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# From Project Continuity to Institutionalised Viability: Rethinking Sustainability In NGO-Led Education in Zambia

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**ABSTRACT:** In the context of NGO-led educational campaigns, the concept of sustainability is often related to the simple continuation of programmes after donor funding exhaustion. However, this project-based understanding obscures the institutional conditions that enable long-term functioning within public education systems. The article is based on a convergent mixed-methods inquiry conducted with six education-oriented non-governmental organisations and representatives of the Ministry of Education in Zambia to examine how educational interventions can be sustained amid resource volatility. Ordinal regression analysis shows that financial resilience and operational viability explain a substantial proportion of variance in sustainability strategies (Nagelkerke $R^2$ = .416). Whereas financial diversification can help mitigate funding shocks, governance coherence, monitoring architecture, coordination routines, and institutional alignment have a stronger structural impact on sustainability outcomes. Qualitative results also provide further insights into the fact that participation and capacity-building, despite their ubiquity, are often poorly embedded in the Ministry of Education's planning, budgeting, and performance-management systems. As a result, the research modifies a conceptual change between project continuity and institutionalised viability. Sustainability is redefined as system-level capacity that arises when feasible operational routines become institutionalised within structures of state governance and remain responsive under conditions of scarce resources. The article provides a clear explanation of why funding plurality is insufficient to ensure the endurance of programmes, drawing on the resource dependency, institutionalisation, and dynamic capability literature. Sustainability in resource-constrained educational systems is not realised through projects as independent entities, but rather through the institutionalisation of their operational logic in public systems. This reframing has significant implications for both NGOs, donors, and policymakers who hope to achieve enduring education reform within the funding period.

**KEYWORDS:** Institutionalised viability; NGO sustainability; Operational viability; Institutionalisation; Resource dependency; Zambia.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Within the education systems of low-income groups, the term "sustainability" is widely invoked but rarely questioned as a structural factor. In Zambia, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with education as their primary focus have become key players in foundational literacy, teacher development, and system strengthening (Lombe & Mwanaumo, 2022; Stutchbury et al., 2024). Although the programme's success is evident, numerous interventions face the challenge of survival beyond donor funding cycles. It is no longer about whether NGOs deliver results, but about whether those results are lasting (Banks et al., 2014; Michael, 2023).

This challenge has intensified due to recent shifts in global development financing. Bilateral grants have decreased significantly over the last five years, whereas multilateral financing has grown primarily as loans for project implementation (Bulow & Rogoff, 2005; Woskie & Wenham, 2024). To the NGOs involved in the Zambian education system, this shift has brought to light an even more vulnerable aspect. Programme continuity is highly sensitive to external funding structures (Chrine et al., 2020). However, funding volatility is not the sole factor in explaining the stabilisation of certain programmes and the dissolution of others. It is not only the financial aspect of the sustainability problem; it is structural.

Based on convergent mixed-method information from six education-oriented Non-Governmental Organisations and Ministry of Education representatives in Lusaka District, this paper presents a crucial empirical regularity: financial resilience and operational viability together account for about 41.6% of the variation in sustainability strategies, with operational viability the more effective predictor. These results dispute simplified assumptions. Conventional assumptions suggest that sustainability depends primarily on financial strength, particularly through diversification of funding or stakeholder mobilisation. Rather, governance structures, coordinating practices, monitoring structures, and institutional conformity have a higher predictive power (Makeche & Chowa, 2023; Singh et al., 2022).

This empirical conundrum demands a conceptual change. The sustainability of NGO-led education programmes cannot be satisfactorily understood as the perpetuation of operations once funds are exhausted, or as a set of controls over community ownership, capacity building, or exit strategy (Carroll et al., 2019; Monkman, 2018). These ideas are often involved, but they are not sufficient to guarantee long-term sustainability on their own. There is qualitative evidence that, although participation and training are widespread, institutional absorption into the Ministry's planning, budgeting, and performance management systems is limited. In practice, embedding is often used in place of handovers.

The current article, hence, redefines sustainability as institutionalised resource-constrained viability. Sustainability is not considered either a project deliverable or a system-level capability (Carroll et al., 2019; Singh et al., 2022). It arises because operational routines have become institutionalised within governance structures, because the implementation architecture is resilient to staff turnover and donor withdrawals, and because the programmes can respond to funding shocks without disrupting core functions. Endurance depends on institutionalised systems of operation, and financial resilience serves as a buffer.

"Zambia provides an analytically significant setting for this reframing. The ecosystem of local and international NGOs in the country is highly saturated, and the education system is organised around evolving donor typologies and shifting financing tools (Kachumi et al., 2025; Nomsenge, 2019). This background enables one to study sustainability not as an idealistic objective but as a bargaining process shaped by institutional fit, organisational agency, and adaptive capacity.

The value of the current research is threefold. To begin with, it empirically shows that operational viability is a stronger predictor of sustainability structurally than financial diversification (Coulmont et al., 2022). Second, it promotes a theoretical model that places sustainability as an institutional competence rather than a project characteristic (Wei, 2025). Third, it elucidates how the three elements, governance absorption, routinised operational systems, and adaptive recalibration, can work together to generate systemic continuity in NGO-led education reform (Okine, 2022).

Sustainability does not follow participation or plurality of funders in any environment where education gains remain delicate, and donor architecture is becoming more uncertain. It has to be institutionally embedded (Bano & Oberoi, 2020; Stutchbury and others, 2024). In the absence of this embedding, NGO-led reform is structurally transient, even in the face of short-term success.

