

Research summary: practitioners

On the road to building a sustainable future

Five-year review of Tearfund's environmental and economic sustainability work



tearfund

The findings in this summary are drawn from the following report: Simpson, N.P.; Liu, L.; Hill, R.C.; Kataw, S.; Mwanga, M.; Avelino, C.; Moreno, M.; Frazer, S.; Ling, A.; Ferguson, A. (2023) 'Five-year review of Tearfund's progress towards its corporate priority on Environmental and Economic Sustainability', commissioned by Tearfund UK, Tearfund Netherlands and Tearfund Germany: Teddington, UK.

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📷 Front cover photo: John (centre) was part of a group from his community in Malawi who learnt forestry skills through EES training. They have planted two hectares of forest and work hard to maintain it. Photo: Marcus Perkins/Tearfund

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This summary highlights findings from a five-year review of Tearfund's programmes to promote environmental and economic sustainability (EES).

Covering 19 countries, with six in-depth case studies, and led by an independent consultant, the review concludes that Tearfund's EES work is having a positive impact on social, environmental and economic conditions, and is contributing to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A number of lessons were drawn from this extensive review to inform future EES work, of relevance to practitioners within and beyond Tearfund.

About Tearfund's environmental and economic sustainability (EES) work¹

Tearfund understands poverty as resulting from four broken relationships, including the relationship between people and the environment.² Environmental degradation is increasing at an alarming rate, and it is the poorest people in our world who are being most affected by it – those who have done the least to cause it. Harmful patterns of consumption and waste, driven by business, are fuelling the crisis, putting pressure on the world's natural resources.

Tearfund recognises that climate change, the environment and people's livelihoods are closely connected. Tearfund is committed to relief and development work that is both environmentally and economically sustainable and reduces exposure and vulnerability to risk. We believe that policies and practices must enable livelihood and wealth generation without compromising the environment.

In 2015 Tearfund published [The restorative economy](#), setting out our vision for a sustainable global economy in which extreme poverty is ended, the balance in creation is restored and inequality between rich and poor is reduced.

To implement this vision in our programme and advocacy work, Environmental and Economic Sustainability (EES) was adopted as one of four corporate priorities. EES is about working towards a world where extreme inequality is reduced and where everyone can meet their basic needs – and flourish – within their environmental limits.

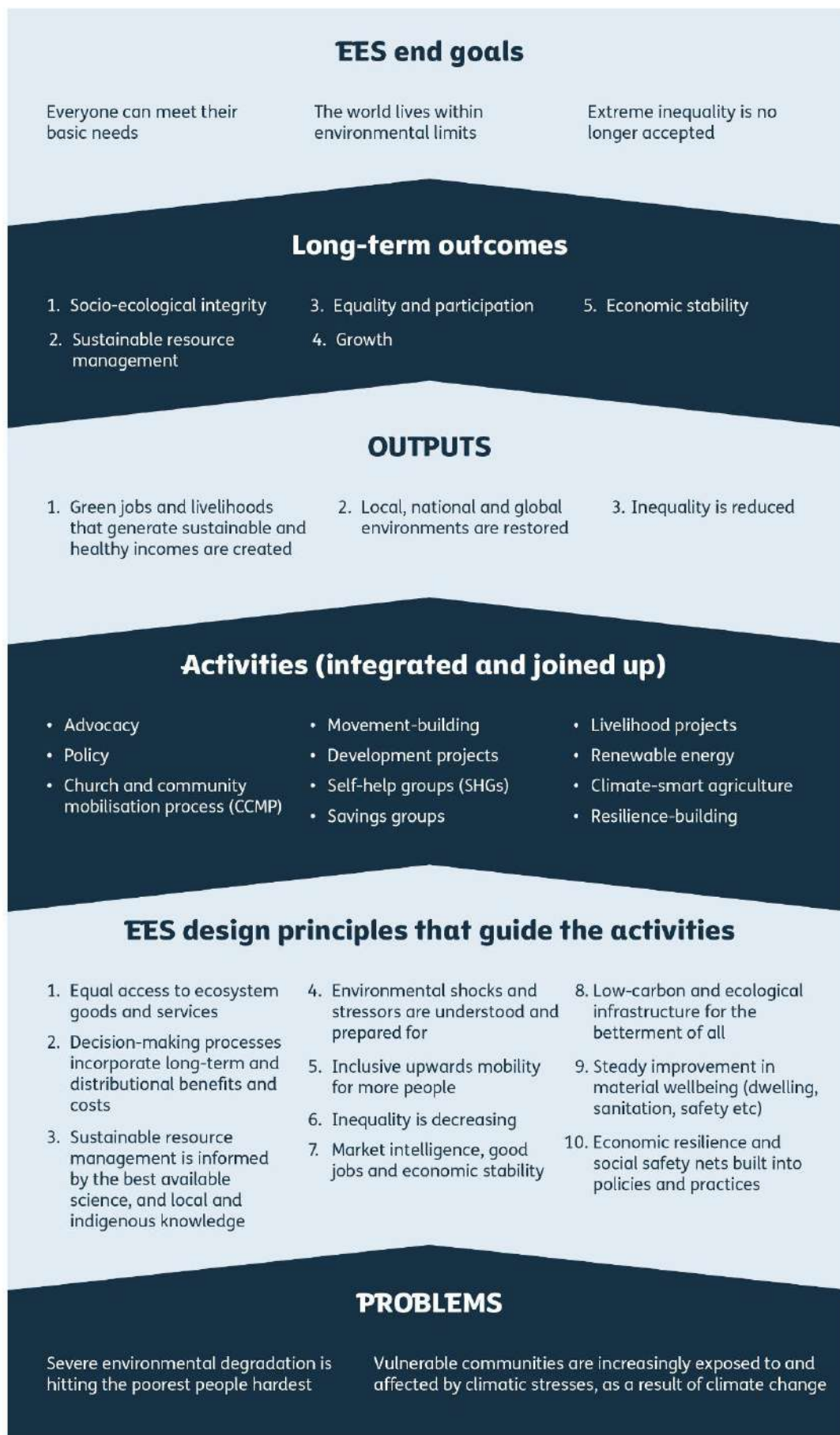
EES has a wide range of elements. Some relate more to the environment, while others relate more to economic wellbeing. However, they are all closely intertwined and can affect each other positively or negatively. Poverty reduction must hold the environment and the economy in balance, recognising that a broken and harmful environment will have a negative impact on people's health, livelihoods and productivity.

