



Post-Donor Sustainability of Development Initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations: A Systematic Literature Review

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Article History

Received: 2025-12-14

Revised: 2026-05-09

Accepted: 2026-05-20

Published: 2026-05-26

Keywords

Catholic women

Governance

Human resource

Leadership

How to cite:

Syengo, J., Soko, J., & Wanyama, M. N. (2026). Post-Donor Sustainability of Development Initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations: A Systematic Literature Review. *Eastern African Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 31-49.

Abstract

Post-donor sustainability remains a major challenge for development initiatives implemented by faith-based organisations in the Global South. Catholic Women Religious Congregations (CWRCs) play a significant role in delivering education, healthcare, social protection, livelihoods support, and humanitarian services in marginalised communities. However, declining donor funding, shifting development priorities, and increased donor withdrawal raise concerns about the continuity of their initiatives. This systematic literature review synthesises empirical and theoretical studies on how organisational practices influence post-donor sustainability among CWRCs. It integrates literature on project design, leadership and governance, financial management, and human resource capacity across faith-based organisations, NGOs, and community development programmes. The review followed a systematic approach using thematic synthesis and integrative analysis of peer-reviewed articles, books, policy reports, and academic databases, including Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, Web of Science, and AJOL (2010–2025). Findings show that sustainability depends less on continued donor funding and more on institutionalised adaptive leadership, participatory governance, strategic financial management, human resource development, stakeholder engagement, and organisational learning. Participatory project design enhances ownership and continuity, while strong governance improves accountability and resilience. Financial systems support sustainability through budgeting, accountability, and diversified resource mobilisation. Human resource capacity strengthens institutional continuity through skills development, leadership formation, and communication systems. Overall, sustainability is multidimensional and context-dependent, emerging from the interaction of organisational systems, institutional capabilities, and mission-driven governance. A key gap identified is the limited focus on CWRCs as distinct actors, despite their critical role in development.

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Introduction

Catholic Women Religious Congregations (CWRCs) play a vital role in serving marginalised communities across the Global South by providing education, healthcare, and humanitarian assistance. However, they face persistent challenges of post-donor sustainability as donor fatigue and localisation agendas accelerate the withdrawal of funding from faith-based initiatives. While sustainability literature highlights participatory governance, adaptive leadership, and financial and human resource capacity as critical factors, much of this scholarship has focused primarily on secular NGOs, leaving faith-based actors underexplored.

Faith-based organisations have historically played a central role in social transformation, humanitarian service delivery, education, healthcare provision, poverty reduction, and community empowerment across many developing countries (Clarke & Ware, 2015; Olivier et al., 2015). Among these organisations, Catholic Women Religious Congregations (CWRCs) have contributed significantly to social development through mission-driven initiatives targeting vulnerable populations, marginalised communities, women, children, and underserved rural populations (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). Catholic sisters continue to serve as important actors in local and global development systems.

Despite their significant developmental contribution, many CWRC development initiatives remain highly dependent on donor funding and external development assistance. Changing donor priorities, donor fatigue, and shifts toward localisation have heightened concerns about long-term sustainability (Banks et al., 2015). Numerous initiatives experience operational instability after donor withdrawal due to weak organisational systems, inadequate governance structures, and poor financial management (Ndibaru & Ongwae, 2023).

Sustainability has become an increasingly important development concern because outcomes are now evaluated not only by project implementation success but also by continuity, institutional resilience, community ownership, and long-term impact beyond donor support (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011).

Within CWRCs, sustainability presents unique institutional dynamics because congregational development work is embedded within religious identity, mission orientation, and communal governance systems (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). Unlike many secular organisations, CWRCs combine spiritual commitment with social service delivery, factors that influence how sustainability is conceptualised and achieved within post-donor environments.

Existing sustainability literature demonstrates growing scholarly attention toward organisational resilience, participatory governance, financial sustainability, and adaptive leadership. However, much of this literature focuses on non-governmental organisations and generalised faith-based organisations without specifically examining CWRCs as distinct organisational systems (Clarke & Ware, 2015). This review, therefore, synthesises empirical and theoretical literature published between 2010 and 2025 and examines how organisational practices influence the post-donor sustainability of development initiatives implemented by CWRCs.

