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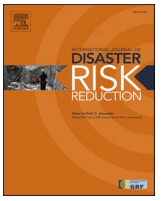

What remains after humanitarian organizations leave? An exploration of community perspectives regarding sustainability and humanitarian aid in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Humanitarian organizations, while addressing acute crises, may ask questions regarding their role in supporting longer term recovery. Planning for and implementing project closure presents opportunities to integrate plans to sustain benefits and services that can extend past the emergency intervention. This study employs interpretive description methodology to examine local stakeholders' experiences of project closure. Data was collected through eight focus groups and thirty-four key informant interviews, involving 101 participants across six communities in the Philippines. This article presents findings related to perceptions of sustainability. Participants characterized sustainability as a shared responsibility between humanitarian organizations and local actors, to be considered at every stage of project implementation. Moreover, sustained relationships were identified as pivotal for ensuring lasting project benefits, including capacities, services, material gains, and livelihood support. Participants' insights offer guidance for how, when, and to what extent humanitarian organizations can address underlying vulnerabilities and support communities' long-term well-being beyond the immediate crisis.

1. Introduction

Humanitarian action is intended to provide shorter term assistance with the primary objectives of saving lives and alleviating suffering during a period of crisis [1]. Humanitarian organizations must manage their limited resources carefully to respond to ongoing and recurring emergencies and retain the capacity to provide assistance as new crises occur [1–3]. When a crisis situation eases, project objectives are achieved, or if security or budget constraints force an abrupt end, projects may be closed or handed over to local or

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international partners [4]. Some humanitarian projects plan and incorporate long-term recovery into their exit and handover strategies, increasing the likelihood of sustained benefits even after project closure or handover [5]. However, in contexts of abrupt closure where humanitarian organizations are unable to plan for the continuity of benefits, the provision of essential services, such as food provision or primary healthcare, may be significantly reduced or discontinued altogether [5,6]. The absence of an exit strategy or plans for sustaining long-term benefits can lead to a decline in service quality over time or create disparities in access, where some populations continue to receive aid while others do not [7]. The loss of these services, coupled with the potential rupture of relationships that sustain them, may cause harm and impede progress toward more equitable and reliable access to essential resources [2,4].

The acute crisis orientation of humanitarian aid might seem to leave little room for considering the future needs of affected communities or the longer-term impacts of how humanitarian responses are implemented [8]. Humanitarian actors, therefore, face the challenge of addressing short-term needs to relieve acute suffering, while at the same time attending thoughtfully to communities' long-term concerns to sustainably recover and strengthen their resilience post-emergency [9].

1.1. Sustainability in humanitarian aid

Sustainability has been broadly defined in the literature as the *"continuation of benefits"* after a humanitarian project ends [10], including services, material gains, activities, relationships and capacities [5,9–11]. In the context of humanitarian aid, attending to sustainability entails considering what aspects of a project can endure beyond the short-term emergency response [2,8]. Efforts to promote sustainability might include, for example, capacity-sharing activities that increase long-term resilience to future shocks or facilitate support for local actors to take over project services in a way that enables continuity of services [12,13]. Humanitarian actors have also discussed the sustainability of the environment when planning to 'green' their operations and minimize their carbon footprint to mitigate future climate hazards [14–16]. Although this article focuses on the sustainability of humanitarian benefits, environmental sustainability can also orient humanitarian organizations to think about the future impact of their operations in the context of an acute emergency.

The importance of promoting longer-term benefits of humanitarian interventions has been highlighted particularly in the context of humanitarian project closure and handover [4,5,8,11]. Sustainability of services and project legacy was identified by a humanitarian health worker interviewed in a study of ethics and project closure as being *"the bottom line"* or the most important aspect for an ethical project closure due to the possibility of promoting long-term benefits for community members [11]. Sustainability is also a major concern for people living in crisis situations. In a report by Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), local actors emphasized the importance of maintaining essential medical services. They highlighted that investing in training and transferring responsibilities to local staff could help ensure continuity of services [17]. Implementing sustainable practices can improve access to quality health and essential services, ensuring continuity of care and advancing global health equity [5]. Such actions can maximize the benefits of humanitarian interventions by prioritizing the long-term well-being of local communities, even after organizations have left [7,9].

An organization's assessment of whether to focus on the sustainability of benefits often depends on contextual and feasibility considerations. For example, a project providing relief supplies or running an immunization program is typically short-term and limited in scope, requiring fewer plans for continuity in the future. In contrast, a project offering essential medical care or shelter to displaced populations calls for greater attention to continuity of care, ensuring that access to basic services meet physical, social, and economic needs after the organization's departure [2]. Scholars and humanitarian organizations have questioned the feasibility of achieving sustainable outcomes during acute emergencies and in resource-limited settings [12,18,19]. These challenges are particularly evident in situations such as providing medical care in conflict zones or responding to major disease outbreaks, where saving lives and alleviating suffering remain the stark priority of the intervention. Budgetary constraints and restrictions placed by donors further limit the ability to sustain material benefits, services, and capacities [12]. For instance, short-term funding deadlines and inflexible cost structures can hinder investments in capacity-sharing and partner-building activities that promote long-term outcomes [20]. Humanitarian financing often prioritizes addressing immediate crises and responding quickly to disasters, making it challenging to adopt a mindset focused on long-term planning and resilience, where sustainability becomes a core objective [1,21].

There remains uncertainty within and outside the humanitarian sector about the role and responsibility of humanitarian actors to promote sustainability [10]. There has also been limited exploration of perspectives from people living in communities affected by humanitarian crises on this issue. We conducted a study examining what community members and local stakeholders valued about how humanitarian organizations approached the closure and long-term impact of humanitarian projects after their exit, including their views on the role and potential for sustainability of project benefits in humanitarian aid.

