, and workforce motivation as fundamental to the sustainability of the Stop GBV Now project. The findings suggest that strategies such as cross-project deployment, performance-based incentives, regular staff appraisals, structured mentorship networks, and deliberate succession planning are not only pivotal to retaining skilled personnel but are also essential to preserving institutional memory and maintaining programmatic consistency beyond donor funding cycles.

This focus extends the arguments advanced by Shroff et al. [16], who emphasize the need for pay-scale alignment, and responds to Lennox et al.'s [17] concerns about workforce volatility in donor-dependent programs. While salary alignment remains a critical issue, this study contributes to the literature by emphasizing the often-overlooked but equally influential role of organizational culture. It highlights how intangible factors such as workplace recognition, supportive supervision, and staff engagement, can create an environment where personnel feel valued, motivated, and committed to the organization's long-term mission. Participants particularly noted that creating a positive workplace environment where staff have clear pathways for career advancement, receive consistent recognition for their work, and operate in a culture of mutual respect significantly boosts morale and retention. This holistic approach not only stabilizes workforce turnover but also helps nurture future leaders within the organisation, thereby mitigating leadership vacuums that often arise post-funding.

However, while these findings affirm the value of robust HR systems in sustaining development interventions, concerns persist regarding the scalability of such practices. Many local NGOs may lack the institutional capacity and financial resources to replicate comprehensive human resource frameworks without continued external support. As such, a critical consideration for sustainability planning is how to build simplified, scalable HR models that retain core benefits without becoming overly resource-intensive. Future research and practice should further explore adaptive, context-specific HR innovations that balance effectiveness with feasibility for resource-constrained organisations.

5. Conclusion

The study explored strategies for the post-funding sustainability of donor-supported health projects, using the USAID Stop GBV Now Project implemented by ZCCP as a case study. The findings revealed that financial sustainability, strategic partnerships, policy alignment, human resource management, stakeholder engagement, and community ownership are critical to sustaining health interventions beyond donor cycles. Participants highlighted the importance of institutionalising resource mobilisation systems, fostering adaptive leadership, and embedding project activities within national frameworks and community structures. However, sustainability planning must also address power imbalances in partnerships, the risks of over-commercialisation, and the scalability of participatory and HR frameworks. By offering a context-sensitive, empirically grounded model for sustaining donor-funded interventions in low-resource settings, this study provides practical insights for NGOs, policymakers, and development practitioners seeking long-term impact. This study will benefit society by strengthening the design and continuity of health and social programmes beyond donor exit, and it sets the stage for future research into scalable, locally owned sustainability mechanisms.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Statement of informed consent

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided written or verbal informed consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained.

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