Do Project Exit Practices Align with Established Theories? A Comparative Case Study Analysis of Selected Agriculture-Related Donor-Supported Projects in Tanzania

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Abstract: *To address the challenge of ensuring project sustainability, the utilization of well-defined exit strategies has gained significant prominence within the realm of development discourse. However, a notable inconsistency appears to exist between the prevailing application of these strategies and the existing body of knowledge. This study seeks to ascertain the extent to which project exit practices harmonize with established theoretical frameworks. The investigation focuses on two distinct donor-funded agriculture-related projects, employing a comparative case study methodology. The research methodology encompassed in-depth interviews, deliberative focus group discussions (FGDs), and comprehensive surveys. Under the proposition put forth by Levinger and McLeod 2002 for effectual project exits, the data analysis procedure integrates qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis techniques. The results derived from QCA indicate that, out of the six elements proposed by Levinger and McLeod, the ISFM project diligently applied four, whereas the ECO-ACT project implemented merely three. Notably, both projects aligned with the practice of planning exit strategies from project inception, fostering collaborative partnerships and linkages, as well as enhancing the capacities of local beneficiaries. Conversely, the aspect of allowing roles and relationships to naturally evolve was uniquely evident solely within the ISFM project. Furthermore, the research projects introduced pivotal measures like establishing farmers' groups, training lead farmers, and cultivating community-based seed production systems, all of which were integral components of their respective exit strategies. In summation, the findings of this study reveal a nuanced scenario where certain facets of project exit practices resonate with established theories, while others do not. As a pragmatic suggestion, project managers are advised to seamlessly integrate exit strategies during project conceptualization, proactively seek and cultivate partnerships with local private entities, and contextualize the application of exit elements proposed by Levinger and McLeod based on the specific exigencies of their projects.*

Keywords: *Project exit practices, project sustainability, development discourse, exit strategies, donor-funded projects, agriculture-related projects*

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1. Background Information

Development projects play a pivotal role in fostering sustainable growth and well-being in various regions. However, a persistent challenge has plagued these initiatives - the tendency for projects to falter shortly after the withdrawal of donor financing (Aarseth, 2017; Obar *et al.,* 2017). This predicament has stirred extensive concern among development practitioners, scholars, researchers, funders, and policymakers (Carvalho and Rabechini, 2017; Aarseth, 2017). The fundamental issue revolves around the concept of sustainability as the bedrock of successful development; without it, the efforts invested throughout a project's lifecycle become futile. The incorporation of exit strategies (ESs) has emerged as a potential solution, offering a means to maintain a sustainable flow of activities and benefits.

Exit strategies, as articulated by Rogers and Marcias (2004), encompass operational plans detailing the phased withdrawal of resources from a project while ensuring the ongoing achievement of goals without external support. This approach outlines how project activities, outputs, and outcomes will transition or terminate following the conclusion of donor funding (Levinger and McLeod, 2002; Lee, 2017; Ruiz-Miranda *et al.,* 2020). This paper adopts the definition of Rogers and Marcias (2004).

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The understanding of ESs' design and implementation is underpinned by various perspectives from authors such as Rogers and Marcias (2004), Davis and Sankar (2006), and Levinger and McLeod (2002). However, Levinger and McLeod's (2002) framework stands out as a lens to assess the alignment between theory and practice in employing ESs. Their framework delineates six core components for effective exit: planning from the outset, forging partnerships, enhancing local capacity, mobilizing resources, staggered phase-out, and allowing post-exit roles to evolve. The interconnected nature of these components underscores their sequential deployment for optimal effectiveness.

Project exit, as elucidated by Davis and Sankar (2006), transcends a singular event; it is a deliberate path characterized by gradualness and contextual specificity (Lewis, 2016). The ideal approaches for exiting are phase down, phase out, and phase over, as conceptualized by Levinger and McLeod (2002). The choice between these approaches hinges on factors such as achieving results, beneficiary assimilation, and the possibility of project transfer.

Theoretical tenets emphasize the early involvement of implementers and local beneficiaries (LBs) in exit strategy design (Levinger and McLeod, 2002; Boiardi and Hehenberger, 2014). This early engagement aims to establish mutual expectations, exit timing, modes, and required resources. The exit plan should encompass exit activities, graduation criteria, monitoring systems, and capacity-building documentation (Rogers and Marcias, 2004). Implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of ESs should intertwine with project progression up to the transition phase.

Despite most projects having documented plans for post-donor funding phases (Hayman and Lewis, 2018), practical execution of exit strategies remains inconsistent (Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007). A recurring theme is the relegation of exit planning to an afterthought, with limited attention and time devoted to overcoming related challenges (Mkomagi and Mwaseba, 2013; Hayman et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2017). This disconnect leads to disjointed exit processes detached from the main project (Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007), while scholarship also largely overlooks practitioners' replication of recommended practices (Boiardi and Hehenberger, 2014; Hayman and Lewis, 2018).

Extant literature primarily addresses exit strategies from specific areas or countries (Gardner et al., 2005; Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007; Markham and Ditkoff, 2013; Boiardi and Hehenberger, 2014), often in contexts divergent from comprehensive development efforts. Scholarly works by Moyo (2009) and Fee (2012) focus on aid exit strategies but lack granular insights into grassroots-level practicalities. The gap between established theories and their application in ESs thus remains ripe for exploration.