2. Methods

This paper presents a sub-analysis of a broader qualitative research study examining moral experiences of community members, project partners, and other local stakeholders in relation to humanitarian project closure in the Philippines [22]. The sub-analysis is focused on perceptions of sustainability in relation to project closure. We chose sustainability for a more in-depth and focused analysis because it emerged as a recurrent and prominent topic amongst participants who raised it as a key concern associated with project closure. To conduct the sub-analysis, we identified all sections of the data that related to the following main research question: *what do participants say in regards to what remains after the closure of humanitarian projects and related to the possibility for the sustainability of project benefits?"*

The study was guided by interpretive description methodology [23] and aligned with a constructivist paradigm [24]. Interpretive description methodology aims to understand and explore phenomena by uncovering patterns, while attending to differences, with the

goal of developing knowledge with application potential. It is adaptable to context and seeks to capture the nuances and complexities of real-world settings. In line with a constructivist paradigm, the research findings are considered to be context-dependent insights co-constructed between researchers and participants.

To support an investigation of participants' varying interpretations and experiences, this research sought to examine their moral experiences regarding the closure of humanitarian projects. Research on moral experiences explores a person's sense of whether values that they *"deem important are being realized or thwarted in everyday life activities,"* and interpretations of lived experiences that "*fall on spectrums of right-wrong, good-bad, or just-unjust*" [25].

2.1. Research team and study context

The research team is composed of members from the Centre for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, Inc. (CDPFI) located in Manila, Philippines, and researchers (several of whom are also health professionals with experience providing humanitarian assistance) who are based in Canada and the United States. An Advisory Board composed of representatives from six local civil society organizations in the Philippines was set up at the beginning of the study. The Advisory Board members had ongoing collaborations and partnerships with CDPFI and within their own communities. The board was intended to play a key role in participant recruitment, provide insights and feedback on the research process, and assist with the translation of transcripts and other documents. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we had to adapt our data collection processes due to international and national travel restrictions [26]. Members of the Advisory Board, with the support and guidance of the research team, took on additional roles in conducting focus groups and interviews, and transcribing and translating recordings. They also provided iterative feedback on the data analysis, provisional findings, and knowledge dissemination outputs and activities.

The six communities included in the study had all been sites of humanitarian interventions in response to conflict or disaster. Humanitarian assistance was initiated in three communities as a result of local conflict, two communities in the aftermath of a major typhoon, and one community that was displaced due to a volcanic eruption. The humanitarian projects were initiated and eventually closed in all six locales, and the type of assistance ranged from shelter assistance, provision of relief goods, livelihood initiatives, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) interventions. Projects ranged in duration from several weeks to several years, and they varied in how project closure occurred, including abrupt closure, phasing down of activities, and transition to development approaches.

2.2. Data collection

Focus group discussions and semi-structured key informant interviews were the primary data collection methods. Focus group participants had taken part in or received humanitarian assistance from the humanitarian projects that were closed. Semi-structured key informant interviews were conducted with local leaders, local government officials, and members of local civil society groups. Participants were recruited through the Advisory Board and via word of mouth. We aimed to have diversity amongst the participants in terms of gender, age, professional or community roles, and different degrees of participation in the humanitarian intervention. We also aimed to recruit people with different lived experiences, including Indigenous peoples, internally displaced populations, women and youth, based on the nature of particular communities and the crisis situation that had occurred.

Interview guides were developed based on feedback from the Advisory Board. Topics included perceptions of humanitarian aid, how and why decisions were made to close a project, the long-term impact of humanitarian response and project closure, and challenges and opportunities to improve future project closure.

All focus groups and interviews were conducted in person and audio-recorded with participant consent, except for one participant who provided written responses. Data collection was carried out in local languages or dialects specific to each locale. The recordings were transcribed verbatim by members of the Advisory Board and research assistants from their organizations. Transcripts were anonymized and translated into English.

In total, eight focus groups were held (ranging from one to three groups per community, with six to ten participants per group) and thirty-four key informant interviews (ranging from two to eight per community), for a total of 101 participants. A more detailed description of the six communities and the data collection methods is reported elsewhere [22].

2.3. Data analysis

For the broader research, we analyzed the data through an inductive process and using constant comparative techniques [27]. During the initial phase of analysis, two researchers conducted repeated close reading (IMB, MH) of each transcript. They collaborated to develop synopses for each community that summarized main ideas from focus group discussions and key informant interviews [28]. Synopses were then discussed amongst the research team and shared with the Advisory Board members, who provided feedback virtually during an online meeting. As the research team and Advisory Board discussed preliminary findings on community perspectives and experiences with project closure, considerations related to sustainability were identified as particularly salient elements of the data, especially participants' concerns about the continuity of project benefits to meet their ongoing needs. These insights sparked the research team's interest in further exploring these issues and led us to develop a targeted sub-analysis on the topic of sustainability. The approach of developing a more in-depth analysis related to a component of the overall research that was especially rich, and that was identified as particularly salient by individuals with expertise in the area of inquiry, is in line with interpretive description methodology [23]. All analytic steps and decisions were documented, and preliminary results were shared through discussions and workshops with the research team, Advisory Board and community members.

To conduct the sub-analysis, one team member (IMB) began with a new round of repeated close reading of the transcripts. As they read, the reader paid attention to all sections of text that related to the following question: *what do participants say in regards to what remains after the closure of humanitarian projects and related to the possibility for the sustainability of project benefits?"* The reader highlighted excerpts from each transcript that addressed ideas of sustainability and what remained once humanitarian organizations had closed their projects. They compiled these excerpts into a table, organizing the data by community and transcript. The reader then reviewed the table with another member of the team (MH) to discuss early insights gathered from the table and identify potential gaps or missing data. Next, IMB examined the table's contents, applying inductive labeling to identify patterns and linkages across the data. Examples of emerging labels included "*sustainability perceived as a mutual responsibility*" and "*ongoing community needs beyond project closure.*" To support the development of this analytic structure, IMB created visual maps and wrote summaries for each label. We presented the initial analysis to the research team and received feedback which helped to sharpen the analysis.