We address EES through taking action at community, national and global levels, focusing on the poorest and most vulnerable people, through catalysing attitudinal and theological change and through prayer. Working with our partner organisations, we combine project, policy and advocacy work in order to achieve three end goals outlined in the Theory of Change in the figure below.

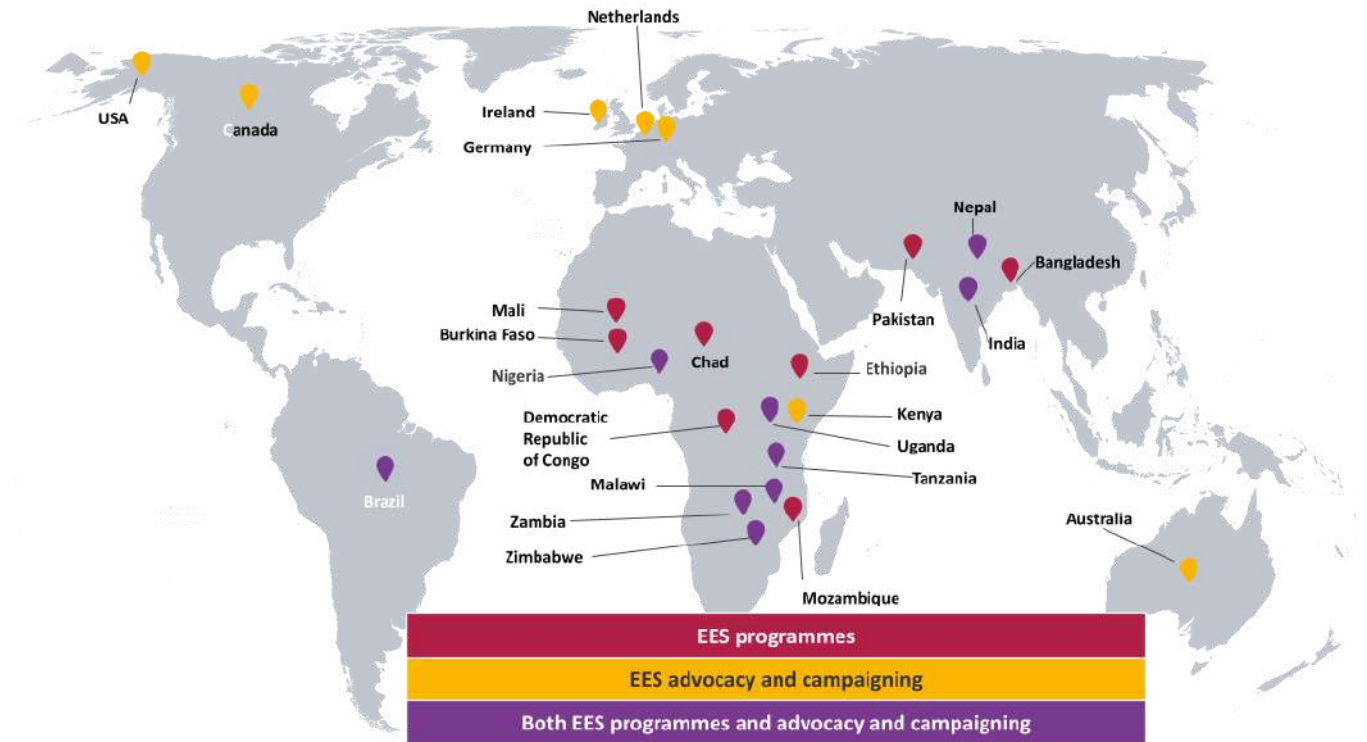
¹ This section is drawn from Tearfund (2019) [Building a sustainable future. Environmental and economic sustainability: a practical guide](#).