Although CWRCs continue to implement significant development initiatives, many programmes remain vulnerable to donor withdrawal and external funding instability. Numerous initiatives experience weakened continuity and eventual collapse after donor support ends due to weak organisational systems, inadequate governance, and overreliance on external funding (Ndibaru & Ongwae, 2023; Banks et al., 2015; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011).



Despite growing scholarship on sustainability within development organisations, there is limited systematic evidence on how organisational practices influence post-donor sustainability, particularly within CWRCs. Most existing literature focuses on secular NGOs or generalised faith-based organisations, leaving a contextual gap regarding the unique governance structures, mission orientation, and institutional dynamics characterising CWRCs (Clarke & Ware, 2015; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012). This review, therefore, seeks to generate a comprehensive understanding of organisational determinants influencing post-donor sustainability among Catholic Women Religious Congregations.

The study is guided by the following research question: How do organisational practices influence the post-donor sustainability of development initiatives implemented by Catholic Women Religious Congregations?

The review is guided by three specific objectives: (1) to examine how project design practices influence the post-donor sustainability of development initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations; (2) to analyse how leadership and governance practices shape the sustainability trajectories of development initiatives implemented by Catholic Women Religious Congregations; and (3) to assess how financial management systems and human resource capacity affect the long-term sustainability of development initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations beyond donor support.

This review contributes theoretically by integrating sustainability literature across organisational management, leadership studies, governance systems, financial management, and institutional resilience. Practically, it provides insights for religious congregations, development practitioners, donors, and policymakers seeking to strengthen sustainability mechanisms beyond donor dependence, while highlighting the unique institutional realities of CWRCs within sustainability discourse.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a systematic literature review (SLR) design to synthesise empirical and theoretical literature on organisational practices that influence the post-donor sustainability of development initiatives among CWRCs. The SLR approach enables rigorous identification, evaluation, integration, and interpretation of scholarly evidence across diverse studies and disciplinary perspectives.

The review employed thematic synthesis and integrative analysis to identify recurring themes, conceptual patterns, and contextual gaps emerging from the literature.

Search Strategy

Literature was identified through systematic searches across Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, AJOL, ProQuest, and ResearchGate, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, books, conference papers, dissertations, and policy documents relevant to sustainability, organisational practices, faith-based development, and institutional resilience.

Search Terms

The search process utilised combinations of keywords and Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) tailored to each database. Google Scholar was searched using terms such as "post-donor sustainability," "faith-based organisations," "development initiatives," and "Catholic Women Religious Congregations." Scopus and Web of Science searches combined "organisational sustainability" AND



"donor withdrawal" AND "NGOs OR faith-based organisations." JSTOR searches focused on "institutional resilience," "participatory governance," and "financial sustainability." AJOL searches used "African faith-based organisations," "community development sustainability," and "Catholic congregations." ProQuest and ResearchGate searches employed "leadership and governance," "human resource capacity," "financial management systems," and "systematic literature review." Boolean combinations and proximity operators ensured specificity and relevance across all databases, enabling comprehensive identification of studies that address organisational determinants of sustainability in faith-based and donor-supported environments.

Inclusion Criteria

The review included peer-reviewed scholarly publications in English, published between 2010 and 2025. Studies were required to examine the sustainability of development initiatives, with particular emphasis on governance, leadership, financial management, participation, project design, and human resource capacity. Relevance to faith-based organisations, NGOs, or community development projects and empirical or theoretical evidence related to post-donor sustainability were additional inclusion requirements.

Exclusion Criteria

Studies were excluded if they lacked a focus on organisational sustainability, post-donor continuity, or institutional resilience during title and abstract screening. Full-text screening was then assessed for academic rigour, methodological quality, and relevance to development initiatives and sustainability systems. Non-scholarly publications, opinion pieces, and studies that solely address short-term project implementation without considering sustainability were omitted. This process ensured that only relevant, credible, and high-quality literature aligned with the review objectives was included in the final analysis.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Relevant studies were systematically reviewed and coded according to emerging sustainability themes. The data extraction process focused on study objectives, methodological approaches, organisational practices examined, sustainability dimensions identified, theoretical frameworks applied, key findings, and contextual relevance to faith-based organisations and Catholic Women Religious Congregations. The review employed thematic synthesis and integrative analysis approaches to identify recurring concepts, convergences, divergences, and explanatory relationships across the selected studies. Findings were subsequently organised into three major thematic categories: project design practices; leadership and governance practices; and financial management systems and human resource capacity.