Once the summaries and other data display tools were revised based on the team's feedback, we presented preliminary findings during two in-person workshops, — one held in Manila with the Advisory Board, and the other in one of the six communities where data were collected for this study. Presenting preliminary findings to these groups "allowed us to push further in expanding the comprehensiveness of the tentative associations [we were] making" [23]. Feedback from the Advisory Board and members of the community provided further insights and contextual information about why sustainability is important for community members, how it relates to the closure and handover of humanitarian projects, and the role of local contexts in facilitating or hindering the possibilities to sustain benefits. For example, Advisory Board members described how, in the Philippine context, strong community organizing, as well as having the support of local government officials (barangay officials), were important conditions for sustaining services or activities initiated by humanitarian organizations. The workshop with the Advisory Board was recorded, and detailed notes were taken by IMB. Although the second workshop (with one of the communities where data were collected) was not recorded, IMB and RP took comprehensive notes and collected worksheets and written reflections from participants.

IMB and RP drew upon the workshop recordings and notes to refine the analytic summaries and visual tools. Changes that were made following these sessions included adding contextual information to better situate the findings in local realities, and refining descriptions and labels used in the summaries. We drew upon these revised summaries to structure the results presented in this manuscript.

To minimize bias and promote analytic rigor, we applied triangulation throughout the analysis process by discussing and refining analytic decisions with input from the full research team, as well as from the Advisory Board members, each of whom had rich experience working with civil society organizations across the regions where the data was collected.

The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Philippines Social Sciences Council and the Institutional Review Board of the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences at McGill University. All participants provided written informed consent before participating in a focus group or key informant interview.

2.4. Reflexivity statement

This research was developed through a partnership that originated between the principal investigator at McGill University and the CDPFI. Several members of the research team are situated in North American institutions as Canadian or US citizens or permanent residents and hold different cultural identities and backgrounds, ranging from junior to senior roles, including members with experience as humanitarian workers. Team members in the Philippines are humanitarian and development practitioners with experience in research. Given the diversity of team members' backgrounds, we sought to reflect on and discuss approaches and assumptions about transnational research collaboration, potential for bias in how we understood different issues, and power dynamics arising due to our different positions and where the sources of funding came from. To do this, we dedicated intentional moments throughout the research process to reflect as a group on the nature of our partnership and to be attentive to how the local contexts and perspectives of community members were represented.

3. Results

In the sections that follow, verbatim quotations are included to illustrate aspects of the analysis with participants identified by community, data collection method, and number. Thus, 6KII4 is the fourth key informant interview in community six, while 1FGD3 signifies the third focus group discussion in community one.

Participants' narratives reflected the importance of sustainability in humanitarian aid, framing it as crucial to address the immediate and ongoing needs of affected communities. The narratives noted that its absence could lead to negative feelings, such as disappointment and anxiety, on the part of members of local communities and a heightened sense of vulnerability to future crises. A participant from a conflict-affected setting expressed disappointment that *"when the project stopped, the livelihood stopped*" (5KII2). A key concern raised by participants was the loss of jobs and financial security when humanitarian projects were ended without any continuity. Local staff expressed anxiety about the formal closure of initiatives, stating, "when that ends, we also lose our jobs" and "the people have no source of income" (2KII5; 2KII4). Additionally, community members reported that concerns for their future well-being increased when their needs were compounded over time and across multiple crises. One participant shared how "aside from armed conflict we are also facing the difficulties during pandemic, (.), even if the conflict subsides we are still struggling with how we can start our lives" (3KII7). When sustained outcomes—such as essential services, material gains, or capacities—were not achieved, participants expressed distress and disappointment (1KII3). For many, sustaining outcomes beyond the immediate crisis response was important. Participants described their ongoing need, emphasizing that they were *"still living in the temporary shelter*" (6KII1) or "*recovering from*

the tragedy" (6FGD1). The prospect of losing support while still experiencing the aftermath of a crisis intensified their concerns for the future.

Nevertheless, participants recognized the temporary nature of humanitarian aid. Participants in community 1 who were affected by a typhoon acknowledged that "massive relief operations will not last, and they are only temporary" (1FGD1). Some suggested that projects should conclude once "*they achieved their goals in our community*" (4KII2). Others expressed a desire for longer-term support but understood the financial constraints organizations faced, stating that aid groups "*cannot operate without funds*" (1KII3). In this way, while participants framed sustainability as an important outcome to meet both current and future needs, many also acknowledged the practical limitations of humanitarian assistance. They recognized that aid organizations could not provide indefinite support, yet they remained appreciative of the assistance they had received, expressing that they were "thankful (…) to receive aid" (1KII2).

This tension, between the aspiration for sustained benefits and services, and the realities of limited resources, highlighted the complex challenges of ensuring meaningful and lasting humanitarian impact. Despite these challenges, participants' experiences highlighted specific ways sustainability could be framed and integrated into humanitarian aid. In the following sections, we present three features of how the narratives of community members who have experienced the closure of a project represented sustainability in humanitarian aid. First, participants' accounts suggested sustainability can be considered as a shared responsibility between humanitarian organizations and local actors. Second, participants expressed that attention to sustainability should be integrated throughout a project's entire timeline, from design to closure, through processes involving transparency and transition plans. Third, they emphasized that sustained relationships fostered and demonstrated ongoing care for community members, while also supporting the sustainability of other project benefits, such as strengthened capacities (e.g., disaster preparedness, technical skills), material gains (e.g., cash assistance, water pumps), services (e.g., shelter provision, WASH), and livelihood activities (e.g., cattle raising).