Similarly, according to Levinger and McLeod (2002), each stage includes critical considerations for achieving a responsible exit. At stage one, the authors argue that project implementers decide how to end the intervention (by phase over, phase out, or some combinations) and set a realistic timeframe. In stage two, the implementers select the partners they will work with and their roles in the project. At stage three, the kind of capacities required and that already existent are determined. Also, the implementers set the indicators for measuring progress in capacity building. At stage four, the type of inputs needed to keep up service delivery, who will supply them, and how much will be available locally or internationally are all decided. Additionally, they discuss the extent to which LBs can sustain project benefits without external support. At stage five, the project's core elements, including the interdependent, are determined. Stage six is a determination of the usefulness of the kind of ongoing support such as advice, mentoring, technical support, etc. and how to finance them post-exit. Literature informs that elements presented by Levinger and McLeod (2002) formed the theoretical foundation for the empirical studies by Engels (2010), Mkomagi and Mwaseba (2013), and Yusuph (2019). The same elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002) served as a framework for the current study's examination of the conformity of ISFM and ECO-ACT project theory and practice.

Nevertheless, scholars (Rogers and Marcias, 2004; Ruiz-Miranda et al., 2020) argue that having an exit strategy enables project participants to think about the end from the commencement, encourages commitment to the sustainability of activities and outcomes, and better planning of available resources. Conversely, project transitions will be more muddled without exit strategies, and the obtained results and benefits will be less likely to be sustained. This might be one of the reasons for the mounting pressure and concern from funding agencies, donors, and academics alike for practitioners of projects to incorporate ESs into their designs.

Although most projects appear to have a description of what will happen when donor funding ends (Hayman and Lewis, 2018), the practice of exiting seems inconsistent (Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007) and practitioners appear uninformed of the existing knowledge (Hayman, 2015). A thread of literature indicates that practitioners commonly treat the process of exiting as an afterthought, with little time to plan and work out exiting-related hurdles (Mkomagi and Mwaseba, 2013; Hayman et al., 2016; Yu et al., 2017). According to Lewis (2016), project implementers tend to develop rules and design ESs after passing the exit decisions. As a result, exiting is treated essentially differently and detached from the main project (Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007). Boiardi and Hehenberger (2014) and Hayman and Lewis (2018) report that even scholarly works have paid less attention to how practitioners replicate the existing

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knowledge and recommended practices concerning project-responsible exit.

Instead, exit strategy studies (Gardner *et al.,* 2005; Jaffe and Mackinnon, 2007; Markham and Ditkoff, 2013; Boiardi and Hehenberger, 2014) have primarily focused on strategies for exiting from a specific area or country. Although these studies are relevant for project practitioners and academics, they are mainly from relief or philanthropy projects and hence, contextually different from a development discourse. Furthermore, studies by Moyo (2009) and Fee (2012: cited in Ngoma, 2019) explicitly discuss aid exit strategies. Nonetheless, the studies hardly address the practical side of aid withdrawal at the grassroots level, where practitioners implement projects. Rather, they focus on the distortive nature or dependency-inducing effects of development aid. Whether what is done by project implementers aligns with the current understanding of ESs.

Project management is not different from any field or area that requires striking a balance between theory and practice. Thus, researching the compatibility of theory and practice in using ESs is necessary for theoretical and practical reasons. First, theory primarily functions as a lens through which we view the world, providing context for problem-solving and critical thought to enhance the probability of project sustainability and management in general terms. Second, unearthing the disjuncture between recommended good practice and actual practice in the field, which is pertinent among project practitioners and researchers. Hence, the main question in this study was, how have project implementers espoused and practised ESs in donor-supported projects in agriculture and community development?

2.0 Methodology
2.1 Study Design and Area
The study used a comparative case study design. According to Yin (2003), the design is recommended for use when the study (i) intends to unpack the 'why' and 'how' questions and (ii) involves one or more interventions across multiple contexts. These conditions apply to this study, which inquired into practices of project exit by investigating how project practitioners have espoused and implemented ESs to sustain donor-supported projects in real-life situations. The study focused on Integrated Soil Fertility Management (ISFM) and the ECO Adaptation to Climate Change in Central Tanzania (ECO-ACT). The European Union (EU) and the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) funded the study projects. The ISFM and ECO-ACT projects were implemented in Tanzania's Namtumbo district (2015-2018) and Chamwino district (2015-2019). The ISFM project supported the production of soybeans, and common beans, and improved varieties of maize and cassava. The main crops promoted by the ECO-ACT were improved varieties of pearl millet, sorghum (MACIA and NACO), sunflower (RECORD), and paddy (SARO 5). Mtakanini, Nahoro,

Mawa, and Mchomoro were the study villages for the ISFM project, while Idifu was the only village for the ECO-ACT. Despite the differences in the crops promoted, the two projects were comparable in using ESs and donor funding which is the reason for their selection and inclusion.