Cross-cutting themes such as participation, institutional learning, resilience, stakeholder engagement, and organisational adaptability were also integrated into the broader sustainability framework.

Researcher Reflexivity

In line with good systematic review practice, the researcher acknowledges her positioning in relation to the subject matter. Familiarity with the Catholic institutional context facilitated deeper contextual understanding but also carried the risk of confirmation bias. To manage this, the systematic search followed explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria applied consistently across all retrieved records, and thematic coding was conducted with conscious attention to divergent and contradictory evidence.

Critical Appraisal of Included Studies

To ensure methodological rigour, an appraisal of included studies was conducted using adapted criteria informed by established systematic review frameworks (Hailey & Salway, 2016; Stirman et al., 2012). Each study was evaluated against four criteria: (1) clarity of research objectives; (2)



methodological appropriateness; (3) transparency and replicability of procedures; and (4) relevance to post-donor sustainability within faith-based or analogous contexts. Studies with strong performance received greater analytical weight; those with moderate quality were included but interpreted with appropriate caution. Theoretically strong but empirically weak studies informed the theoretical integration rather than the empirical findings.

A systematic literature search was conducted following PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, replicability, and methodological rigour. The search retrieved records from seven databases as follows: Google Scholar (n = 62), Scopus (n = 41), Web of Science (n = 35), JSTOR (n = 19), AJOL (n = 13), ProQuest (n = 10), and ResearchGate (n = 5), yielding 185 database records. An additional 55 records were identified through reference list scanning, citation tracking, and grey literature searches, bringing the total to 240 records. After removing 60 duplicates, 180 unique records remained for screening. Following title and abstract screening, 110 records were excluded due to irrelevance to the study objectives. A total of 70 full-text articles were assessed for eligibility, of which 30 were excluded for not meeting inclusion criteria: 12 for lack of relevance to post-donor sustainability, 9 for inadequate methodological quality, 6 for focus on non-comparable settings, and 3 for absence of English-language full text. Ultimately, 40 studies were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The study selection process is summarised in Figure 1.