3.1. Achieving sustainability as a shared responsibility

For many participants, achieving sustainability was seen as a collaborative process grounded in shared responsibilities among local leaders, organizations, government officials, and community members. Humanitarian organizations were expected to prepare the ground for sustainability by investing in long-term processes—particularly capacity-sharing and fostering community ownership—while local actors were seen as critical to ensuring that project activities could be sustained in meaningful and context-specific ways. Some participants emphasized that sustainability could be more effectively achieved when humanitarian organizations actively enabled local actors to take the lead, expressing how, *"If you [the organization] guide us, then we can do the necessary work. What we need is someone who leads us, who facilitates us. Guiding us what to do next. That's all we ask"* (1KII3). Several participants also emphasized that local actors ought to have an active role in guiding humanitarian organizations in allocating resources and delivering services. The absence of such involvement was illustrated by a participant who recounted how an organization provided a water pump project, but ultimately "*it did not sustain (..) since the area selected to install the pump had low levels of underground water"* (3KII1). According to the participant, this issue could have been avoided through collaborative consultations, ensuring that interventions aligned with local contexts. Sustainability, in this sense, was seen as a shared responsibility in which local actors could provide insights into community needs, while humanitarian organizations could lay the groundwork and facilitate continuity of the project (1KII3).

Participants also highlighted the central role of local government actors, such as barangay officials, in maintaining project activities post-closure. One participant noted that they could monitor and track projects, even after humanitarian organizations departed. They stated that barangay officials "*can monitor (..) and know the status of the intervention"* initiated as part of the humanitarian project (6KII8). Participants from other locales echoed this by sharing how *"turning over post-humanitarian responsibilities to government partners that will provide continuous assistance, and monitoring can be helpful"* (1FGD1). In cases in which monitoring and evaluation were not feasible for humanitarian organizations, the follow-up was understood to be the responsibility of the local government officials. A barangay councilor reported that after formal closure, "*We are the ones who continue managing the other project. After the project is turned over to the barangay, the barangay will be the one to sustain the project …" (3KII3).* When barangay officials were not in agreement to sustain project outcomes such as services, relationships and activities, and "*the barangay did not take its responsibility"* (1KII3), participants reported that potential ongoing benefits from the project did not endure after formal closure. On the other hand, participants from a focus group discussion shared how, "t*he positive effects of the exit could be made more durable if the responsibility to sustain is accepted by the barangay"* (1FGD1). The possibility of sustaining project outcomes was of particular concern for a community located on a remote and somewhat isolated island. For them, *"It is also important to connect the community with government agencies so that they would know where to go when they have issues"* after organizations close their projects *(1FGD1)*.

Capacity-sharing was seen as a central mechanism to enact this shared responsibility. To enhance the possibility for sustainability, participants emphasized that humanitarian organizations held a responsibility to actively create conditions that enabled local actors to sustain project outcomes. Some participants identified capacity-sharing activities, such as training related to Disaster Risk Reduction, financial planning, and Climate Change Adaptation, as key mechanisms that humanitarian organizations could invest in to equip local actors with the knowledge and skills needed to maintain project benefits and adapt them, as needed, over time. One participant from a conflict-affected community explained: *"Even [if] the conflict subsides, we are still struggling with how we restart our lives. We want to realize this, and also [IHOs] informing us what are the programs, like leadership training that we can avail to empower us, such as those for women's sectors*" (*3KII7)*. Seminars on disaster preparedness were positively viewed as *"it gave us [community members] a better understanding of preparing for calamities"* (4FGD1). These enhanced capacities not only fostered a sense of resilience and future preparedness, but also enabled communities to take the lead in sustaining project outcomes. For example, some participants described how capacity-sharing activities, such as training and education (1KII3) or "*a livelihood project which has an impact and relevance "* (5KII6), helped community members learn to manage and improve established programs. Enhanced capacities, in turn, promoted a

sense of shared ownership and long-term growth that could continue even after a project's formal closure. A participant similarly shared how it was positive when *"they teach you to sustain the livelihood given. As for me, that's great because it's useless if you don't know how to manage the livelihood* support *given. The sustainability of the project is necessary" (6*KII8). Although participants were grateful for receiving "*relief items like blankets, pails and materials for construction"* they emphasized how the most enduring outcomes came from those organizations that embedded learning, skill-building, and collaboration into every phase of the project. In doing so, these initiatives strengthened community resilience and ensured that the benefits of humanitarian efforts could continue long after formal support ended.

Alongside capacity-sharing activities, participants expressed that they wished that organizations would take steps to encourage a sense of ownership of the project among community members. When closure and handover processes involved shared leadership and active participation, it generated a sense of ownership that led to long-term benefits by doing "*positive things that they are proud of, which could result in lasting benefits"* (6KII8). This sentiment was also voiced by a participant who shared how he wanted "*to help in sustaining it [the project] (..) I can give my time, money, and effort as long as it is for the good of the community even without the help of external organizations"* (1KII3). For participants, the commitment of community members to *"the projects being implemented (..) is vital in sustainability, especially after the projects close"* (1FGD1). A community-based and local commitment to sustainability was seen as crucial because local civil society organizations and community members, "*are permanent"* (6KII4), whereas "*The presence of other organizations is fleeting. They are here now but they will leave the next day" (1KKI4)*. In sum, participants highlighted that sustainability is strengthened when humanitarian organizations work in genuine collaboration with local actors, integrating capacity-sharing and fostering local ownership throughout the project lifecycle to contribute to the project's sustainability well beyond its formal closure.