Sustainability must be discussed outside funding flows and metrics to explain this weakness in the structure. The second part builds upon a composite theoretical prism that explains the interplay among resource dependency, institutional entrenchment, and adaptive capability in shaping programme persistence.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper transforms the concept of sustainability into a system-level capability rather than a project-level achievement (Deslatte, 2022). To support this reframing, the theoretical framework combines three mutually supportive lenses: Resource Dependency Theory (RDT), Institutionalisation Theory, and Sustainability as a Dynamic Capability. Taken as a whole, these views explain why programme sustainability rests on operational viability, rather than on diversified funding.

### 2.1 Resource Constraint and Structural Dependency.

Resource Dependency Theory (RDT) argues that organisations depend on third parties to provide important resources, and the parties involved in such relationships must cope with the power distance that exists between them (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Education-oriented NGOs in Zambia rely heavily on donor funding. Organisational autonomy and planning horizons are restricted when funding is contracted or project-bound (Chambo & Zyambo, 2025; Kachumi et al., 2025; Lombe & Mwanaumo, 2022).

RDT is not only useful for explaining the volatility of funding, but also for explaining the effect of structural dependence on organisational behaviour. In situations with high donor concentration, NGOs face challenges related to diversification, collaboration, and bureaucratic congruence (Arhin et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2022). However, diversification fails to eliminate vulnerability when the operational systems are externally anchored.

The empirical results indicate that, while financial resilience contributes to sustainability, operational viability is the stronger predictor, implying that operating without dependence does not guarantee continuity (Green et al., 2021). Shocks could be softened by financial buffers, although they do not institutionalise programmes. As a result, RDT defines the constraint environment in which sustainability must be built but does not elucidate endurance in its entirety. That is why institutional embedding is taken at the centre (Carroll et al., 2019).

### 2.2 Institutionalisation as the Mechanism of Endurance.

The theory of institutionalisation assumes that practises remain due to routinisation into formal organisation, norms, and systems of governance (Stal, 2015; Scott, 1995). Institutionalisation does not occur when a programme is handed to an organisation, but when its logic of operation is integrated into the lifecycle of planning, budgeting, reporting systems, and professional practises (Geus et al., 2024; Solomon, 2015).

Sustainability in this paper is understood as the result of such embedding. There is qualitative evidence that most NGOs demonstrate strong community engagement and capacity-building policies but cannot be fully integrated into the Ministry of

Education's systems. This divide is the reason why the success of programmes often is structurally temporary (Bano & Oberoi, 2020; Volmink & van der Elst, 2017).

Institutionalisation reframes sustainability from a temporal concept (survival after funding ends) to a structural one (becoming embedded within a system). As an embodiment of governance routines, monitoring architecture, coordination mechanisms, and staffing stability, operational viability lies between programme implementation and institutional absorption (Geus et al., 2024; Singh et al., 2022). Therefore, operational viability seems to be the predictor of sustainability in the regression model. Viable operational systems are easier to routinise within the structures of the state than project activities that are loosely coordinated. The other concept is sustainability as a Dynamic Capability.

Although structural embedding is explained by institutionalisation, there is a need for adaptive capacity to maintain sustainability in volatile environments. Sustainability theory, specifically its dynamic-capability branch (Mazzero et al., 2015; Souza et al., 2017; Carroll et al., 2019), defines sustainability as the capacity of an organisation to combine, reorganise, and re-deploy resources in response to environmental change.

Sustainability in Zambia's changing donor environment does not depend solely on entrenching routines but also on re-tuning them. Programmes adhere to adaptive practises such as funding reconfiguration, iterative monitoring cycles, and learning-oriented governance structures, which allow programmes to remain coherent as resources are contracted (Aiwonose et al., 2025; Brinkerhoff et al., 2018).

Accordingly, sustainability is not institutional absorption or continuity, but institutionalised viability perpetuated by adaptive evolution (Deslatte, 2022). Operational systems must therefore become both institutionalised and adaptable. Without embedding, the embedded structure is at risk of becoming obsolete; without embedding, the adaptive process causes fragmentation.

2.4 The Theoretical Proposition about Integration.

The current research contributes to a hypothetical suggestion by constructing these strands:

The concept of sustainability in the education programmes led by the NGOs comes to fruition when the resource dependency (RDT) organisations attain the institutionalisation of viable operational systems (Institutionalisation Theory) and maintain adaptive capacity in the environment of volatility (Dynamic Capability Theory) (Arhin et al., 2018; Harb et al., 2026).

In this combined model, the constraint is represented by the resource dependency, structural coherence by operational viability, enduring by institutionalisation, and continuation by adaptive capability (Neukam et al., 2025).

Financial resilience helps with shock absorption, but in itself, does not lead to sustainability. In turn, sustainability is defined as institutionalised resource-constraint viability, which is continuously re-adjusted through adaptive learning (Choto et al., 2022).

This unification of theory suggests that operational viability will have a greater impact on sustainability than diversification of funding alone. The next section describes the empirical approach to measuring this assertion.

## III. METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

### Research Design

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach to investigate sustainability strategies in education-based non-governmental organisations in Zambia. The collection of quantitative and qualitative data in parallel, the analysis of the individual strands, and the synthesis of the findings based on the interpretive boundary enabled the study to combine the strengths of both the accuracy of the measurable constructs, such as the financial and operational systems, and the richness of the institutional processes, i.e. the institutionalisation of NGOs into the state apparatuses (Stutchbury et al., 2024; Hassler et al., 2020). Quantitative modelling enabled the investigation of predictive relationships, but qualitative inquiry inadvertently uncovered the subtle mechanisms of institutional change and transition patterns.