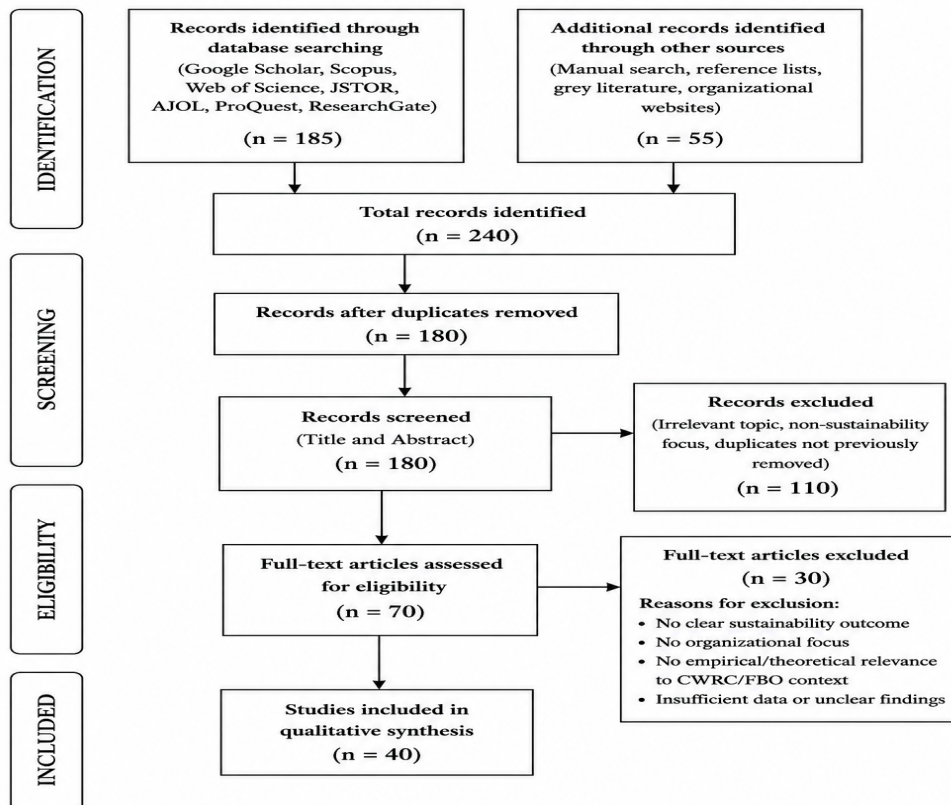


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram for the Study Selection Process



Conceptualisation of Post-Donor Sustainability

Post-donor sustainability has emerged as a central concern within contemporary development discourse due to increasing donor withdrawal, funding instability, and pressure on development organisations to maintain long-term continuity beyond external financial support (Banks et al., 2015; Scheirer & Dearing, 2011). Although widely discussed, the concept remains multidimensional, context-dependent, and theoretically contested (Stirman et al., 2012; Hailey & Salway, 2016).

Traditionally, sustainability was narrowly understood as the ability of projects to continue operating after donor funding ends. However, contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises sustainability as a broader organisational capability involving institutional resilience, adaptive capacity, governance quality, financial continuity, stakeholder ownership, organisational learning, and long-term social impact (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Almutairi et al., 2020).

Within CWRCs, sustainability carries additional spiritual and mission-oriented dimensions. CWRCs often conceptualise development as part of religious vocation, social justice, and community transformation rooted in Catholic social teaching (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012; Soko et al., 2012; Soko et al., 2014). Sustainability, therefore, involves not only financial and institutional continuity but also mission fidelity, moral legitimacy, and long-term commitment to vulnerable communities.

Organisational practices encompassing institutional systems, governance mechanisms, financial procedures, human resource systems, and participatory approaches significantly influence sustainability trajectories by shaping institutional adaptability, accountability, and resilience capacity (Ndibaru & Ongwae, 2023; Kamau et al., 2021).

Post-donor sustainability among CWRCs can therefore be understood as a multidimensional institutional capability that emerges from the interaction among adaptive leadership, participatory governance, strategic financial management, human resource development, stakeholder engagement, organisational learning, and mission-driven institutional resilience (Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012; Hailey & Salway, 2016).

Results and Discussion

Project Design Practices and Post-Donor Sustainability of Development Initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that project design practices play a decisive role in shaping post-donor sustainability. A clear pattern emerges that sustainability is not primarily determined by donor resources but by how projects are designed in their formative stages, particularly regarding participation, stakeholder engagement, planning systems, governance structures, and learning mechanisms.

A dominant theme across the reviewed literature is that participatory project design is central to sustainability because it fosters ownership, commitment, and continuity beyond donor withdrawal. Aga et al. (2017), Noori (2017), Tsoeu-Ntokoane et al. (2024), Muniu et al. (2017), and Bikuba and Kayunze (2019) converge on the finding that when beneficiaries are actively involved in needs assessment, decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation, they develop psychological ownership toward project outcomes—a disposition critical in the post-donor phase. More recently, Mwangi and Mutuku (2025) and Simon and Moturi (2025) further demonstrate that community co-ownership of project processes significantly reduces the risk of programme collapse after donor exit.

The literature further demonstrates that participation alone is insufficient unless it is meaningful, continuous, and institutionally embedded within governance systems. Yang (2016) demonstrates that the quality and governance of participation determine sustainability outcomes. Projects characterised



by top-down mobilisation and externally controlled participation frequently yield lower long-term sustainability than those emerging from grassroots engagement and locally driven participation.

Structured planning systems and project management frameworks also significantly strengthen sustainability. Chow et al. (2021), Yu et al. (2018), and Golini et al. (2017) demonstrate that logical frameworks, risk management, monitoring systems, and structured governance arrangements strengthen accountability, coordination, and institutional continuity.