2.2 Sampling Processes
The researchers sampled study respondents from among the villagers supported by the ISFM and ECO-ACT project at Mtakanini, Nahoro, Mawa, Mchomoro and Idifu using a purposive sampling technique, based on their involvement in project-initiated activities. In total, the supported LBs were 958 LBs (429 ECO-ACT; 529 ISFM). Using a formula by Kothari (2004), 274 (151 ISFM; 123 ECO-ACT) respondents were sampled and interviewed.

$$n = \frac{z^2 . p. q. N}{e^2 (N-1) + z^2. p. q}$$

$$n = \frac{(1.96)^2 . (0.5). (0.5). (958)}{(0.05)^2 . (958\text{-}1) + (1.96)^2. (0.5). (0.5)} = 274$$

Where: n = sample size, N = number of household project beneficiaries from eight villages, amounting to 958, and e = 5% (0.05) level of precision, p = sample proportion, q= 1- p, z = the value of a given confidence level. Then, they performed a proportionate random sampling technique, yielding 151 for ISFM and 123 for the ECO–ACT project (Table 1).

Table 1: Number of project beneficiaries and study respondents by project

Project	District	Ward	Village	Total beneficiaries	Estimation	Sampled respondents
ECO-ACT	Chamwino	Idifu	Idifu	429	274/958 x 429	123
Subtotal				429		123
ISFM	Namtumbo	Hanga	Mawa	155	274/958 x 155	44
		Msindo	Mtakanini	117	274/958 x117	33
				130	274/958 x130	37
		Luegu	Nahoro	130	274/958 x130	37
		Mchomoro	Mchomoro	130		
Subtotal				529		151
Total				**958**		**274**

Source: Author's computation

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The participants for the study were selected using generic purposive sampling techniques. According to Bryman (2012), the technique fits in qualitative studies that do not necessarily seek to develop a theory and the selection criteria for participants are predetermined. This study chose the strategy because the fore-identified conditions applied. A participant was eligible if (i) was in a managerial position or (ii) participated in the set-up and implementation of the project's ESs. In total, the study participants were six, namely the project managers, the District Agriculture, Irrigation and Cooperative officers (DAICOs) for Chamwino and Namtumbo, the Chamwino District representative responsible for the ECO-ACT project, and the representative of CARITAS, the Songea office.

2.3 Methods and Instruments

The study opted for a mixed-method approach to collect qualitative and quantitative data. The aim was to comprehend extensively how ISFM and ECO-ACT projects deployed ESs and how they affected the sustenance of project activities and benefits at the household level instead of focusing on either approach separately. The study used surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions (FGDs) as data collection methods.

The researcher collaborated with four enumerators to collect data from household respondents using a survey-based questionnaire. It comprised information on the respondents' socio-economic characteristics, their perceptions of their efficacy and outcome expectancies, the use of ESs by the project team, institutional arrangements put in place to manage project activities they performed before and after the withdrawal of the project and the benefits they got from those activities. To enhance the effective use of the tool, the researcher trained the research assistants.

Additionally, the researcher conducted key informant interviews (KIIs) with six selected key informants on a face-to-face basis. The interviews were held in the participant's offices. Moreover, the researcher developed and administered three sets of questions. One for project managers, the other for the representatives of the Chamwino and Namtumbo districts, and the last one for the representative for CARITAS, Songea office. The content of the tools varied depending on the participant's position in managing the study projects. The aim was to increase both in-depth and diversity from participants' perspectives. Furthermore, formulated the questions based on the six elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002). Probing with follow-up questions was used to make participants clarify the issues discussed. On average, the interview session ranged from 45 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Kiswahili and audio-recorded using a voice recorder.

Additionally, the study involved three focus group discussions (FGD) at Idifu, Mawa, and Mchomoro villages. The study involved only one FGD session in each village. Both males and females attended, four each. Similar to the interviews, the researcher conducted FGD in Kiswahili and audio-recorded. The farmers' group leaders took a proactive role in helping to nominate participants. The primary criteria for selection to the discussion were active beneficiary status and involvement in the project from the beginning.

2.4 Data processing and analysis

Data processing involved transcribing the FGD and KIIs audio recordings into scripts. The study applied intelligent verbatim transcription to allow every word transcribed and interpreted to exclude pauses, status, and filler words. In addition, the strategy helped to improve the grammar. Having transcribed the audio recordings, the researcher translated them into English.

The analysis involved qualitative comparative analysis (QCA) and thematic analysis techniques. The QCA is an analytical technique to compare case-based information, which leads to a replicable modest generalisation of case-specific findings - typically considered an advantage of quantitative methods. Additionally, the literature recommends using QCA to analyse small cases, and to synthesize case-based findings (Legewie, 2013; Befani, 2016).

In this study, the application of QCA went through a series of steps (Befani, 2016; Simister and Scholz, 2017). First, identify cases of interest (here, we refer to the study projects). Second, developing a set of necessary factors or conditions whose presence or absence may contribute to the intended outcomes (here, we refer to recommended good practices for a successful exit as suggested by Levinger and McLeod, 2002). Third, establishing criteria on how to score the factors or conditions. The researcher scored the identified conditions based on the presence or absence of that condition across the cases studied; 1 for presence and 0 for absence. Then, the results were presented in a matrix of 0 (absence) and 1(presence). Fourth, analysing and synthesizing data where the researchers did a cross-case comparison and case analysis. At this point, the researchers applied thematic deductive (or theoretical) analysis (see, Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, by generating initial and secondary codes using the guidelines by Saldana (2009). The initial coding was manually done in Microsoft Word through a systematic text-analysis approach, followed by structural and process coding. Then, the researcher included the resulting codes in the elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002) (which represent themes in this study). After that, the researcher performed secondary coding in Ms Word to create patterns and categories using focused and axial coding techniques.