² For more detail, see Tearfund Learn (2019) [Tools and guides: Understanding poverty](#).

EES Theory of Change



Since 2018, Tearfund has established local-level sustainability interventions in 35 countries around the world, with many examples of working to improve livelihoods while restoring and protecting the environment in various contexts. The map below shows the countries in which Tearfund funds EES programmes, and advocacy and campaigning work.



About this research

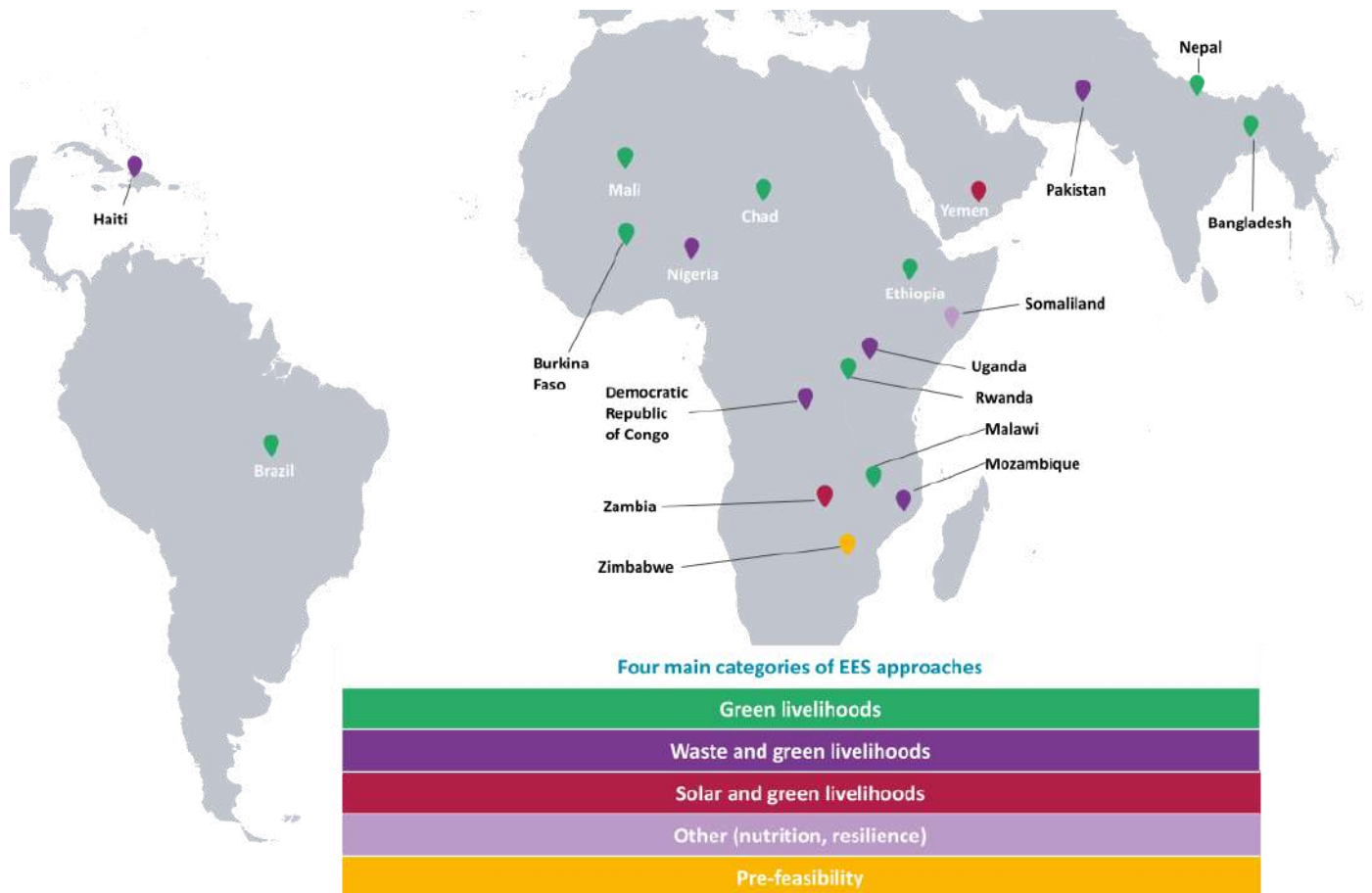
Tearfund undertook this review to identify strengths and challenges from the first five years of our EES work (from 2018 to 2022), and to reflect on areas for revision, improvement and future growth. The review was conducted by an independent consultancy team led by Dr Nicholas P. Simpson, a climate risk, adaptation and resilience specialist, with support from research associates and Tearfund EES specialists.