3.2. Communicating transparently and initiating clear transition plans from the outset of the project

Several participants described sustainable outcomes as dependent on dynamic processes and steps that extended from project design to post-closure and handover. A critical component of this process was transparent communication, particularly regarding the project's timeline and formal closure. When organizations clearly stated that relief efforts were temporary, such as when they "*reminded us [community members] that the massive relief operations will not last and that they are only temporary*" (1FGD1), it helped manage expectations and encouraged communities to begin preparing early for handover by sustaining activities beyond the project's eventual closure. Despite local actors being "*assured that the program has ended and there will be no further relief/assistance to be given"* the existence of ongoing needs and recurring crises instill hope for sustained outcomes and monitoring and evaluation (6FGD1). Therefore, to mitigate feelings of uncertainty, local actors shared how if organizations "*are planning to leave, they must communicate that their programs are coming to an end, so that people will not wait for nothing" (*6KII3). 'Waiting for nothing' meant community members were uncertain about when and how the project would end, if there was a possibility for the continuation of benefits and services, or if the organization would return to the community for monitoring or to provide additional assistance (2KII3). Uncertainty about the future was a recurring concern among participants, especially when humanitarian organizations departed without clearly communicating their intentions or the finality of their engagement. The absence of transparent communication could blur the line between formal closure and continuity, leaving communities uncertain about the project's end. To mitigate this uncertainty, a participant emphasized the importance of clear communication during closure, stating: *"Closure processes should be, well, transparent so that you don't have to hope—but you still hope that they will come back because they didn't say anything*" (6KII2).

When organizations were transparent about their departure and fostered a sense of mutual trust, it facilitated ongoing "*operational management"* of services and activities after closure by supporting local actors to be ready to "*maintain the project that they have left to us"* (3KII4). Participants strongly advocated for sustainability to be supported by "*clear transition plans drawn out by the local partner with the community, local government, and the people's organization on how to continue and build on the gains generated from the project"* (1KII1). Clear and early planning for this transition and handover helped communities build on the project's benefits and maintain services after the organization's exit. A youth leader emphasized the importance of this support: "*Before exiting, they [international humanitarian organizations] should orient us properly*" (5KII3). Without such preparation, essential services often became nonfunctional. For example, a Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) coordinator at a local high school noted how *"projects becoming useless because [the] community depended on the implementing organization for it to become functional*" (1KII3). They further lamented that these projects "*got wasted. It made me sad that up to now, you can see that the project was not operational and unusable."* Others recalled how lack of plans for transition and handover resulted in efforts being abandoned, with one participant stating, "*There were benefits but when they left, they did not last because there was no proper guidance and dialogue. We were not asked how we are going to apply what they taught us. Will we sustain it? Will we* support *it? They were like, 'we [humanitarian organization] are here now but we will go tomorrow'"* (1KII4). Humanitarian organizations, according to several participants, had an important role to play in preparing transition plans and providing guidance towards next steps; otherwise *"when program implementers leave, and when the community is not adequately prepared for their departure, what they started will eventually disappear"* (1FGD1). Similarly, a participant from a community experiencing the aftermath of conflict expressed how not having the support of organizations in these processes could lead to community members not knowing "*how to manage the livelihood* support *given*" (6KII8). This type of guidance was seen as especially important in contexts with recurring crises, where sustaining project activities can be critical to ensuring that communities are better prepared for future shocks. Participant accounts suggest that transparent communication and the co-development of transition and handover plans with local actors can play a key role in ensuring that project benefits are sustained and have lasting impacts.

3.3. Establishing lasting relationships and ongoing connections

Many participants highlighted that sustaining humanitarian project benefits beyond a project's formal closure fostered a sense of continuity, enabling communities to experience lasting impacts even after direct support ended. They reported that the ongoing use of material resources, such as radios and shelter-related services, prompted them to continuously reflect on the project's impact (4FGD1; 3FGD1). As one participant noted, "*Radios and other [things] they gave us, we still use them very well*" (3FGD1). Nevertheless, the types of benefits participants wished to sustain were not limited to services or forms of tangible assistance such as material gains. They also highlighted the importance of sustained relationships, not only as a key factor in preserving the tangible benefits of a project, but as a vital dimension of continuity that fostered a lasting sense of connection for affected communities. A participant displaced by a volcanic eruption expressed how when relationships between the organizations and communities were sustained, it seemed that projects had, in fact, not yet been concluded (2KII3): they carried on, despite the departure of the humanitarian organization, as the community continued to benefit from what was initiated. Enduring relationships also reshaped how formal closure was understood. For as long as there was a continuous relationship with the organization, a participant considered the project to not be "*closed yet (..) They are still there ma'am, there's connection ma'am"* (3KII5).

Several participants consider that building relationships was a crucial part of the closure and handover process. They highlighted the importance of staying connected despite the exit of the organization. One participant emphasized the importance of maintaining the connection in the context of formal closure stating that, *"It's not proper that they will just exit unceremoniously; not even leaving contact information to us in case we would like to connect"* (1KII4). In instances when organizations "*just disappeared*," focus group participants reported feeling abandoned or perceived as *"receivers of assistance only*" (1FGD1), even when material gains or services endured. Consistent communication was viewed as a key factor in fostering relationships between organizations, local leaders, and community members, even after humanitarian organizations had left. As one participant explained, regular communication provided "*an opportunity to express their happiness because of the assistance, or sadness because you are leaving"* (1KII4). Ultimately, maintaining open communication demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the community's well-being. As one participant stated, organizations might still want to check in "*even when no major disasters are present so they can see what other needs our community has"* (4KII1).