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In the presentation of data, QCA was used to compare the compatibility of theory with practice in using ESs for the two study projects based on data collected from KIIs. The study relied on the results from thematic analysis and KIIs to explain why things happened the way they did. Moreover, it used results from KIIs, FGDs and surveys to determine the extent of using project exit elements. Additionally, it used QCA results for an across-case comparison in the type and extent of use of exit strategies.

To improve the study's rigour, the researcher did constant reading and re-reading to search for and identify codes, patterns and categories. In addition, the researcher shared the analysed data with the supervisors to gain their opinions and comments and accommodated them accordingly. In most cases, the researcher did triangulation between sources, that is, between KIIs and FGDs to ensure quality data.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The current study examined the use of ESs for donor-supported projects to determine whether theory and practice were consistent. Then, it presents findings and discussions arising from the study by considering three criteria. First, is the consistency of ES deployment in theory and practice. Here, the study examines the project's ESs (expressed as patterns or categories) with respect to the elements of a successful exit described by Levinger and McLeod (2002). Thereafter, it validates consistency between theory and practice using QCA results from KIIs - when a pattern or category describing a particular theme is evident. Second, is the extent to which the study projects deployed Levinger and McLeod's proposed elements for a successful exit. This sub-section identifies and analyses the various patterns and categories constituting a theme based on QCA and thematic analysis findings from KIIs and FGDs. The aim is to describe what the project team did, how, and why. Third and last, the study examines the awareness of respondents on the project's use of exit elements. Here, the study presents and discusses survey results from household respondents.

3.1 Consistency between theory and practice in the use of ESs

The study used results from QCA to determine if the study project used ESs consistent with the elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002). The results (Table 2) indicate that the ISFM project implemented four elements while the ECO-ACT implemented only three. The findings show study projects never used the fourth and fifth elements, which call for mobilising funds from internal and external resources and staggered phase-over.

Table 2: Study projects' consistency between theory and practice in the use of ESs

Conditions for successful project exit	Project name	
	ISFM	ECO-ACT
1. Plan for exit from the beginning of the project	1	1
2. Develop partnerships and local linkages	1	1
3. Build local organizational and human capacity	1	1
4. Mobilize local and external resources	0	0
5. Stagger the phase-out of various project activities and resources	0	0
6. Allow roles and relationships to evolve and continue after exit.	1	0

Key: 1= present; 0=absent

The interviews with the key informants revealed that the study projects did not mobilise resources from local and external resources because donor funding sufficed to maintain the scope and quality of exit activities up to the point of exit. Moreover, project activities were household-based and did not require staggering activities and resources. Typically, the staggering of project activities and resources happens when the exit approach involves a transfer of responsibilities to another organisation. In such cases, a distinct transition phase is necessary to give local actors assuming responsibility an opportunity to gain relevant competencies in leadership and resource generation, according to Levinger and McLeod (2002). However, in the context of this study, project exit activities were mainstreamed directly in the project framework from the start. The sixth component, which calls for allowing roles and relationships to evolve after exit, was not implemented as part of the ECO-ACT project.

Interview results from KIIs show that the reason for not evolving relationship between the ECO-ACT project and LBs was that donor funding did not extend to post-exit activities, as commented here:

> "In most cases, the donor stops supporting the project after it is completed. They anticipate that the recipients will have taken off, which can occasionally be challenging in our country. For example, I cannot go to the village any longer as it demands fuels, per diems, and the like" (ECO-ACT project manager, Dodoma, 4/2/2021).

Post-exit financing is uncommon since, according to experience, most donors do not fund any activities after the project's completion date. On the other hand, given the value of ongoing relationships in the form of advice, technical support, or mentorship, it points to a fault in the design of ESs for failing to consider other funding sources. According to Levinger and McLeod (2002), project implementers should look into how to finance post-project activities apart from the relationship that should evolve. However, the ISFM project managed to avert this weakness by collaborating with CARITAS, Songea, a local, non-governmental organisation

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that continued to offer advisory services. It engaged in project-similar activities in the district. Hence, in the context of this study, funding arrangements, the nature of activities done, and the withdrawal approach are used to determine using or not to use a specific exit element. The findings disapprove of the suggestion by Levinger and McLeod on deploying all six elements in situ.

3.2 The extent of use of exit elements suggested by Levinger and Mcleod (2002)
3.2.1 Plan for exit from the beginning of a project

According to Levinger and McLeod (2002), exit plans should be crafted from the start of a project and carried out through it. The interviews with participants for the ISFM and ECO-ACT projects revealed that the ESs were conceived during the design stage and implemented alongside project activities.

"From the project's design, we suggested and implemented some strategies as we continued with project implementation" (ISFM project manager, Dodoma, 15/1/2021).

"The issue of project exit is not something implemented closer to the end of the project. It starts from when you plan. You must think about the issue of an exit strategy" (ECO-ACT project manager, Dodoma, 4/2/2021).