It comprised two components:

1. Desk review of project documentation and reports across 19 countries (January–August 2022). Apart from India and Tanzania, the review included all countries where Tearfund funds EES-related programmes.
2. Primary qualitative data collection with stakeholders connected to EES programmes in six countries (August–October 2022).
 - Brazil
 - Democratic Republic of Congo
 - Malawi
 - Nepal
 - Pakistan
 - Zambia

Across the 19 countries evaluated by this review, projects and programmes were classified by four main strategies of EES approaches, as shown in the map³:

- Sustainable green livelihoods
- Waste and green livelihoods
- Solar and green livelihoods
- Other (including concentrations that do not fit neatly into other categories, such as resilience, nutrition or movement building).



The review developed case studies to highlight examples of EES work achieving improvements in each design principle area.

³ Bangladesh, Nepal, Brazil, Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia have multiple projects that are classified under multiple categories but are coded according to their primary EES activities.

About EES

EES work has a positive impact on social, environmental and economic conditions

A key aspect of the review involved scoring EES projects and programmes against relevant [EES design principles](#), to compare scores at baseline and endline and the change observed. Pre-project baseline ratings ranged from 'worsening' to 'fragile', reflecting the fact that Tearfund communities are often the most isolated and marginalised groups. Following EES interventions, there were measures of improvement in social, environmental and economic conditions to higher ratings of 'stability' across all but one of the ten design principles. Progress was achieved in all three of the goals set, namely, to provide sustainable green jobs, reduce inequality and enhance the local environment.⁴



📷 Celeste and her family were badly affected by drought in Paraiba State in Brazil, until Tearfund partner ACEV installed a borehole so they can plant and harvest all year round. Photo: Tom Price – Ecce Opus/Tearfund

The most consistently successful outcomes in terms of the average change between baseline and endline on a scale of 1 - fragile to 5 - flourishing – across all projects – were:

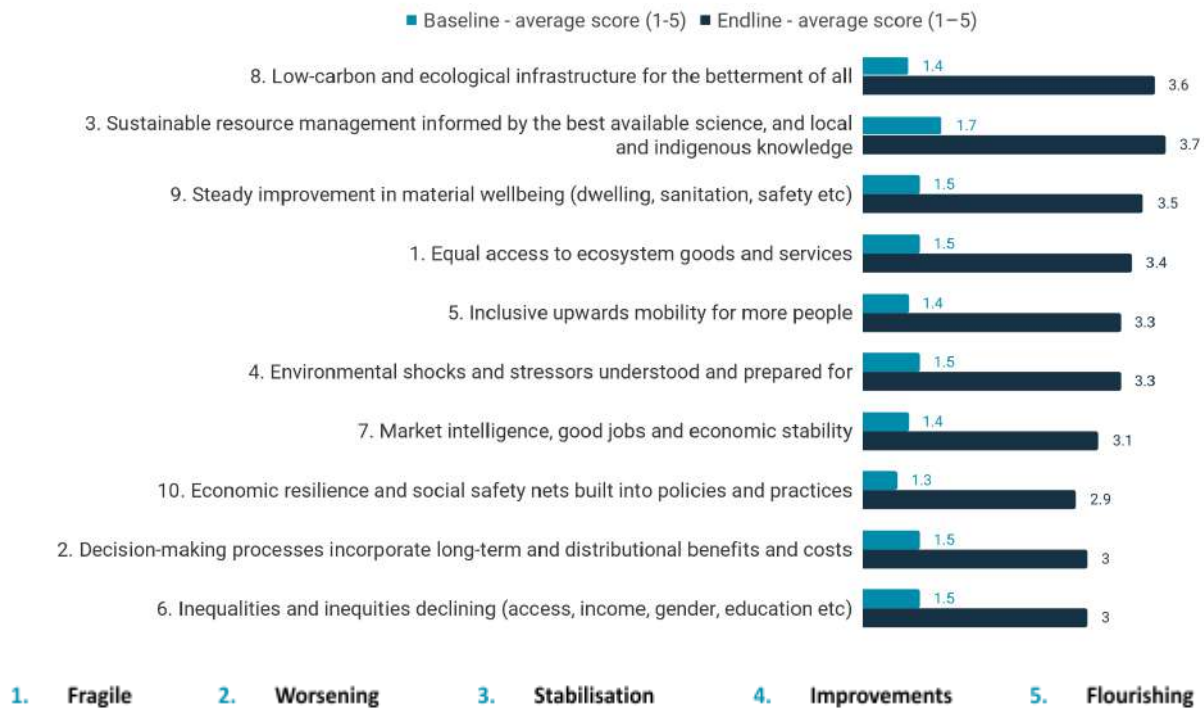
- Design principle 8: 'Low-carbon and ecological infrastructure for the betterment of all' with an average change of **+2.2**.
- Design principle 3: 'Sustainable resource management informed by the best available science, and local and indigenous knowledge' with an average change of **+2.0**.
- Design principle 9: 'Steady improvement in material wellbeing' with an average change of **+2.0**.

⁴ See outputs in EES Theory of Change on p 3.