Stakeholder engagement and collaborative governance are also central sustainability mechanisms. Silvius and Schipper (2019), Pauna et al. (2023), Bernat et al. (2023), and Lisanza et al. (2023) demonstrate that active stakeholder involvement throughout the project cycle strengthens trust, transparency, shared responsibility, and institutional accountability. Odhiambo et al. (2025) further confirm that robust stakeholder engagement frameworks embedded in organisational capacity significantly improve performance outcomes of community-based projects, particularly where governance structures align stakeholder interests with institutional sustainability objectives.

Knowledge management and organisational learning are equally significant dimensions of sustainability. Bernat et al. (2023) demonstrate that knowledge creation, sharing, and institutional learning embed expertise and organisational memory, thereby reducing dependence on external actors and improving post-donor continuity. Tirtana et al. (2025) reinforce this finding, demonstrating that faith-based organisations that function as learning intermediaries—systematically capturing and disseminating institutional knowledge—exhibit significantly stronger adaptive capacity during periods of organisational transition and funding disruption.

Collectively, post-donor sustainability is strongest when participatory design, structured planning, collaborative governance, knowledge management, and accountable leadership are integrated within institutional project systems. Participatory approaches without governance risk inefficiency; technical systems without participation risk community disengagement.

Within CWRCs, sustainability is strengthened when development initiatives are designed through participatory, learning-oriented, and accountable systems that integrate sisters, beneficiaries, local communities, and institutional partners as active co-creators rather than passive recipients of donor-funded interventions.

Despite strong convergence across the literature, most studies focus on NGOs and secular institutional systems with limited attention to CWRCs as distinct organisational actors. The transferability of existing findings, therefore, requires contextual validation within CWRC governance systems and mission-oriented institutional environments.

Leadership and Governance Practices Shaping Sustainability Trajectories of Development Initiatives in Catholic Women Religious Congregations

The reviewed literature demonstrates a strong consensus that sustainability is determined not solely by financial resources or project design, but by the interaction between leadership and governance within complex institutional and social systems. Sustainability consistently emerges as a dynamic and relational process shaped by adaptive leadership, participatory governance, institutional learning, accountability, and resilience-oriented management systems.

A dominant theme emerging from the literature is that leadership in sustainable development contexts extends beyond administrative management into adaptive sense-making, institutional coordination, innovation, and learning facilitation. Ma et al. (2023) conceptualise leadership as transformative action that mobilises resources, coordinates stakeholders, and enables adaptation under uncertainty.



Dunning (2020) further emphasises institutional memory and experiential knowledge as essential for continuity across leadership transitions.

Within CWRCs, these findings underscore the importance of mentorship, succession planning, and knowledge retention systems. Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012) demonstrate that structured leadership development among women religious strengthens decision-making capacity, resource mobilisation, governance effectiveness, and institutional continuity.

Sustainability-oriented leadership requires adaptive decision-making supported by monitoring, evaluation, and evidence-based management. Szoenyi et al. (2020) and Almutairi et al. (2020) conceptualise resilience as the institutional capacity to anticipate, absorb, adapt to, and recover from shocks, requiring adaptive systems responsive to changing social, economic, political, and donor environments.

Marshall et al. (2021) demonstrate that faith-based governance systems strengthen sustainability through moral legitimacy, relational trust, long-term community embeddedness, and ethical leadership.

Participation and collaboration consistently emerge as foundational governance principles strengthening sustainability outcomes. Prianto et al. (2023), Rast et al. (2020), Summers et al. (2017), and Munthali et al. (2026) collectively demonstrate that meaningful participation strengthens ownership, legitimacy, accountability, institutional trust, and continuity. Symbolic participation, weak governance structures, and fragmented coordination systems undermine long-term sustainability.

Ethical and value-based leadership further emerge as a significant sustainability driver. Case (2025), Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024), Rivera (2018), and Deneulin (2021) demonstrate that moral legitimacy, servant leadership, relational trust, and mission-driven governance strengthen organisational resilience and long-term sustainability. Tirtana et al. (2025) extend these insights to pandemic governance contexts, demonstrating that faith-based organisations exhibiting strong ethical leadership and transparent governance are better positioned to sustain programmatic commitments during periods of systemic disruption—a finding directly pertinent to CWRC sustainability in contexts of donor withdrawal and funding volatility.

The reviewed literature positions sustainability within CWRCs as an emergent outcome of adaptive leadership, participatory governance, institutional learning, mentoring systems, ethical leadership, collaborative accountability, and resilience-oriented organisational cultures.