Communication was also considered important for the sustainability of other project benefits, by allowing ongoing dialogue about unmet needs and how they could be addressed, even post-closure and handover. As one participant explained, "*before exiting, they could ask, are there other things that we need to do? Do you have other needs? The dialogue should be consistent (…). That's when you see the value of your help to the community"* (1KII4). Sustaining relationships and ongoing connections, even after a project had officially ended, allowed local actors to seek support and guidance in sustaining project activities (1KII3). A member of a local civil society organization in a conflict-affected community recalled that while one organization had promised to return after closing their project, there had been no further communication. Reflecting on this, they emphasized that the *"best thing to do is to monitor all the project[s]* …" (3KII6). Similarly, a community leader highlighted how monitoring and evaluation visits could help reinforce the relationships between organizations and communities, stating, *"It's good to feel that connection*" (3KII7). These visits also allow organizations to "*follow through on actions or just check the status of the projects they have implemented"* (1FGD1). Overall, sustained relationships and open communication shaped how participants perceived project closure and handover and the possibility of maintaining other project benefits (see Table 1 for a summary of results).

Table 1
Presents a summary of key themes and factors that facilitate sustainability based on participants' perceptions and experiences.

Themes related to sustainability	Factors that can facilitate sustainability	Supporting quotations
Achieving sustainability as a shared responsibility	- Collaborative processes - Capacity-sharing (e.g., Disaster Risk Reduction, financial planning, climate change adaptation) - Community ownership of project benefits - Monitoring and evaluation activities	*"Even [if] the conflict subsides, we are still struggling with how we restart our lives. We want to realize this, and also [IHOs] informing us what are the programs, like leadership training that we can avail to empower us, such as those for women's sectors*" (*KII7).* "*to help in sustaining it [the project] (..) I can give my time, money, and effort as long as it is for the good of the community even without the help of external organizations"* (1KII3)
Communicating transparently and initiating clear transition plans from the outset of the project	- Transparent communication - Clear transition plans	if organizations "*are planning to leave, they must communicate that their programs are coming to an end, so that people will not wait for nothing" (*6KII3) *"clear transition plans drawn out by the local partner with the community, local government, and the people's organization on how to continue and build on the gains generated from the project"* (1KII1).
Establishing lasting relationships and ongoing connection	- Remaining connected with the affected community (e.g., leaving behind contact information) - Open communication during and post-closure	"It's not proper that they will just exit unceremoniously; not even leaving contact information to us in case we would like to connect" (1KII4). "before exiting, they could ask, are there other things that we need to do? Do you have other needs? The dialogue should be consistent (…). That's when you see the value of your help to the community" (1KII4).

4. Discussion

This study examined local stakeholders' perspectives of humanitarian project formal closure in six communities in the Philippines and highlights their priorities, concerns and recommendations regarding the sustainability of project benefits. While sustainability is broadly defined in the literature as "*the continuation of benefits*" [10], participants shared narratives that grounded this concept in their lived experiences in relation to the formal closure of humanitarian projects and the possibility of handing over activities. Participants acknowledged the temporary nature of humanitarian interventions but still hoped for lasting impacts based on the activities undertaken during the humanitarian project. They identified key factors and actions that facilitate sustaining project benefits. These factors included organizational responsibilities such as laying the groundwork for sustaining project benefits, ensuring transparent communication around closure timelines, promoting local ownership, and investing in capacity-sharing initiatives. In addition, several actions required collaboration between humanitarian organizations and local actors—such as jointly developing transition plans and fostering ongoing relationships. Participants' accounts illuminate how they understood sustainability: not simply as an outcome, but as a process shaped by continued learning, mutual responsibility, and ongoing needs. From their perspective, sustainability acknowledged the enduring vulnerabilities and aspirations of affected communities long after a project's formal end. It required that organizations not only deliver short-term assistance, but also invest in conditions that enable communities to carry forward the benefits of a project. Moreover, participants saw value in outcomes that extended beyond the services provided by humanitarian organizations, including positive unintended consequences such as employment opportunities, income generation and strengthened community capacities. From this perspective, participants understood sustainability not only as the continuation of services, but also as encompassing the wider social and economic gains generated through humanitarian interventions. Acknowledging these expectations highlights the importance of considering both intended outcomes and the indirect legacies of humanitarian interventions. Drawing these elements together, the conception of sustainability that appeared to orient participants' expectations and perspectives related to humanitarian project closure was an understanding of it being *a dynamic, relational, and shared process between humanitarian organizations and local actors to ensure that the benefits of an intervention continue to meet ongoing needs beyond a project's formal end.*

4.1. Types of harm resulting from an absence of sustainability

Participants in our study highlighted how achieving sustainability could support resilience-building in the face of recurring crises, help sustain livelihood activities and promote long-term well-being for communities in humanitarian contexts. In contrast, they also discussed how the absence of attention to sustainability could lead to negative sentiments about humanitarian organizations and interventions, including disappointment, anxiety, and uncertainty about the future of humanitarian action. These perspectives point to potential harms that could emerge from a lack of sustained outcomes in emergency response.