### Sample and Context

The study focused on six non-governmental organisations, including an equal number of international and local, whose headquarters are in the Lusaka District and whose officials are selected by the Ministry of Education. The selection criterion was purposive and three-fold: firstly, direct involvement in teacher professional development and learner achievement programmes; second, formal involvement with district or national Ministry systems; and lastly, operational experience across more than one funding round. The respondents in the survey included programme managers, finance officers, monitoring and evaluation staff, and ministry officials directly involved in NGO-supported programmes. To investigate institutionalisation and sustainability processes, semi-structured interviews were conducted with top NGO management and education officials at the district level.

The inclusion of both local and international NGOs enabled a comparative analysis of governance, funding, and absorption pathways, which, according to the research, are central to sustainability in resource-dependent settings. The questionnaire elicited 222 responses from the six non-governmental organisations and the Ministry of Education, as well as 12 semi-structured interviews with senior management and ministry officials.

**Quantitative Data and Analysis**

A structured questionnaire was used to measure three main constructs: Financial Resilience, Operational Viability, and Sustainability Strategies. The respondents answered questions on a five-point scale. Strategies included in the sustainability strategy were institutional integration, exit planning, capacity-building mechanisms, stakeholder participation, and monitoring and learning systems. The Sustainability Theory and Desirability Viability Feasibility (DVF) framework helped in developing the constructs.

**Construct validation and Reliability**

To determine construct validity, exploratory factor analysis was utilised. Sampling adequacy and factorability were established using the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity. The extracted factors showed good internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients within normal reliability limits. Later post-factor reliability analysis validated sustainability strategies as a consistent, multi-item construct.

**Inferential Modelling**

Financial resilience, operational viability, and sustainability strategies were predicted using ordinal regression modelling to test the relationship (Hajmohammad et al., 2023; Ahmic, 2022). The model found that financial resilience and operational viability collectively accounted for about 41.6% of the variation in sustainability strategies, and operational viability was the stronger predictor ($p < 0.05$). Concentration of donors and small buffers of reserves were still statistically significant measures of vulnerability. These findings provide empirical support for the argument that sustainability is structurally preconditioned by the power of governance and institutional capabilities, not only by the diversification of funding sources (Santis et al., 2021).

**Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews covered institutionalisation processes, exit schemes, the capacity of governments to absorb, alignment in governance and adaptive mechanisms to donor volatility. Strategic plans, memoranda of understanding, monitoring frameworks and sustainability policies were included in document analysis. The qualitative data were coded and thematically analysed through an institutional prism, paying attention to evidence of routinisation, assimilation into the processes of designing Ministry plans, redistribution of authority during the transition, and adaptation to tightening funding. Quantitative results were compared with themes to evaluate the level of convergence and explanation.

## IV. FINDINGS

### 4.1 Sustainability under resource constraints

Our regression analysis shows that financial resilience and operational viability are the two variables that explain approximately 41.6 per cent of the variance in sustainability strategies. However, financial resilience alone is not the strongest predictor of sustainability. Sustainability strategies were operationalised as a composite index, which sums up the institutional integration, exit planning, capacity development, stakeholder engagement, and learning systems. Although the descriptive statistics indicated moderate scores on funding accessibility, managing costs, and financial awareness, qualitative interviews served as an eye-opener to long-term structural weaknesses: excessive dependence on one or two main donors, the lack of reserve buffers, and short-term grant cycles that interfere with long-term planning.

The concentration of the donors and the lack of contingency funds remained statistically significant vulnerability factors in the ordinal regression model. Although financial resilience can reduce funding shocks, it does not, on its own, achieve sustainability. The construct offers a short-term operational stability but does not lead to institutionalisation of resilience. These results provide empirical evidence to the hypothesis of the Resource Dependence Theory that dependency management is required, but not sufficient to attain permanent structural stability.

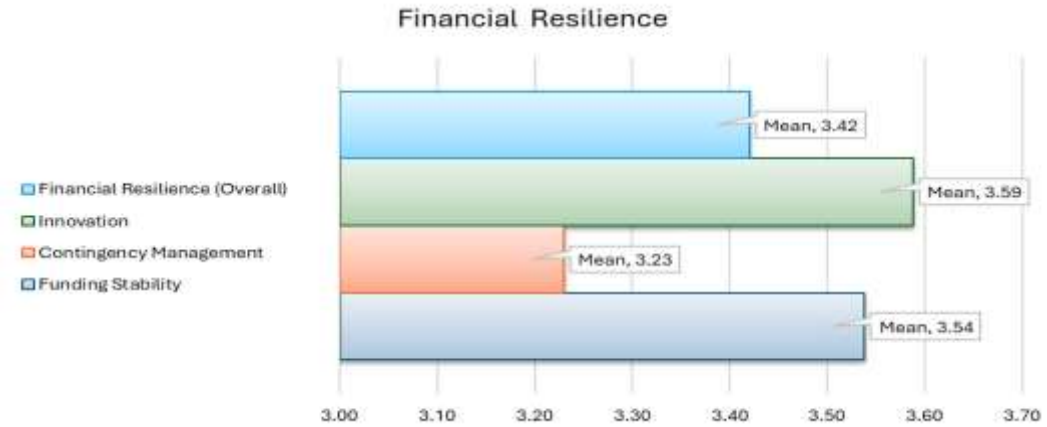



**Figure 1: Analysis of Financial Resilience**

### 4.2 Institutional Embedding: Operational Viability as the Structural Core

The strongest structural predictor of sustainability in the ordinal regression model was operational viability ($p < .05$). Although financial resilience contributed to the model's overall explanatory power, government structures, coordinating systems, staff stability, and monitoring structure had more significant effects on sustainability outcomes. This statistical trend implies that more coherent organisations are better prepared for sustainability than those financed solely through diversification.