Collectively, leadership contributes to sustainability through strategic direction, adaptive decision-making, mentorship, and institutional learning, while governance institutionalises participation, accountability, coordination, and continuity. Sustainability is strongest where both operate interactively within mission-driven, participatory, and resilient institutional environments.

Financial Management Systems and Human Resource Capacity in Relation to Long-Term Sustainability

The reviewed literature consistently demonstrates that long-term sustainability beyond donor support is fundamentally influenced by the interaction between financial management systems and human resource capacity. Sustainability depends not merely on the amount of donor resources available but on the institutional capacity to manage finances strategically, develop competent personnel, and cultivate organisational resilience.

A dominant theme emerging across the reviewed studies is the central role of financial management systems in determining sustainability outcomes. Guandaru et al. (2025), Aura et al. (2016), Ndibaru



and Ongwae (2023), and Dadu et al. (2024) collectively demonstrate that budgeting systems, financial accountability mechanisms, financial monitoring systems, internal controls, strategic planning frameworks, and transparent financial governance structures significantly strengthen sustainability outcomes.

The literature reveals that organisations with effective budgeting systems, financial reporting mechanisms, monitoring systems, and accountability structures demonstrate stronger institutional continuity, more efficient resource allocation, and greater resilience after donor withdrawal. Financial governance, therefore, functions not merely as an administrative requirement but as a strategic sustainability mechanism supporting accountability, trust, organisational legitimacy, and institutional continuity.

Resource mobilisation and income diversification further emerge as critical determinants of sustainability. Syanya (2018), Lungo et al. (2017), Wambura (2023), and Briones (2024) collectively demonstrate that organisations relying on diversified financing systems exhibit greater resilience than institutions dependent on single-donor streams. Diversified income systems strengthen institutional autonomy, reduce vulnerability to funding shocks, and improve operational continuity. This evidence is corroborated by Dadu et al. (2024), whose study of NGO financial sustainability in Kenya identifies grant diversification, stringent grant management protocols, and participatory financial planning as the strongest predictors of post-donor operational continuity – findings with direct implications for CWRC financial sustainability strategies.

Within CWRCs, these findings imply the need for deliberate transitions from donor-dependent financial models to diversified systems that involve social enterprises, income-generating activities, local fundraising, and community-supported financing arrangements.

Human resource capacity also emerges as a decisive determinant of sustainability. Ndombi et al. (2020), Gatumi et al. (2022), Komujuni et al. (2013), Wambura (2023), and Briones (2024) collectively demonstrate that sustainability depends significantly on technical competence, leadership development, institutional learning, staff commitment, governance formation, communication systems, and organisational capability development. More recently, Guandaru et al. (2025) confirm that organisations whose personnel possess strong budgeting and financial management competencies demonstrate significantly greater institutional sustainability, underscoring the inextricable link between human capital investment and the effectiveness of financial governance.

Organisations capable of sustaining initiatives invest continuously in training, mentorship, financial literacy, leadership development, and institutional learning. Human resource capacity strengthens adaptability, accountability, operational efficiency, and organisational continuity. A critical insight emerging from the literature is the interdependence between financial management systems and human resource capacity. Financial systems become ineffective when personnel lack technical competencies, financial discipline, accountability, commitment, or managerial expertise. Conversely, technically competent personnel operating within weak financial governance structures experience institutional inefficiencies, accountability challenges, and resource management difficulties.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems constitute a further critical sustainability mechanism. Wangari and Minja (2021), Syanya (2018), and Ndibaru and Ongwae (2023) demonstrate that effective M&E systems strengthen accountability, adaptive management, and evidence-based decision-making. Odhiambo et al. (2025) further establish that systematic monitoring of organisational capacity outcomes is directly associated with improved project performance and institutional learning, reinforcing the case for embedding M&E as a structural governance priority rather than a donor compliance requirement. The literature additionally emphasises participatory governance,



stakeholder engagement, and collaborative partnerships. Oino et al. (2015), Mwangi and Mutuku (2025), Simon and Moturi (2025), and Jalali (2013) demonstrate that sustainability is strengthened through participatory management, promoting ownership, accountability, relational trust, and community engagement.