More specifically, the study found that ESs designed and implemented for the ISFM project were (i) establishing a partnership with CARITAS, Songea office (ii) transforming saving and credit groups into farmers' groups (iii) training farmers organised in groups to build their capacity (iv) identifying and building the capacity of lead farmers, private service providers (PSP), agro-dealers, and the leaders of primary cooperatives and AMCOS through training (v) transforming farmers groups into saving and internal lending community (SILC) groups, and (vi) engage key Namtumbo District Council (NDC) personnel in the various project implementation processes (vii) Hold a phase-out workshop. For the ECO-ACT project, the ESs were (i) initiating the system of producing sorghum seeds locally as quality declared seed (QDS) (ii) providing drought tolerant seeds, initially free of charge, but later selling at a lower price (iii) engaging focal Chamwino District Council (CDC) staff including extension staff in the implementation of the project (iv) establishing user groups and capacitating them to do project activities (v) identifying and training lead farmers (vi) Linking QDS producers with Tanzania organic seed certifying institute (TOSCI) (vii) linking farmers with agro-dealers (viii) Holding a phase-out workshop. A closer examination of these strategies reveals that they are comparable in most ways despite the differences in agroecological zones, types of supported crops, funding agencies, and implementing partners. The findings suggest that agricultural-related projects deploy ESs that are more or less the same.

Moreover, results from KIIs show that both projects phased out project-specific activities done by LBs. Nonetheless, CDC and NDC, the host district councils, were assigned the overall oversight responsibility to project activities, as demonstrated by the following extract.

"Now, after ending the project engagement, we left all village-level activities to the district council. You would find that there is a ward extension officer who oversees them. But, there are things we left directly to farmers. For example, farmers farmed on their plots. They should, therefore, continue them" (ECO-ACT project manager, Dodoma, 4/2/2021).

Overall, the findings about formulating ESs during the project formulation stage and implementing them throughout the engagement are much like Levinger and McLeod's recommendations. However, the findings contrast with studies (Mkomagi and Mwaseba, 2013; Hayman *et al.,* 2016; Yu *et al.,* 2017) which reported that practitioners commonly treated the process of exiting as an afterthought. The identified discrepancies may be the result of different contexts and financing sources. According to Mkomagi et al. (2015), the alternative explanation might be that in the past, some organisations used to gradually scale back their interventions without necessarily thinking about phase over or phase out as alternatives to ending donor-supported projects. This is true for most projects conceived in the 1990s when most organisations had not mainstreamed the use of ESs in their policies and interventions.

3.2.2 Develop partnerships and local linkages

It has become apparent that forming partnerships or working closely with farmers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and academic institutions is a crucial and efficient way to create and disseminate innovations. This was also evident in the interviews with participants that revealed that the projects formed partnerships with actors in the public and private sectors. Project partnerships, according to Levinger and McLeod (2002), lay the foundation for a successful exit. For the ISFM project, the Institute of Rural Development Planning (IRDP) Dodoma, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA, based in Dar es Salaam)), NDC, and CARITAS, Songea office, served as primary collaborators. For the ECO-ACT project, IRDP, TARI Hombolo (TARIH), and CDC were the collaborators – all of which are public institutions. Except for CARITAS and IITA, which are private institutions, the remaining collaborators are public institutions. A note is made here that while IRDP was the principal implementer for both projects, distinct personnel managed the projects.

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The multi-disciplinary nature of the study projects and the desire to improve outcomes were the driving force behind the formation of project partnerships, as revealed by one of the key informants:

"Because the project was multi-disciplinary, it required multidiscipline implementers. So, we decided to include partners who are specialists in those activities with the expectation that it would be more efficient" (ECO-ACT project manager, Dodoma, 4/2/2021).

Levinger and McLeod's (2002) recommendations also support using multi-disciplinary partnerships. The authors underscore giving due consideration to partners' contributions to the project to supplement those of the principal implementer.

The partnership theme comprised two categories, partnership levels and partner selection criteria. While CARITAS and NDC handled project work daily, IRDP and IITA collaborated on technical aspects of the project. The ISFM team believed it was crucial to partner with local non-governmental organisations since they continue to be involved in the community even after external assistance ends. The primary requirements for choosing such a partner were that the organization was to be based in the project area, engage in activities related to the project, and have a solid track record of working with farmers. However, the ECO-ACT project lacked this categorisation.

In terms of linkages, the study's findings reveal two types of categories. The first category comprises LBs and private service providers. It featured in three ways, LBs being linked with (a) local agro-dealers (features in both projects), (b) with large commercial buyers and (c) with financial banks (ISFM project only). The study found that linking LBs with agro-dealers aimed to make it easy for LBs to get access to improved seeds and fertilisers, as revealed by the ISFM project manager:

"We extended our reach to include other actors in the value chain, such as those who provide fertilizer, and we created points for easing the distribution of seeds, crops, and fertilisers. Farmers could get access to them for less money" (ISFM project manager, Dodoma, 15/1/2021).

By establishing links with secondary input dealers, LBs were provided with a secure and consistent source of inputs, as affirmed by the representative of CARITAS in Songea: *ZAMSEED used to bring maize seeds to the offices of CARITAS, and LBs used to get them from there at a lower price.* Moreover, the ISFM project, in contrast to the ECO-ACT, linked LBs to larger commercial buyers of crops for maize and soybeans. Reacting to a question about whether they established linkages with actors along the value chain, the ISFM project manager said:

"Yes, Silver Land and we had marketing ties. Farmers used to sell their soybeans and maize to them. In Dar es Salaam, we also had a buyer named TANSEED. Additionally, they had been purchasing soybeans" (ISFM project manager, Dodoma, 15/1/2021).