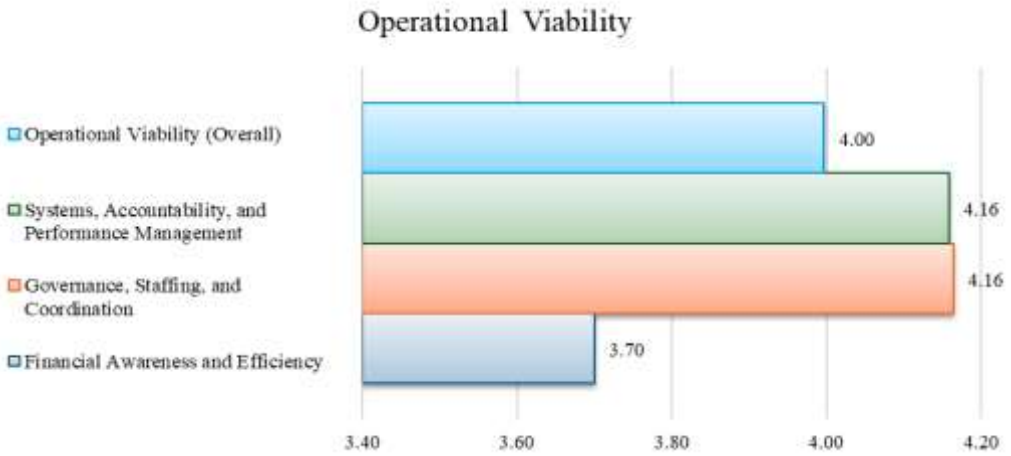



**Figure 2: Findings on Operational Viability**

An example of this recurring theme is shown in Figure 2, which depicts moderate-to-strong mean scores for governance and systems indicators, thereby visually supporting the suggested operational feasibility.

This structural coherence is also explained by descriptive statistics. According to the respondents, there were evident organisational roles (M = 3.784), sufficient staff skills (M = 3.667), effective collaboration with partners and the Ministry of Education (M =3.686), and participatory decision-making structures (M =3.588) (see Table1). In the same measure, accountability and performance management systems were rated highly, such as monitoring and evaluation systems (M = 3.41.69), transparent procurement controls (M = 3.652), and reporting mechanisms that facilitate decision-making (M = 3.574) (see Table 2).

These moderately high internal governance scores suggest that many NGOs have well-organised working practices. However, the major question is whether this kind of organisational coherence is reflected in the systemic incorporation into the wider framework of public education.

**Table 1 presents mean scores for governance, staffing, and coordination indicators.**

| Question | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| Q26 Clear organisational structures and roles | 3.784 | 1.018 |
| Q27 Staff adequately skilled | 3.667 | 1.103 |
| Q28 Effective collaboration with partners and MoE | 3.686 | 1.105 |
| Q29 Transparent and participatory decision-making | 3.588 | 1.068 |
| Q30 Effective communication within and between departments | 3.539 | 1.075 |

**Table 1:** Governance, staffing and coordination indicators

Functional systems for accountability and performance management. Table 2 reports indicators of accountability and performance management systems.

**Table 2: Systems, accountability and performance management**

| Question | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| Q31 Efficient monitoring and evaluation systems | 3.416 | 1.047 |
| Q32 Staff performance regularly appraised | 3.466 | 1.098 |
| Q33 Transparent procurement and financial controls | 3.652 | 1.018 |
| Q34 Reporting and feedback support decision-making | 3.574 | 1.022 |

The qualitative evidence discloses that it is an unbalanced translation. Even though NGOs have shown to have working internal mechanisms, they have been embedded institutionally in areas such as planning, Ministry budgeting processes, and professional development frameworks. Another common feature in the interview process was that the Ministry's involvement usually follows

the project approval and the acquisition of funds, but not conceptualisation and design. As one of the senior officials at the Ministry observed:

*They want to develop the proposals on their own and once they are approved… that's when they engage us, and they complain when we don't fully own the program. (MoE Dir4, 1st October 2025)*

Another official echoed this concern:

*The Ministry is mostly involved when the funds are now available for commencement of the program… if only we could start together, develop together, it would be easier. (MoE Dir1, 18th September 2025)*

These narrations suggest that it is often procedural but not co-constructive collaboration. Many monitoring systems operate in parallel with the district reporting structures, and exit strategies tend to be handover-focused rather than institutional absorption.

That evidence indicates that operational viability creates organisational coherence, and sustainability arises only when organisational coherence is entrenched in systems of the state. In those cases where governance routines are not internalised to the authority of the Ministries, sustainability is structurally weak, though internally robust systems. This explains the greater predictive power of operational viability over financial diversification: systems that can be routinised within state administrative structures are easier to sustain than loosely coordinated project activities.