Collectively, sustainability among CWRCs emerges from the interplay among financial governance, human resource development, participatory management, strategic planning, organisational learning, monitoring frameworks, and diversified financing strategies. Sustainability, therefore, emerges as a holistic institutional capability requiring the integration of financial accountability, leadership competence, technical capacity, participatory governance, organisational learning, and adaptive resilience.

Cross-Thematic Discussion

The integrated literature demonstrates that post-donor sustainability among Catholic Women Religious Congregations is not a singular organisational outcome, but an emergent institutional capability produced through the interaction between multiple organisational systems. Sustainability consistently emerges as multidimensional, adaptive, relational, participatory, and context-dependent. Across all three thematic areas, participation emerges as the foundational sustainability principle: it strengthens ownership in project design, accountability in governance, and institutional continuity in financial and human resource systems. Sustainability is strengthened when all stakeholders function as active participants rather than passive recipients of donor-funded interventions.

Leadership and governance systems emerge as the institutional architecture sustaining all other organisational practices. Effective leadership enables strategic direction, adaptive decision-making, innovation, and resilience-building, while governance institutionalises accountability, participation, coordination, and mission continuity. Sustainability is also deeply influenced by organisational capability development. Human resource capacity strengthens technical competence, financial accountability, and adaptive management, while financial systems strengthen sustainability through accountability structures, strategic planning, and diversified financing.

A key insight is that sustainability cannot be reduced to financial continuity alone. Organisations frequently fail to sustain projects not because of limited funding but because of weak institutional systems, inadequate governance, insufficient stakeholder ownership, and limited human resource capacity. Organisational learning and institutional resilience are critical cross-cutting mechanisms. Adaptive institutions capable of learning, innovating, and responding to uncertainty demonstrate greater sustainability capacity than rigid institutions dependent on external donor systems.

Mission orientation and moral legitimacy are distinctive dimensions of sustainability within CWRCs. Unlike secular organisations, CWRCs derive legitimacy from spiritual commitment, a social justice orientation, and long-term community engagement, which can strengthen community trust, stakeholder commitment, and institutional resilience. Spiritual legitimacy alone, however, is insufficient without strong organisational systems. Mission commitment must be supported by effective governance, strategic financial management, organisational learning, and institutional capacity development.

Overall, post-donor sustainability among CWRCs is an emergent institutional capability produced through the interaction between participatory project design, adaptive leadership, collaborative governance, strategic financial management, human resource development, organisational learning, and mission-oriented accountability structures.



Table 1: Matrix of Key Findings from the Systematic Review on Post-Donor Sustainability of Development Initiatives among Catholic Women Religious Congregations (2010–2025)