The lowest average change between baseline and endline on a scale of 1 - fragile to 5 - flourishing across all projects reviewed was for the following two design principles:

- Design principle 2: ‘Decision-making processes incorporate long-term and distributional benefits and costs’ with an average change of **+1.5**.
- Design principle 6: ‘Inequalities and inequities declining’ with an average change of **+1.5**.

Average design principle score at baseline and endline, ranked from largest to smallest change



Design principle 3: Sustainable resource management is informed by the best available science, and local and indigenous knowledge

An EES agricultural programme in Zambia was developed based on Christian theological principles of ‘care for creation’, and the best available science from Foundations for Farming (2022). The programme supported ‘ecological intensification’, which includes increasing crop diversity through intercropping (growing two or more crops in the same field), adding fertility crops (that work symbiotically with nitrogen-fixing rhizobia bacteria to add nitrogen to the soil), and mulching with organic matter to reduce moisture loss and promote soil nutrient health.

Churches have established demonstration plots in which community members practise sustainable farming and seed suppliers demonstrate crop varieties. The plots host school children, exposing them to the benefits of agriculture without chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The demonstration plots treat farming as an evolving science, in which methods are tested and allowed to ‘fail’ or ‘succeed’, identifying best practices through trial and error. Knowledge transfer to and exchange among farmers on conservation agriculture has increased the yield of staple crops.

Design principle 9: Steady improvement in material wellbeing (dwelling, sanitation, safety etc)

EES work supported the installation of metallic-improved cooking stoves (MICS) in the remote Bajura region of Nepal. Women and their family members experienced an ongoing improvement in health and safety as a result of installing mud-built stoves, which have one or two metallic plates and a metallic chimney.

The stoves are more efficient: they use less firewood and keep wood burning for longer periods. In the winter months, the stove keeps the room warm for longer. As a result, women have to spend less time collecting firewood, often far from their homes, and can do more work tending their kitchen gardens. This efficiency in turn promotes forest conservation as less wood is needed for cooking.

The stove's chimney eliminates indoor smoke, preventing smoke damage to women's eyes and lungs from open fires, thereby promoting better health and a cleaner home. Before installation, women reported dreading cooking because of smoke inhalation, whereas now they relish the creativity of cooking and being able to talk to loved ones as they sit together alongside the stoves in a smoke-free environment.

The local government has been so impressed by this project, it has offered to pay to install the stoves in more homes – an indication of the transferability and scalability of this initiative.



📷 Ambika cooks dinner for her family using a metallic-improved cooking stove. Photo: Tearfund

Design principle 7: Market intelligence, good jobs and economic stability

Communities in northeastern Brazil were plagued by water shortages, which made agricultural livelihoods difficult to sustain and encouraged unsustainable farming practices. A Tearfund-supported project helped tackle these issues by installing wells and introducing new, more sustainable opportunities to promote green livelihoods.

To help people start growing their own food, the project set up a seed bank to purchase seeds below market price and provided technical advice about how to grow the seeds. This advice encouraged sustainable farming techniques in place of previously harmful practices like burning straw for planting corn and beans. One of the techniques farmers adopted was utilising waste water for tree planting – and many banana trees flourished from this practice.

Most of the project participants were mothers, aged 20–35, who had limited means to earn money to support their young families. Through this project they were able to sell their produce and generate income. The project helped people to sell their produce through WhatsApp and at markets, sharing the profits across all the farmers. Project participants were encouraged to collect and share income data among themselves, so that they could make decisions about which crops to grow based on what was most profitable. As a result of the project, organic food like beets and aubergines became much more popular across the city, contributing to a more nutritional diet for both the farmers and their neighbours.