Results from KIIs further revealed that the ISFM project, through NDC, linked LBs groups with CRDB Plc, a financial bank, to enable them to get credit to buy farm inputs, mainly improved seeds, fertilisers, or pesticides.

The second category under the theme of linkage comprises the leaders of primary cooperative societies and local government leaders at the village and district levels. Only the ISFM project is featured in this category. The ECO-ACT did not work to make cooperative societies. Its objectives did not include it. The findings imply that ECO-ACT project LBs missed an opportunity to get training about cooperative issues, which is very pertinent for the sustainability of farmers' groups. The Chamwino district strategic plan (2013 - 2018) also documents the lack of cooperative education as one of the factors constraining the development of the agriculture sector in the district. Apart from supporting the elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002), the findings about forming partnerships to improve the implementation of ESs are consistent with those made by Rogers and Coates (2015) who identified partnership as one of the preconditions for project sustainability apart from funding, capacity building, and LBs ownership. Additionally, it corroborates a study by Bjärstig (2017), which claimed that partnerships do result in sustainable outcomes.

3.2.3 Build local organisational and human capacity

According to Brown *et al.* (2001), most development organisations engage in capacity building to meet their objectives and promote sustainability; the long-lasting outcome of capacity building. The study participants' opinions also support this claim: *We saw that the project needed to be maintained and the need to increase the capacity of the individuals involved* (ISFM project manager, Dodoma, 15/1/2021). To make capacity-building exercises effective, Levinger and McLeod (2002) suggest undertaking a thorough organisational capacity assessment to determine the capacity needs of both implementing partners and LBs, which was the case for the ISFM and ECO-ACT projects. Technical capacity building, material capacity building and approaches to capacity building emerged as categories supporting building organisational and human capacity themes.

The study found that project implementers undertook technical capacity building primarily to raise local beneficiaries' understanding of various project facets, enhance performance, and boost the likelihood of sustainability. It entailed developing new local institutions or

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strengthening pre-existing ones. The newly established institutions included farmers' groups and cooperative societies, lead farmers, and demonstration farms. Additionally, the study found that the ISFM project transformed existing saving and credit groups into farmers' groups and formed them where they were missing. The aim was to spread integrated soil fertility management technologies and provide farmer training. It also established farmers' associations (FAs), farmers' organisations (FOs), and an AMCOS. When farmers' groups in a village united, they formed an FA. The amalgamation of farmers' groups and associations formed FOs. The coalition of FAs and FOs formed an agriculture marketing and cooperative society (AMCOS). Thus, the AMCOS comprised all primary societies in the district while farmers groups, FA, and FO operated at the grassroots or village level.

Through analysis of the findings, it is noted that the formation of cooperative societies was consistent with the ISFM project's objective of improving the same in the study area. Hence, it facilitated their establishment to strengthen the bargaining power of smallholder farmers than if they sell crops individually. Moreover, cooperative societies could serve as hubs for accelerating change, trickle-down effects, and collective marketing, as commented by a CARITAS representative. The study's findings on using FA and FO are congruent with Msuta and Urassa (2015), who reported FOs as significant institutional vehicles for promoting agricultural development that aid farmers in resolving problems related to access to agricultural inputs, credit, technical knowledge and marketing of produce.

Although the ECO-ACT project lacked objectives of strengthening cooperatives, it similarly helped farmers form and register six groups as community-based organisations (CBOs), according to the project manager. Beekeeping, paddy cultivation, home gardening, quality declared seeds production, sorghum cultivation, and pearl millet husking machines were the formed groups, according to FGD in Idifu village.

Further, the other aspect under the technical capacity building was the identification and training of lead farmers, as noted by one of the key informants: *For each participating village, we selected lead farmers from among project-supported farmers* (Representative of CARITAS, Songea, 14/4/2021). The reason for using the lead farmers approach was normative, as identified by one of the study participants:

> *"You know, here we believe that individuals tend to think they can accomplish anything if they witness a friend doing it and acknowledge that they were successful. Therefore, we put these folks to good use. We empowered them, and they left to serve others. Local farmers are more likely to pay attention to them*

than they would if you brought in an expert" (ECO-ACT project manager, Dodoma, 4/2/2021).

According to the representative of CARITAS, a person was selected to serve as a lead farmer when they were influential in the community. This criterion aimed to get persons who could command others to do project activities such that if they say something, others would listen. Another criterion was the ability to learn - mainly because they were required to be more knowledgeable than the other group members - to be able to assist them. These criteria are similar to those proposed by Vesterager *et al.* (2017) under the RIPAT approach, which includes being an active member of a group, having the ability to adopt the promoted technologies, having a good reputation in the community, and being literate. Additionally, the study found that in some cases, village government leaders engaged in selecting lead farmers, which is consistent with Simpson *et al.* (2015). The authors observed that allowing communities or their institutions to choose lead farmers fosters local ownership and accountability. The study's findings on the use of lead farmers confirm research by Oyelami *et al.* (2018) and Ringo (2020), which reported that lead farmers can strengthen community-based extension services by providing support to other farmers both before and after donor funding ends.