### 4.3 Desirability Without Authority: Participation and Capacity Building

Survey responses indicated moderate-to-strong stakeholder engagement and investment in capacity building as shown in Table 3.

**Table 3: Institutional sustainability and capacity building**

| Question | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| Q35 Sustainability planning integrated into project phases | 3.50 | 1.043 |
| Q36 Staff capacity development prioritised | 3.662 | 1.002 |
| Q37 Clear exit or transition strategy | 3 | 1.101 |
| Q38 Documented sustainability policies | 3.26 | 1.072 |
| Q39 Succession plans for leadership continuity | 3.093 | 1.164 |

The deep-rooted involvement of the community and pedagogical staff development, as well as deciding how to act together, were well-documented, as Table 4 shows. However, empirical regression studies show that such interventions, even when they improve operational viability, do not have an independent effect on institutional sustainability.

**Table 4: stakeholder engagement and local ownership**

| Question | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| Q40 Engage local communities in planning and decision-making | 3.667 | 1.02 |
| Q41 Strengthen partnerships with the government | 3.667 | 0.986 |
| Q42 Beneficiaries contribute resources to support sustainability | 3.299 | 1.089 |
| Q43 Promote community ownership of education initiatives | 3.564 | 1.041 |
| Q44 Collaborate with other organisations to sustain outcomes | 3.637 | 1.048 |

The quantitative trend discovered in the previous section was supported by qualitative data, but it also highlighted a lingering anomaly: despite communities being consulted, they remained deprived of budgetary powers. The respondents also emphasised financial control and cost transparency as the key mediators of ownership. When ministries are not visible in programme budgets, unit costs, and recurring expenditure requirements, their ability to take charge in the event of donor withdrawal is significantly limited. Subsequently, sustainability is not compromised by a lack of interest or dedication, but rather by a lack of knowledge of operations and monetary ownership. One respondent elaborated:

*There should be proper accountability and ownership so that the Ministry can run with it even in the absence of NGOs. When the Ministry does not know the costs and details associated with running the program, it becomes difficult to continue with the program after NGOs leave. (Key Informant, 1st October, 2025)*

Individual competence was enhanced through capacity-building initiatives, but there was no institutional absorption. The statistics, therefore, suggest that community involvement is rather a continuity buffer than a direct delivery mechanism. In understanding the programme's purpose and the importance of the intervention, communities are more likely to help schools maintain activities and hold educational actors to account. This way, community involvement would lengthen both the interventions and their duration. One of the respondents in INGO3 EM3 stated:

*Training of teachers and school-level stakeholders ensures continuity. When the majority of people in the ministry, for example, teachers, are trained. Also, the people that are supervising them, like DEBS and standard officers, it becomes easy to continue with a program as the capacity would have been built in the system. (INGO3 EM3, 6th October, 2025)*

Trained personnel were vulnerable to turnover on non-formal career paths. Based on the data, it can be found that participation improves legitimacy or desirability, but to find sustainable results, governance authority and structural entrenchment are required. This explains why participation itself cannot be statistically predictive of sustainability.

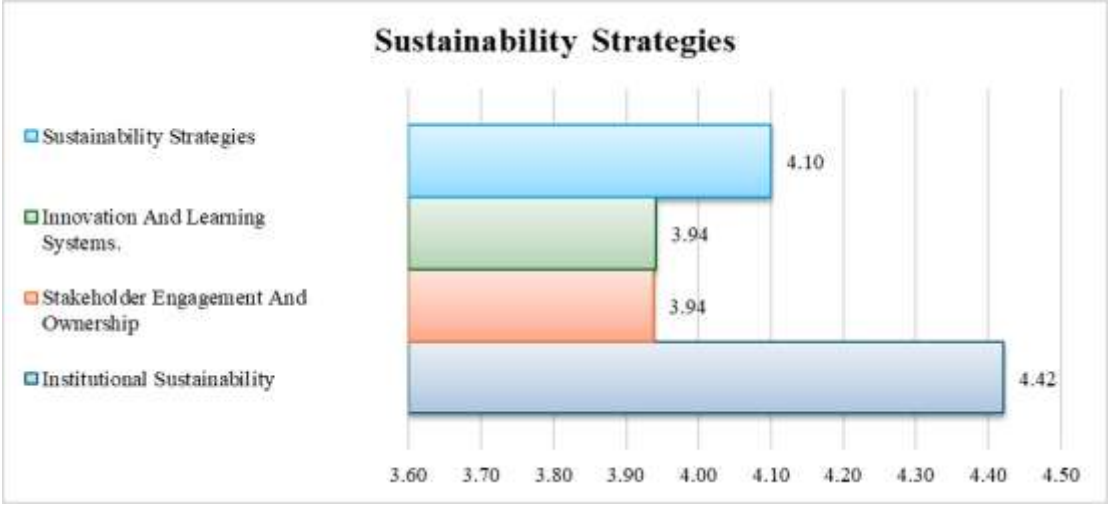



**Figure 3: Sustainability strategies**

### 4.4 Adaptive Continuity: Sustainability as Reconfiguration Capacity

Institutional embedding does not ensure survival under volatile conditions. Instead, the empirical results also suggest that sustainability is strongly reliant on the ability of embedded systems to recalibrate with changing resource environments.