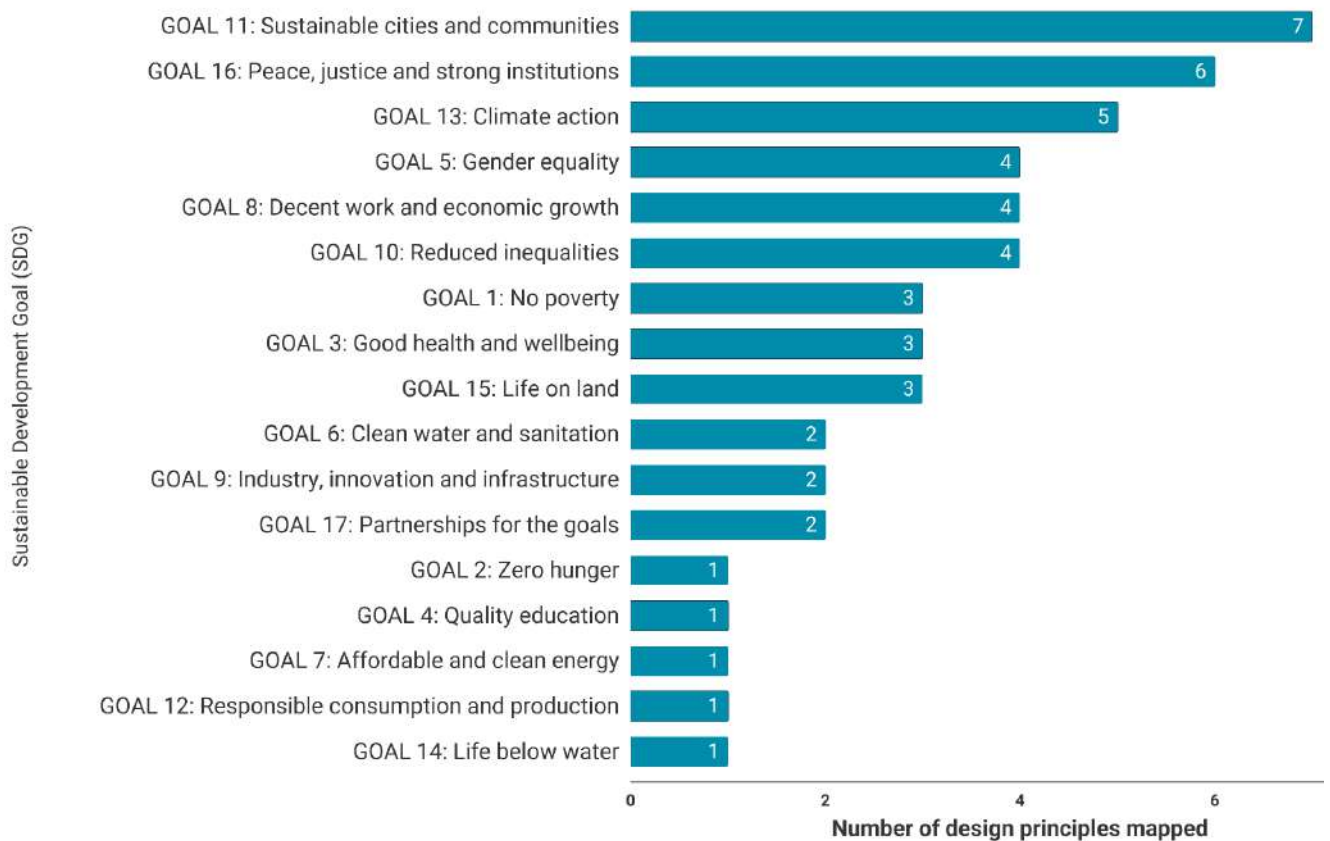


📷 Rita takes advantage of the new well to water her crops in Brazil. She will use these to feed her family and sell in local markets for profit. Photo: Tom Price – Ecce Opus/Tearfund

EES work is contributing to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals

EES design principles were mapped against the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) of the United Nations [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals](#), and were found to contribute to all 17 goals. The figure below shows this mapping; however this is only indicative, given the design principles work synergistically together to achieve outcomes. Seven of the design principles were mapped to SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities) and six were mapped to peace, justice and strong institutions.

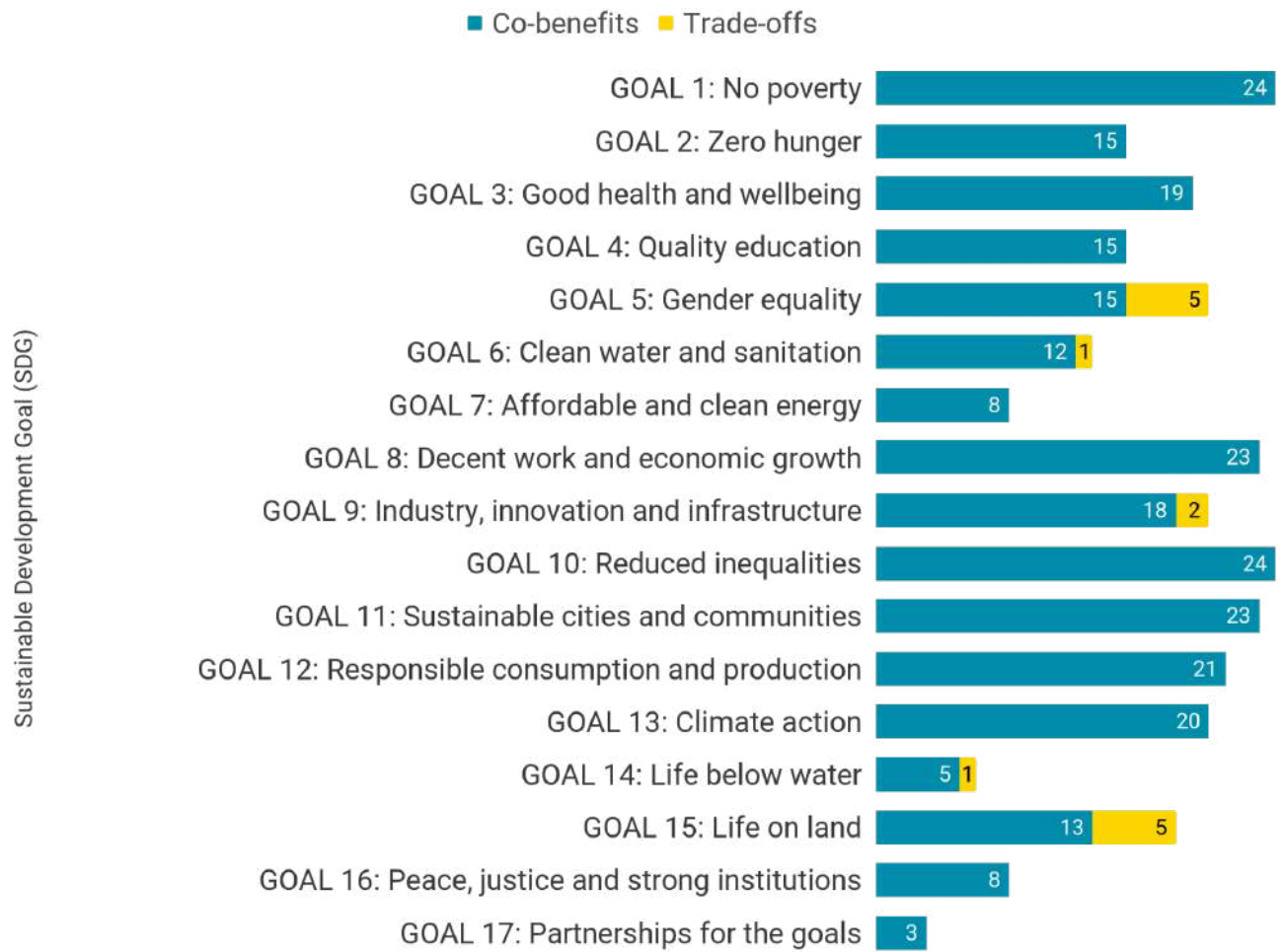
Design principles mapped against Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)