For example, when relationships were not sustained, existing partnerships, trust, and collaboration between humanitarian organizations and local actors were eroded. These consequences were experienced by some participants as a form of relational harm. When humanitarian organizations left without communicating transparently their timeline for exit or what aspects of the project could continue, members of the community felt abandoned by the organization, perceived only as passive receivers of assistance, or disheartened about the possibility to sustain other project benefits, including relationships. These experiences generated feelings of disappointment among some community members about the possibility of receiving future assistance and maintaining collaborative partnerships. In this way, generating a type of *relational harm* from a lack of sustainability processes and outcomes. These findings align with other humanitarian aid reports, which highlight how a lack of transparency from humanitarian organizations about decision-making was perceived as unfair and harmful for social cohesion, leading to hostility between aid workers and affected communities [29]. Moreover, in another qualitative study exploring local humanitarian workers' experiences with project closure, when humanitarian organizations did not communicate when they would depart, it contributed to affected communities having a sense of "*fractured trust and deepened perceptions of abandonment.*" [30]

A lack of sustained outcomes also presented a missed opportunity to minimize future harm and vulnerability for affected communities. When humanitarian organizations did not prepare the ground for local actors to continue project benefits or sustain capacities, such as DRR, it limited participants' ability to respond effectively to recurring disasters, increasing their vulnerability to risk. The potential for harm caused by greater vulnerability to risk increased in contexts where affected communities expressed aspirations for sustainable outcomes in contexts of ongoing need, such as continued displacement or recurring disasters. In such cases, insufficient attention to future needs and the preparatory steps necessary to address them represented a missed opportunity to mitigate vulnerabilities, ultimately heightening the intensity of recurring shocks and exacerbating future harm for affected communities. Adopting an outlook oriented toward minimizing vulnerability in future crises not only helps avoid such missed opportunities but also advances resilience, by fostering people's capacities during crises while simultaneously creating long-term conditions to resist and recover from future shocks [31]. Taken together, these insights suggest that humanitarian programmes that continue beyond the acute emergency phase should carefully consider possibilities to promote sustainability in order to avoid unintentionally undermining community trust and exacerbating future vulnerabilities.

4.2. The role of local actors in promoting sustainability

Participants in the study did not explicitly discuss the role of localization to support the processes and outcomes of sustainability. Yet, many participants framed sustainability as a shared responsibility between humanitarian organizations and local actors, highlighting the importance of fostering local ownership and mutual trust, with an emphasis on considering local actors as active

participants in sustaining project outcomes (1KII3; 6KII8). This approach aligns with localization agendas that prioritize directing resources to local stakeholders and increasing local agency in implementation and decision-making [32]. The emergence of localization as a central policy priority in humanitarian aid can be traced to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, when donors, humanitarian organizations and state actors committed to the principle of *"as local as possible, and as international as necessary"* [33]. This commitment has driven multiple calls for greater locally led humanitarian aid [15,34,35], yet concerns for localization being driven by external Global North institutions, as well as questions of "who is local" have raised apprehensions about its potential [36,37]. Additionally, the abrupt withdrawal of USAID funding posed a serious threat to local organizations' ability to continue providing essential services [38]. The lack of planning and preparation for freezing funds risks undermines local civil society and disrupts efforts to localize aid. This situation highlights the need for reforms in how funding is directed to local actors [39,40]. The perspectives shared by participants, including community members, local government officials, and members of civil society organizations, highlight diverse experiences regarding shared roles, expectations, and responsibilities in planning for the closure and handover of humanitarian projects. For example, participants suggested that community members could be meaningfully engaged in sustainability processes, not only through participation in decision-making structures, but also through ownership over project benefits through the assumption of leadership and oversight roles along the project's lifecycle to promote enduring benefits after the organization's departure. This framing invites a nuanced discussion about the role of localization in humanitarian action, especially in balancing power dynamics and promoting shared decision-making, among local civil society, humanitarian organizations and community members. By considering sustainability in relation to the localization agenda, humanitarian organizations will be prompted to reflect upon the complexities of project closure and handover and the opportunities for collaboration and shared responsibilities in planning for lasting impacts that prioritize local agency, empowerment, and resilience.

Previous studies regarding humanitarian project closure and handover address the value of relationship-building as important in promoting the sustainability of services and benefits post-closure or handover. For example, Sitali et al. [5] highlight that successful handovers to local partners at the end of a project require building strong relationships and maintaining transparent communication. Interviews with national and international humanitarian health workers highlighted their view that the success of a project closure is linked to the ability to continue services for the community by handing over and transferring responsibilities to local stakeholders for sustainability [11]. The literature suggests that exit strategies involving local actors help strengthen their capacities, increasing the likelihood that project activities will be sustained after closure and handover [5,41]. This study contributes additional insights to this growing body of literature by highlighting how enduring relationships can redefine what project closure entails. Participants highlighted how maintaining relationships was perceived as a valuable aspect of an intervention, but also crucial for supporting the possibility of other sustained benefits. The perspectives shared by participants align with recent calls for a more "relational humanitarianism" [42]. A humanitarianism that centers established relationships as a crucial component of any intervention involves placing more weight on a community's *"social context, their histories and their future prospects*" to inform programming and operations [42]. A relational humanitarianism views relationships as dynamic and evolving, where roles and responsibilities are shifting over time and beyond the crisis response. In this context, relationships require continuous navigation of the tension between the temporary nature of humanitarian aid and the lasting needs of the community and the impact of humanitarian interventions [8]. Humanitarian organizations might close their projects and exit a community because project objectives had been met or due to the need to respond to other crises. Yet, from the perspectives of participants, the continuity of relationships and partnerships provided a sense that projects had not yet ended so long as the relationship between the humanitarian organization and the local community was maintained. The extensive roles local actors played within their own communities reinforce how centering and fostering relationships can support the process of sustainability. At the same time, organizations must contend with practical constraints, as the limits of the humanitarian emergency mandate can make it challenging and resource-intensive to sustain relationships over time [18]. Balancing the idea of enduring relationships with the operational constraints of emergency mandates remains a key challenge for fostering long-term impact in humanitarian aid.