Adaptive practises reported in quantitative indicators of innovation, learning and policy integration indicate moderately high adaptive practises. The use of evidence and data to inform planning (M = 3.696), integrating innovation and technology (M = 3.451), and promoting organisational learning and sharing of knowledge (M = 3.480) was found to be a consistent practise (Table⁻ 5). The sustainability indicators monitoring (M = 3.382) and policy engagement efforts (M = 3.304) also indicate efforts to further institutionalise the adaptive governance process.

**Table 5: Innovation, learning and policy integration**

| Question | Mean | Std. Dev. |
|---|---|---|
| Q45 Integrate innovation and technology in programming | 3.451 | 1.033 |
| Q46 Use evidence and data to inform planning | 3.696 | 1.02 |
| Q47 Influence policy and advocacy on sustainability | 3.304 | 1.103 |
| Q48 Promote organisational learning and knowledge sharing | 3.48 | 1.053 |
| Q49 Monitor sustainability indicators to improve performance | 3.382 | 1.056 |

The findings indicate a clear shift toward iterative models of governance rather than irrevocable models of compliance, with greater emphasis on iterative learning processes. Programmes that institutionalised feedback loops, learning laboratories, and strategic mechanisms to redraw funding maintained operational viability even in the face of contracting donor support.

The use of crosstabulation demonstrated greater heterogeneity across the organisational categories. Ministry representatives were more critical of funding stability and NGO accountability than their peers in international NGOs, whereas local NGOs often had more congruent assessments with ministry views (Tables 6 and 7). It is worth pointing out that people with over a decade of work experience expressed more restrained judgments of sustainability and institutional readiness, suggesting that occupational experience with funding periods creates a more critical attitude toward the potential long-term sustainability.

**Table 6: Differences in perceptions of sustainability and institutional absorption by years of professional experience**

| Survey Item (Shortened) | F | p-value | Eta² |
|---|---|---|---|
| NGO provides sufficient resources | 5.27 | <.003 | 0.20 |
| NGOs should hand over programmes systematically to MoE | 4.52 | <.006 | 0.17 |
| Quality of NGO programmes meets standards | 3.66 | <.017 | 0.15 |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| NGOs should invest in stakeholder support | 3.65 | <.017 | 0.15 |
| NGOs involve MoE in sourcing funding | 3.13 | <.032 | 0.13 |

The accessibility of funding is regularly rated by respondents to the Ministry of Education as significantly more difficult, as it reduces the level of stability and reliability, but a relatively less developed sense of responsibility and evaluation in NGOs is also emphasised. Those who are members of international NGOs, in turn, are mostly characterised by a positive attitude toward the current funding schemes, are more confident about the sustainability of planning in the long run and have more optimistic views on the effectiveness of monitoring and evaluation procedures. Lastly, NGOs affiliated with local branches are positioned between the Ministry of Education's and international NGOs' worldviews, sometimes even closer to the Ministry of Education's regarding perceived funding issues.

**Table 7: Organisational Differences in Resource Stability, Accountability, and Sustainability Planning**

| Survey Item (Shortened) | F | p-value | $\eta^2$ |
|---|---|---|---|
| MoE regularly evaluates NGO-funded programmes | 8.65 | < .001 | 0.21 |
| Accessing funds is easy | 8.59 | < .001 | 0.21 |
| NGO programmes have stable funding | 7.90 | < .001 | 0.20 |
| NGO programmes have reliable funding | 7.73 | < .001 | 0.19 |
| NGO-MoE have long-term financing plans | 7.71 | < .001 | 0.19 |

This interpretation is enhanced through qualitative evidence. Sustainability, according to the respondents, should be based on openness to share financial learnings and mutual cost structures. There should be accountability and ownership, as observed by one of the key informants:

"*There should be proper accountability and ownership so that the Ministry can run with it even in the absence of NGOs. When the Ministry does not know the costs and details associated with running the program, it becomes difficult to continue." (Key Informant, 1st October 2025)*

Here lies an important aspect of adaptive continuity: sustainability is not just about embedded routines but also about the transmission of operational and financial intelligence to maintain autonomous operations.

This evidence thus promotes a dynamic understanding of sustainability. Routines that are institutionalised should be flexible to adapt to changes in donor architecture, staffing structure, and policy. Adapted programmes which do not embed fragments are not enough; programmes which do not embed fragments run the risk of being fragmented. Sustainable systems should be structurally absorbed and recalibrated iteratively.

Figure 4: Qualitative Matrix on Factors Influencing Sustainability summarises this association, showing how capacity building, policy alignment, and planned handover in the structure of adaptive governance processes affect the programme longevity. Sustainability is not, therefore, an institutional refreezing. It is institutionalised viability that is constantly readjusted in reaction to r

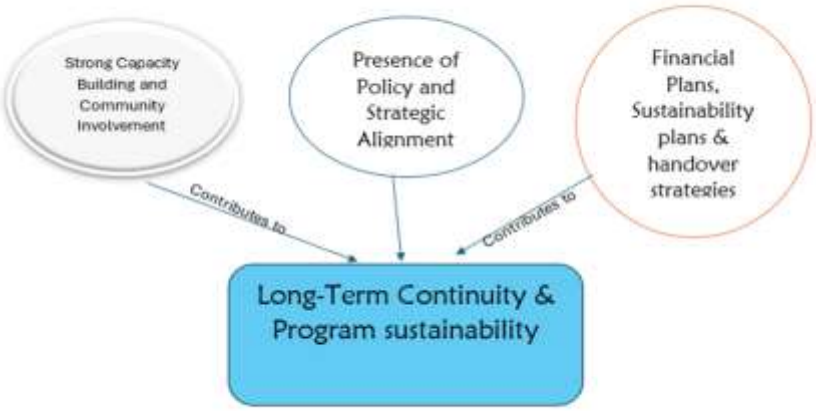



**Figure 4: Qualitative Matrix on Factors Influencing Sustainability**

### 4.5 The Structural Model

The regression model reveals that sustainability and organisational viability, as well as financial resilience, are statistically associated. As can be seen in Table 8-10, operational viability has a greater effect than financial resilience, but they are both

statistically significant. These empirical results support the theoretical suggestion put forward above and provide the premises of further discussion.