The review acknowledged the potential for Tearfund’s EES work to align with and promote achievement of the SDGs, referred to as ‘co-benefits’, as well as identifying the potential for trade-offs between EES work and progress towards certain SDGs. All projects were scored on whether there was a trade-off or co-benefit with each of the SDGs, to assess Tearfund’s broader contribution to the goals through EES programming.

Out of 24 programmes assessed, all had co-benefits with SDG 1 (no poverty) and SDG 10 (reduced inequality) while three had co-benefits with SDG 17 (partnerships to achieve the goals). Relatively few trade-offs were identified; however five projects were identified as having trade-offs related to Goal 5 (gender equality) and Goal 15 (life on land).

Co-benefits and trade-offs between EES programmes and SDGs



Lessons for EES work

The review identified the following cross-cutting success factors for EES work, which include synergies with Tearfund's broader programming.

- 1) Community acceptance, trust and support:** Across all EES projects in Africa, Asia and South America, trust was secured through building strong community groups. These often evolved into self-help groups (SHGs), which were strongly linked with project success.

What are self-help groups?

Self-help groups have a very distinctive identity. They are for people who have the fewest economic resources in a community (eg women and people with disabilities) and little opportunity to contribute to local decision-making. They are self-governed in a way that is highly participatory, giving everyone in the group the opportunity to learn leadership and financial skills. Each group is made up of 15 to 20 people from similar socio-economic backgrounds. They meet weekly to discuss issues, find solutions to common problems and build trusting and supportive relationships.

Each week everyone saves a small amount of money. Members can then take out loans at low interest rates for household needs, or to invest in small businesses. Local facilitators show the groups how to effectively govern themselves, as well as providing small business training. As they grow in confidence, many groups begin to play an active role in their communities, including advocating for change.

- 2) Role of the church in pro-environmental behaviour change and structures for environmental governance:** Tearfund's [church and community transformation](#) (CCT) approach of working with churches and mobilising them for community development was central to Tearfund's EES work, in both stable and fragile contexts. CCT places the church as a site of social transformation, changing mindsets from dependency to empowerment. Of the EES projects reviewed that worked through church and community groups engaged via CCT, 70 per cent included activities that encouraged pro-environmental behaviour change. Working with churches can create spaces where the environment is thought about, discussed and protected in line with Christian theological principles of 'care for creation'.⁵ Such spaces hold demonstrable potential to develop transformative, local-level structures for environmental governance.
- 3) Leveraging local partners and government engagement:** Just under two-thirds (63 per cent) of EES projects were implemented in collaboration with external local partners, and 56 per cent of projects involved local government before, during and after project implementation. This collaborative approach ensures that programming is in line with national and international standards and the latest scientific knowledge, and appropriately contextualised.
- 4) Synergies with advocacy and movement building:** Just under half (47 per cent) of Tearfund's EES projects engaged with grassroots organisations. The integration of local governmental and grassroots players was linked to long-term behaviour changes at individual, community and governmental levels.

⁵ For more explanation of these principles, see Tearfund (2022) [Abundant community theology: Working towards environmental and economic sustainability \(EES\)](#).