Furthermore, the study projects established demonstration farms (also called demo farms). KII results show that the project implementers trained LBs on the crops promoted by the projects using the demonstration farms. In both projects, demo farms were situated at LB farms and managed by group members, who carried out all of the tasks from site selection, preparation, planting, weeding, and harvesting. This, according to the representative of CARITAS, allowed LBs to witness, learn and make informed decisions when choosing which crop to opt, for based on how well they performed:

> *"When you start a demonstration farm it allows farmers to learn from the varieties of crops planted in demo plots. Farmers observe them from the planting, through flowering, to the harvest period. That way, a farmer will identify which variety is good or problematic"* (Representative of CARITAS, Songea, 14/4/2021).

The findings on the use and placement of demo farms support Bailey *et al.* (2006) who recommend demo farms be placed on local farms to increase visibility and promote learning, and behavioural change, instead of extension plots or research stations.

Regarding material assistance, the ISFM project gave one of the Msindo village's - sponsored groups machines for cassava drying, juice processing, and flour packing. The aim was to create a market for cassava, one of the crops promoted by the project. Additionally, it enabled the AMCOS to get an office to provide a space for managing

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cooperative activities in the district, before and after project withdrawal. Up to the period of data collection, the machines and office space were found operational. The ECO-ACT, on the other hand, offered free or discounted seeds, livestock medicines, improved chicken and goats, ox ploughs, bee hives, and tools for harvesting honey. The study found that the provision of these items was one of the project's exit strategies which aimed to create a demand for LBs to use improved varieties of crops and livestock. However, an FGD with participants at Idifu showed that the approach was unfruitful post-exit. Most farmers were reluctant to buy improved seeds for lack of money. Instead, recycled the first-generation seeds offered by the project.

In a nutshell, the findings under the theme of building human and organisational capacities have demonstrated that the study projects took various initiatives ranging from technical to material support, evidencing consistency between theory and practice in that regard, as commented by Levinger and McLeod (2002). The study's findings about deploying capacity-building as an exit strategy are consistent with Engels (2010), Mkomagi and Mwaseba (2013), and Ndombi *et al.* (2020). According to Ndombi *et al.* (2020), using exit capacity building as an exit strategy improves LBs' capability to decide responsibly and allocate resources effectively. Furthermore, the authors allude that capacity building significantly influenced the sustainability of livelihood projects in Kilifi County, Kenya.

3.2.4 Allowing roles and relationships to evolve and continue after exit

According to Levinger and McLeod (2002), the relationships between LBs and implementing organisations do not have to end when the projects are withdrawn. In that respect, the current study sought to determine whether roles and relationships between LBs and the study projects evolved and continued. The study findings reveal that continued relationships and mentorships of farmers' groups were the categories found under the theme of ongoing roles and relationships.

The significant relationships found to be ongoing for the ISFM project were those between farmers and agro-dealers; those between CRBD bank and farmers' groups; those between CARITAS and NDC, and those between lead farmers and farmers. A notable ongoing mentorship relationship was between CARITAS and SILC groups. According to the representative of CARITAS, Songea, the organisation continued to mobilise farmers to transform their groups into saving and internal lending community (SILC) groups. Moreover, it facilitated the groups to join the 'Kilimo Fund' (literally meaning agricultural fund) to empower them to save money for buying farm inputs during the planting season, which was frequently deficient. To increase efficiency and accessibility to service, the organisation has a permanent staff who deals with SILC groups in the region.

Considering the ECO-ACT project, the study findings reveal a somehow different scenario. In most cases, the relations developed during the project engagement had come to an end. In contrast to the ISFM project where farmers' groups had remained vibrant, farmers' groups under the ECO-ACT project collapsed shortly after the project was withdrawn due to poor management – evidencing the lack of cooperative education among farmers as indicated in the district's strategic plan. Nonetheless, lead farmers continued to serve as role models and a source of inspiration and technical advice. Moreover, CDC had assumed the role of providing free or subsidized sorghum seeds to farmers in the district following a lesson learned from the ECO-ACT project.

3.3 Local Beneficiaries' Awareness of the Project's Use of Exit Elements

To support the qualitative findings, the researcher performed a quantitative analysis to discern the awareness of LBs in the project's use of exit elements. Respondents were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with statements on a Likert scale. The statement inquired whether the projects engaged host district councils in implementing project activities. It also inquired whether they established a system of producing quality declared seeds in the project area. The other aspects were whether they linked supported farmers to agro-dealers in nearby towns, or built the capacity of its beneficiaries to carry out project activities. Furthermore, the tool inquired if LBs continue to receive technical advice from the project's main implementers and whether the project capacitated lead farmers to support fellow farmers in the village.