**Table 8: Model fitting information regression output**

| Model | -2 Log Likelihood | Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Intercept Only | 172.347 | - | - | - |
| Final Model | 78.905 | 93.442 | 2 | < .001 |

**Table 9: Goodness of fit Link function: Logit**

| Test | Chi-Square | df | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Pearson | 45.916 | 22 | .002 |
| Deviance | 50.463 | 22 | .001 |

**Table 10: pseudo R-squared Link function: Logit**

| Measure | Value |
|---|---|
| Cox and Snell | 0.367 |
| Nagelkerke | 0.416 |
| McFadden | 0.212 |

This factual evidence supports the integrated theoretical model that resource limitations define vulnerability, operational feasibility defines structural coherence, institutional entrenchment defines endurance, and adaptive continuity defines consistency over time. Sustainability, therefore, does not only emerge from the plurality of funding sources or participatory rhetoric, but also from governance structures through which an institution can absorb and recalibrate.

## V. DISCUSSION

This study began with a puzzle: if funding volatility threatens NGO-led education programmes, why does operational viability predict sustainability more strongly than financial resilience? The regression analysis showed that the two variables, namely financial resilience and operational viability, explain about 41.6 per cent of the variance in the considered sustainability strategies, with operational viability being the stronger variable. Even though the model exhibits a significant level of explanatory power (Nagelkerke $R^2$ = .416), a substantial amount of variance remains unexplained, implying that contextual, political, and organisational factors that are not reflected in financial resilience and operational viability yet determine the sustainability trajectories. These results, thus, undermine popular sustainability discourses in development practice.

The present literature on NGO sustainability often demonstrates sustainability as a role of diversified funding sources, stakeholder involvement, and exit planning. Although these dimensions are certainly desirable, the evidence below shows that they are structurally inadequate. Sustainability is not fundamentally assured on financial plurality or community consultation, but rather on the development and actualisation of sound governance architecture.

### 5.1 Rethinking Resource Dependency: Beyond Diversification

Resource-Dependency Theory asserts that organisations mitigate vulnerability through diversifying funding sources and forming strategic alliances (Michael, 2023). The empirical findings provide only partial support for this view: while financial resilience reduces exposure to donor contraction, diversification alone does not institutionalise programmes (Cook & Bakker, 2019).

Organisations that were moderately financially sound were still susceptible in cases when they had not put in place operational systems within the structures of the Ministries. It implies that dependency management reduces exposure to shocks without transforming programme temporality (Haider, 2021; Singh et al., 2022). Sustainability does not need a diversified inflow of structure; it needs absorption.

The theoretical implication is that resource dependency explains the environmental constraints, but it does not explain endurance. The constraint of endurance relies on what transpired within the working systems (Drees & Heugens, 2013).

### 5.2 Institutionalisation as the Missing Link in Sustainability Theory

One of the key theoretical contributions of this study is that they have elucidated the concept of institutionalisation as the process through which sustainability can be made structural and not a temporal process, as indicated by Deslatte (2022), who found that NGOs are the building blocks of a wider sustainability shift in the national education system. This means that, in the case of donor-funded programmes, the effective integration of their systems with the host nation's existing government systems plays a central role in the long-term effects and programme viability (Albrecht, 2013; Lee, 2016).

Traditional methods define sustainability as follow-up following donor exit (Lee, 2016; Ndombi et al., 2020). Nonetheless, qualitative discovery showed that most programmes focused on handovers, with no operational logic embedded in the district's planning, budgeting, and performance-management structures. In these cases, when routines were parallel to state systems, sustainability was contingent (Ova, 2023; Solomon, 2015).

The key statistical and qualitative indicators of sustainability outcomes are operational viability, which is reflected in governance coordination, staffing stability, monitoring architecture, and accountability systems. It means that sustainability arises when operational coherence is routinised within institutional structures (Epstein et al., 2024; Kachumi et al., 2025). Accordingly, sustainability cannot be conceptualised as a feature of a project; it is an institutional property.

This reframing makes sustainability theory less a checklist or model involving participation, funding, and exit strategy, and more a systems-embedded model of routinisation, governance integration, and the transfer of authority.

### 5.3 Participation Without Authority: The Limits of Desirability

The data showed high levels of stakeholder involvement and capacity-building investments, but these were not predictors of sustainability when operational viability was held constant. This makes desirability-based models like the DVF model complicated. Although desirability enhances legitimacy, legitimacy does not necessarily mean structural authority (Carroll et al., 2019; Choto et al., 2022). Results indicated that consultation with the communities was usually done, yet the budgetary and planning authority tended to be outside. This brings up an important difference between nominal stakeholder participation and substantive empowerment, in which the latter requires the devolution of decision-making authority and control of resources to local actors (Barnes & Laerhoven, 2014).