- 5) **Efficient financial savings and disbursement mechanisms play an important role:** Savings groups, self-help groups and village savings and loans associations (VSLAs) financed upward mobility for participants across the whole range of EES activities. These community-based banking mechanisms provided individuals with access to saving and loan schemes. Pooling of financial resources created a social safety net for the vulnerable, while loans catalysed microenterprises.
- 6) **Strong market linkages are worth investing in:** Access to functioning markets is essential in the long-term, to ensure financially viable jobs, income-generating projects, and economic stability. Linking projects to markets can be challenging and may take time.
- 7) **The importance of informal influencing:** Training and knowledge exchange sessions have been successfully incorporated into EES projects. As well as formal training and knowledge exchange, the learning from successful EES measures has been shared by participants and/or observers of EES work with others, motivating them to replicate the practices. There were examples of success stories that have been shared further afield, leading to widespread adoption.
- 8) **Supporting work towards reconciled, peace-filled societies:** In fragile societies, EES projects contributed to community cohesion by creating environmentally friendly economic pathways. There is therefore a synergy between Tearfund's work to build reconciled, peace-filled societies and economic and environmental sustainability.
- 9) **Moving from crisis to resilience through EES programming:** The EES projects reviewed strengthened coping mechanisms and addressed underlying vulnerabilities, contributing to reducing the risk of stressors and the shocks of disasters, whether caused by human actions or natural phenomena. There is a synergy between Tearfund's work to move from crisis to resilience in areas affected by disasters and projects focused on EES.



📷 Lucas is a solar entrepreneur in Tanzania who raised capital through his self-help group to open his own shop, which he can now open after dark thanks to a solar-powered light. Photo: Tom Price – Ecce Opus/Tearfund

The review identified several challenges in the planning and management of EES programming, which led to the following recommendations for future work in this area.

- 1) **Continue to prioritise participation by communities.** As evidenced in several EES projects, there is great benefit in involving participant communities in initial and ongoing consultations, giving space for agency and dignity in decision-making.
- 2) **Consider systems of oppression and their effects on marginalised groups.** EES projects must be alert to systems of oppression, whether based on gender, ethnicity, race, class or caste. Participation should be planned to be safe, accessible and time-sensitive for women and other marginalised individuals and groups, and their representatives ought to be included in EES project steering committees to enhance their role in decision-making.
- 3) **Engage young people.** Young people/teenagers should be encouraged to become involved in EES work as their presence ensures the intergenerational transfer of knowledge and practice, and supports the longevity of EES interventions.
- 4) **Prioritising quality over scale.** The review concluded that quality in EES programming is more important than quantity or scale. Tearfund's partners may find it easier to provide technical support on a selected range of intervention types, coordinated well to enhance outcomes.
- 5) **Seek longer time horizons for project funding.** Projects need to be rolled out over sufficiently long time periods. Short-term funding cycles make it difficult to build project momentum and meaningfully assess EES impact in the longer term.
- 6) **Consider technology cost and transferability carefully.** For example, waste management projects are expensive in terms of equipment and running costs.
- 7) **Take note of local climate information and forecasting** when carrying out agricultural and ecosystem-based activities, to ensure the most robust outcomes from interventions.
- 8) **Carry out cross-sectoral risk assessments** in planning, to anticipate and mitigate low-probability, high-impact events like those associated with climate change – a lesson from Covid-19. For example, risks to water security can create risks to food security and health.
- 9) **Ensure effective monitoring and evaluation to inform learning.** Strong record keeping, and identifying and measuring appropriate outcome indicators, are essential for successful monitoring, evaluation and reporting during projects, to foster learning and encourage adaptive EES programming.
- 10) **Keep learning and adapting.** Technical mentoring and periodic monitoring and follow-up should continue throughout the life of EES projects. In this way, participants gain experience of assessing and mitigating problems, and this builds capabilities and confidence to adapt to future challenges. In anticipation of project completion, participants could establish a community management committee to plan the transition to management by local participants.
- 11) **Advocate for access to markets.** The communities Tearfund works with are often far from social and economic centres, making it hard to procure resources and access markets. To alleviate the poverty of distance, Tearfund could engage in advocacy for better transport access to and from remote regions.
- 12) **Work towards expansion and scale-up.** To realise this potential, further support should be provided for the geographical and thematic expansion of the EES projects. Tearfund offices and partners should share learning from projects internally and externally, and engage extensively with stakeholders and organisations to encourage more widespread EES programming. This review documents valuable learning from EES programming so far to support this process.

Resources

The following resources may be valuable to practitioners working in environmental and economic sustainability:

- Tearfund (2015) [The restorative economy](#).
- Tearfund (2019) [Building a sustainable future. Environmental and economic sustainability: a practical guide](#).
- Tearfund (2022) [How to design and evaluate environmental and economic sustainability \(EES\) projects](#). A self-led online course.



📷 Emmanuel installed solar panels on his home to provide electricity for his home and shop after participating in an EES project in Tanzania. Photo: Toby Lewis Thomas/Tearfund

This review was commissioned by Tearfund UK, Tearfund Netherlands and Tearfund Germany.

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