The results (Table 3) disclose three levels of awareness; low, neutral and high. Of the three levels, 47.3% and 43.3% of the respondents reported high and low awareness, respectively. Project-wise, more respondents for the ECO-ACT (48.8%) than the ISFM project (45.7%) reported high awareness. In both cases, the proportion of respondents reporting high awareness was less than fifty per cent. This is a surprising finding since LBs participated directly in carrying out most of the exit activities discussed so far. They did not, however, command much understanding of the logic behind it, as seen by their limited familiarity with the numerous ESs used by the study project. This shows that engaging LBs in determining needs and activities and engaging them in the implementation processes does not eliminate the necessity for direct open communication between the project management and the LBs. Clear communication between LBs and the project team, as noted by Levinger and McLeod (2002), aids in preventing feelings of shock and desertion during the phase-out period. Additionally, it creates opportunities for exploring funding options outside of the project's period, which is crucial for initiatives like demonstration farms, QDS plots, mentorship programmes for lead farmers and farmer organisations, and technical support

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for cooperative society leaders. In this regard, it is crucial to give LBs the knowledge necessary to comprehend "why" decisions are made in a given way in terms of their benefits, ownership, and sustainability.

Table 3: Local beneficiaries' perception of the project's use of exit strategies

Level of perception	ISFM project (n=151)	ECO-ACT project (n=123)	Overall (n=274)
Low	67(44.4)	52(42.3)	119(43.3)
Neutral	15(9.9)	11(48.8)	26(9.4)
High	59(45.7)	60(48.8)	129(47.3)

Figures in brackets are per percentage

3.4 Other patterns and categories observed in the study projects' use of exit elements

Apart from establishing patterns and categories consistent with the themes suggested by Levinger and McLeod (2002), the other patterns and categories observed in the study projects' use of exit elements are presented hereunder.

First, reaching community members not directly involved in the interventions. The results show that the ISFM project strategically placed demonstration farms near the main roads to improve their visibility and attract other farmers to adopt the project's recommended practices. The strategy enabled the project to widen its scope and reach villagers not directly supported by it. The use of this strategy has normative and practical implications. Normatively, as more people adopt the project practices, the more everyone in the project area would feel obliged to do the same. In practice, LBs were able to systematically test, and evaluate the performance of different types of farm technologies promoted, and scale up. The study's findings on placing demo farms near the main roads corroborate.

Second, it provides LBs with an opportunity to share experiences among themselves and with experts. The findings suggest that in the course of knowledge and skills dissemination concerning the various facets of the project, the ISFM project provided LBs with an opportunity to evaluate and communicate to the project team the relevance and applicability of the acquired knowledge. The collected feedback was synthesized and compiled by the project team into pamphlets and distributed back to the participants for further learning. One participant stated the following:

> *"We normally assessed the training's effectiveness after completing each training session. In addition, we normally gave them assignments. As the participants returned to their groups, they would talk about what they had learned, how it applied; where they did it correctly or wrong; and how they could have done better. Thus, they would offer comments on the applicability of what was taught in the prior session when they returned for the subsequent training session"* (ISFM project manager, Dodoma, 15/1/2021).

FGD participants at Mchomoro and Mawa villages perceived this approach to learning as a powerful way of knowledge dissemination. They remarked that despite the withdrawal of the project, its benefits remained clear and that they still applied the gained knowledge and skills in farming. In Mchomoro village, FGD participants compared their experience with the ISFM project to pupils who had joined and graduated from the nursery, primary and secondary education and were waiting for another funding opportunity to go for university education. The study's findings support UNDP (2008) which noted that capacity building is an iterative procedure of design-application-learning-adjustment rather than a single intervention. The use of the approach signifies a fundamental departure from top-down knowledge dissemination to the bottom-up (participatory) extension approach. It recognises farmers as active participants responsible for identifying problems and coming up with alternative solutions (Maulu *et al.,* 2021).

4.0 Conclusions and Recommendations

This study sought to validate whether using ESs for development projects was consistent with the existing knowledge. The study was grounded on the recommendations by Levinger and McLeod (2002) for a successful exit. The findings reveal that the ISFM project used four out of the six elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod, and the ECO-ACT projects used three only out of the six. Planning for exit from the start, establishing project partnerships, and enhancing the capacity of partners and LBs were the elements applied by both study projects. Allowing roles and relationships to evolve featured out to the ISFM project only. Moreover, the project team implemented the exit elements throughout the project to enhance local beneficiaries' knowledge and skills, ownership, and sustainability. Project-wise, sustainability indicators were much more evident for the ISFM project than for the ECO-ACT project. The study concludes that the practice of project exit was consistent with theory for some elements but not for others. It is further determined that mainstreaming exit activities into the project from the beginning can help consolidate behaviour-changing practices and the sustainability of activities and benefits, without necessarily having a distinct transition phase. In light of the study findings and conclusions, the study recommends the following:

First, project managers consider ESs while planning projects and employ them effectively throughout the project engagement. By doing this, it will be possible to determine how the project will turn out in the end and adjust as necessary to account for changes within the project's timeframe. Additionally, it will help resolve the dilemma of having another budget for the transition period in phase-out contexts, which is usually lacking. Second, project managers should look at and establish partnerships with private organisations operating in or close to the supported

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community to strengthen ongoing relationships and mentorship programmes beyond the project engagement period. Third, it is not necessary to deploy all six elements suggested by Levinger and McLeod. It all depends on the context, specifically, funding arrangements, the nature of activities done, and the withdrawal approach deployed. Lastly, although the study discussed various effective exit practices, they should be considered a "best fit" rather than a "best practice," as projects vary in many ways. The practices can act as markers and safety nets to help achieve project goals or to maintain the benefits gained. If variations in the context - and – culture-specific factors are considered, they could be applied to most situations.

Acknowledgement

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