The implication is important: participation increases the relevance of the programme, but it is the redistribution of the authority that would be needed to achieve sustainability. Moreover, community engagement can be formalised rather than functional unless institutionalised within state systems (Menashy & Zakharia, 2022).

### 5.4 Sustainability as Dynamic Institutional Capability

The results also show that sustainability is not a fixed entity but dynamic. The sustainability indices were also higher in organisations that had institutionalised adaptive learning systems, including iterative monitoring systems and funding recalibration strategies (Deslatte, 2022; Zineb, 2024). This is in favour of a dynamic capability view of sustainability. Routines that are institutionalised have to be flexible in the changing donor architectures and policy changes. Sustainability then exists at the boundary of structural embedding and recalibration of adaptation (Seppey et al., 2017). Embedded programmes stagnate, and adapted programmes disintegrate. The sustainable systems need both. According to this view, sustainability is an emergent characteristic of complex adaptive systems, not an endpoint, and the internal operational robustness must be continually negotiated with external environmental dynamics. Also, it means that sustainability is not an object but an ongoing, strategic adaptation process within the set institutional structures (Seppey et al., 2017). This perpetual adaptation demands a subtle understanding of the internal organisation's capabilities and capacities, as well as the external sociopolitical environment (Chilundo et al., 2015).

### 5.5 Theoretical Advancement: Sustainability as Institutionalised Viability

By bringing these strands together, this research paper makes a theoretical repositioning:

Institutionalised in NGO-driven educational programmes, their sustainability is maintained through viability in the face of resource scarcity, which is achieved through recalibration. This definition involves four theoretical transpositions: it re-places sustainability as a property of systems rather than a continuity of projects; it separates financial resilience (shock buffering) and structural viability (endurance mechanism); it redefines sustainability as a process-based concept based on dynamic institutional capabilities (Andersen, 2021); and it reaffirms the need to embed operational systems within the context of a pre-existing governmental system to provide programmatic resilience that is not subject to donor cycles (Salovaara & Hagolani-Albov, 2024).

It recognises institutional embedding as the process that transforms viability to continuity. It also instils adaptability, as it is the process that maintains institutional alignment over time. Such an outlook makes sustainability an active process of reflexivity, which is always recreated through performative and situated practises that intersect the strategic and practice-based views (Liao & Lu, 2025).

This study bases the theoretical change on empirical findings by establishing that operational viability has greater predictive power for sustainability than financial diversification. This reconceptualisation transcends previous models that equated sustainability with financial self-sufficiency and/or community relationships but recognises the significance of systemic integration and adaptive governance (Gul & Morande, 2023; Kiarii, 2025; and Mbuthia et al., 2022).

## VI. IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- NGOs ought to consider the development of institutional routines as opposed to handover plans that are one-off. This requires a strategic shift from project-based interventions to strengthening national and sub-national systemic capabilities by integrating programme operations into governmental structures on a regular basis (Waller et al., 2020).

- Government ministries should develop more concrete channels for incorporating NGO innovations into the policy and district framework. It must not be superficial integration; instead, it must entrench the operational processes to promote financial resilience and sustainable programming (Kachumi et al., 2025).
- Donors need to change their mode of projectised funding into systemic investment that facilitates institutional absorption and long-term sustainability. This is a reform of funding models to strengthen organisational human-resource capacity, co-financing, and partnerships in the strategy to move away from an exclusive emphasis on direct social impact (Singh & Mthuli, 2020).

## VII. CONCLUSION

The proposed inquiry aimed to examine the factors supporting the sustainability of NGO-managed education programmes amid donor instability and changing financing frameworks. They are empirically found to be less dependent on financial diversification than on operational viability. To be more specific, it is structurally mediated by integrating operational viability in institutional structures. Though financial strength mitigates the impact of external shocks, governance, routinised coordination, monitoring structures, and institutional absorption all determine programme endurance.

By showing operational viability and demonstrating a stronger predictive impact on sustainability than on financial resilience, this study represents a paradigm shift: sustainability is not a project characteristic but an emergent system characteristic. When viable operational routines are institutionalised in the planning, budgeting, reporting, and professional structures of the Ministries, and when the routines are flexible even in the case of resource contraction, it materialises.

This reframing has implications that go beyond the Zambian setting. In many low-income education systems, the concept of sustainability is operationalised through exit pathways, directives on stakeholder engagement, and funding continuity strategies. These strategies, despite being significant, are likely to overlook the structural requirements that the programme needs to survive. True sustainability requires the transfer of power, congruence with institutional requirements, and the overall integration of governance. Without assimilation into state systems, NGO-initiated reforms remain temporally weak, despite their temporary effectiveness.

The policy implications are thus quite clear: sustainability planning must start at the conceptualisation of programmes, not at the exit juncture. Donor agencies should focus on measures indicative of institutional embedding rather than on the mere extension of the project. For NGOs, developing an adaptive governance framework could be more effective than simply expanding funding portfolios.

The next generation of scholarship must inquire about the circumstances that enable institutional absorption, especially in different typologies of governance and types of financing. Comparison studies would help understand differences in navigation modes between local and international NGOs and whether particular organisational structures facilitate the institutionalisation process.

Finally, sustainability in education reform based on NGOs does not occur when a project continues to exist, but when its logic of operation becomes a regular part of the system of public functioning. The institutionalised viability, which is constantly recalibrated in resource-constrained settings over and above desirability, is a structural mandate in sustainable educational change.

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