4.3. Potential avenues to advance sustainability in humanitarian aid

A recurring tension regarding the possibility of sustainability relates to humanitarian actors' limited scope of responsibilities to act beyond the short-term emergency response in promoting sustainable outcomes [18,19]. As famously stated by Sadako Ogata, former High Commissioner for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *"there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems."* [43]. With an increasing scale of protracted crises such as displacement and armed conflict globally, humanitarian aid's emergency mandate encounters both feasibility and contextual challenges in advancing sustainable solutions beyond their mandate of immediate crisis response [19,29]. Humanitarian scholar, Hugo Slim, suggests that an organization's responsibility for people's future should be based on their capacity to act, and as capacities increase, so do responsibilities to consider what can be sustained [2]. Several efforts have been made to develop explicit linkages and better integration between the humanitarian and development sectors to bridge some of the responsibility and capacity gaps.

Recently, the Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus has been a major focus of attention [29]. With the HDP Nexus, humanitarian actors can complement roles and draw on the comparative advantage of development and peace actors to plan for sustainable development, poverty alleviation and peacekeeping efforts [29,44]. This increases and complements capacities among humanitarian, development, and peacemaking actors to sustain humanitarian benefits and plan for the future well-being of affected communities. While the Nexus offers an ambitious framework to overcome fragmentation, its practical implementation proves challenging. A central difficulty lies in reconciling the contrasting mandates, priorities, and principles of the three sectors [45–47]. For example, humanitarian aid's focus on addressing immediate life-saving needs contrasts sharply with the longer-term, political, and

rights-based strategies often employed in development assistance [18,46]. Moreover, humanitarian actors emphasize neutrality, independence, and impartiality, and many practitioners are wary that integration, especially with peace-building actors, could compromise these core values by opening the possibility of securitized approaches involving military or counterterrorism actors [45,47,48]. In addition, a lack of clear policies at the program-level, different funding schemes, and perceptions of national and local humanitarian staff that the debate on the HDP Nexus was too academic, headquarters-centric and top-down, have also posed challenges for its implementation [9,29].

Civil society organizations and local activists have also proposed an integration of community- and survivor-led responses to enhance the practice and implementation of the Nexus. Community- and survivor-led responses allow affected communities to have greater control over interventions aimed at improving their survival, recovery and future protection [49]. Addressing the vulnerabilities as well as taking advantage of the inherent capacities and assets of the community can amplify relevant context-specific interventions and the possibility for sustainability by considering communities not just as recipients of aid but partners and leaders during and after crisis response. As Steinke [50] argues, the humanitarian, development, and peace sectors must make deliberate, context-informed decisions to operationalize the Nexus in ways that deliver tangible long-term benefits to affected populations. Further research on community and organizational perspectives regarding the role and implementation of the HDP Nexus, particularly in relation to community- and survivor-led responses, may be needed to promote sustainability in humanitarian aid.

4.4. Contextual considerations

This research was conducted in six communities in the Philippines in a wide range of geographic and demographic contexts, as well as divergence in the types of humanitarian crises and responses. Although the different types of settings captured nuances and variations among the different contexts, it is important to note that the possibility for sustainability might look different in the Philippine context in comparison to other humanitarian crises. The Philippines has strong community organizing, often associated with the involvement of Barangay officials and local civil society organizations, which can facilitate processes of collaboration and agreement to participate in sustainability processes. In addition, the frequent disasters triggered by natural hazards in the country have strengthened local systems, such as local disaster risk reduction and management councils present in every district, thus enabling local actors to better respond to and prepare community members for future disasters. Humanitarian contexts with fractured social ties, weak institutions, heightened conflict, or mistrust in local institutions might require different and additional considerations for the possibility of sustainability.

5. Limitations

A limitation of this study relates to how the data was collected. For the broader empirical study, we did not set out to specifically focus on sustainability, though it was one of the considerations related to project closure that we anticipated would emerge as a concern for participants. As such, the interview guides did not include questions specifically focusing on sustainability, which limited the extent of discussion of this topic within the interviews, though it was frequently raised spontaneously by participants in response to questions of what was important for them during project closure. To support our understanding of this topic, we were able to discuss with the Advisory Board and some community members via online and in-person discussions to better situate and further contextualize what participants had said in relation to sustainability. Further methodological limitations are reported by Hunt et al. (*forthcoming*). They include data collection modifications that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as issues of recall during interviews and focus group discussions.

6. Conclusion

The narratives of local actors illuminate the possibilities and challenges for promoting sustainability in all stages of humanitarian project closure and handover. Ultimately, the participants' perspectives and insights on sustainability in humanitarian aid present opportunities for humanitarian organizations to consider when, how and to what extent they can and should seek to address considerations of the underlying vulnerabilities and future well-being of affected communities that go beyond the acute crisis response. While the budget, resource, and time constraints of emergency contexts make it difficult for humanitarian organizations to promote sustained benefits, the findings from this study can orient discussions between humanitarian organizations and local actors about ways that humanitarian projects could advance positive long-term impact. Participants linked sustainability to outcomes including capacities, activities, services, material gains, and relationships. Their experiences with the closure of humanitarian projects highlighted the importance for both organizations and local actors to recognize a shared responsibility for achieving the sustainability of project activities. Participants emphasized that sustainability should be a priority from the outset and integrated throughout all project stages. This approach required transparent communication, crafting and revising transition plans, and implementing capacity-sharing activities to more effectively attend to ongoing needs and support the long-term well-being of affected communities. While acknowledging the temporal and resource constraints facing humanitarian aid organizations, participants expressed a desire for continuity of a broad set of project benefits, indicating that sustainability is not merely about maintaining services but also about fostering relationships, local ownership and enhanced resilience to future and recurring crises.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Isabel Muñoz Beaulieu: Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Revka Perez:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Mayfourth Luneta:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis. **Lisa Eckenwiler:** Writing – review & editing. **Shelley Rose Hyppolite:** Writing – review & editing. **Handreen Mohammed Saeed:** Writing – review & editing. **Lisa Schwartz:** Writing – review & editing. **Matthew Hunt:** Writing – review & editing, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to declare.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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