Review Objective	Key Theme	Summary of Findings	Representative Sources
1. Project Design Practices and Sustainability	Participatory project design	Sustainability is strongly enhanced when beneficiaries and CWRC members are actively involved in needs assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation, leading to ownership and continuity after donor exit.	Aga et al. (2017); Muniu et al. (2017); Bikuba & Kayunze (2019); Yang (2016)
	Stakeholder engagement	Multi-stakeholder involvement strengthens accountability, alignment of priorities, trust, and long-term continuation of development initiatives.	Silvius & Schipper (2019); Lisanza et al. (2023); Pauna et al. (2023)
	Project planning systems	Structured planning tools (logframes, PCM, risk management systems) improve coordination, monitoring, and sustainability outcomes.	Chow et al. (2021); Yu et al. (2018); Golini et al. (2017)
	Knowledge management & learning	Institutional learning and knowledge sharing reduce dependency on donors and strengthen continuity of programs.	Bernat et al. (2023); Aga et al. (2017)
2. Leadership and Governance Practices	Adaptive leadership	Leadership that is flexible, mission-driven, and responsive to contextual change enhances institutional resilience and sustainability.	Ma et al. (2023); Wakahiu & Salvaterra (2012); Almutairi et al. (2020)
	Participatory governance	Inclusive decision-making systems strengthen accountability, legitimacy, and ownership within CWRC development initiatives.	Forino et al. (2017); Meyer & Auriacombe (2019); Summers et al. (2017)
	Ethical and faith-based leadership	Moral legitimacy, servant leadership, and mission orientation strengthen trust, cohesion, and long-term commitment.	Rivera (2018); Koehrsen & Burchardt (2024); Deneulin (2021)
	Institutional learning & mentorship	Leadership continuity through mentoring and internal capacity building ensures sustainability beyond individual leaders.	Dunning (2020); Wakahiu & Salvaterra (2012)
3. Financial Management Systems and Human Resource Capacity	Financial accountability systems	Strong budgeting, auditing, and internal control systems significantly enhance sustainability of donor-funded initiatives.	Ndibaru & Ongwae (2023); Guandaru et al. (2025); Aura et al. (2016)
	Resource mobilisation & diversification	Financial sustainability improves when organisations diversify funding sources beyond donor dependence.	Hailey & Salway (2016); Syanya (2018); Briones (2024)
	Human resource capacity development	Staff training, leadership formation, and technical skills development strengthen institutional continuity.	Ndombi et al. (2020); Gatumi et al. (2022); Komujuni et al. (2013)
	Monitoring & evaluation systems	M&E systems improve transparency, accountability, adaptive management, and evidence-based decision-making.	Syanya (2018); Wangari & Minja (2021); Odhiambo et al. (2025)
4. Cross-Cutting Sustainability Drivers	Institutional resilience	Sustainability emerges from the ability of CWRCs to adapt, absorb shocks, and maintain continuity of services.	Scheirer & Dearing (2011); Stirman et al. (2012); Hailey & Salway (2016)



Review Objective	Key Theme	Summary of Findings	Representative Sources
	Stakeholder collaboration	Collaboration with communities, donors, and partners enhances legitimacy and sustainability outcomes.	Freeman (1984); Kamau et al. (2021); Olivier et al. (2015)
	Mission orientation & spiritual legitimacy	Religious mission and Catholic social teaching strengthen commitment, trust, and long-term service continuity.	Wakahiu & Salvaterra (2012); Olivier et al. (2015)
	Organisational integration	Sustainability depends on the interaction of leadership, finance, HR, governance, and project systems rather than any single factor.	Banks et al. (2015); Scheirer & Dearing (2011); Almutairi et al. (2020)

Note. CWRCs = Catholic Women Religious Congregations. Sources represent key studies cited across the thematic areas of the systematic review (2010–2025). The table presents a synthesis matrix; it is not exhaustive of all 40 included studies.

Critical Appraisal of Contradictions and Divergences in the Literature

While the integrated literature demonstrates strong convergence regarding organisational determinants of sustainability, important divergences and contradictions also emerge across the reviewed studies. A central tension exists between participation-centric and systems-centric perspectives on sustainability. Participation-oriented scholars such as Aga et al. (2017), Muniu et al. (2017), and Yang (2016) emphasise community ownership and beneficiary involvement as primary sustainability drivers, while systems-oriented scholars such as Chow et al. (2021), Guandaru et al. (2025), and Ndibaru and Ongwae (2023) foreground financial governance, institutional controls, and management frameworks. The evidence suggests that neither perspective alone is sufficient: participatory approaches without institutional systems frequently lead to weak accountability and resource mismanagement, while robust financial systems without participatory ownership produce programme collapse after donor exit.

A second divergence concerns the role of external partnerships in sustainability. Syanya (2018) and Lungo et al. (2017) argue that diversified external partnerships strengthen resource mobilisation and institutional learning. However, Jalali (2013) and Banks et al. (2015) caution that dependency on external donors and international partners can undermine grassroots mobilisation, institutional autonomy, and intrinsic sustainability capacity. This tension implies that sustainability strategies must carefully balance external resource mobilisation with internal institutional capacity-building to avoid perpetuating dependency while pursuing diversification.

A third divergence concerns the role of religious identity in sustainability. Marshall et al. (2021), Koehrsen and Burchardt (2024), and Wakahiu and Salvaterra (2012) position religious identity and moral legitimacy as sustainability assets, arguing that mission-driven governance strengthens commitment, trust, and institutional resilience. In contrast, Clarke and Ware (2015) caution that religious identity can also restrict organisational adaptability, limit donor engagement, and constrain professionalisation pathways. These divergent perspectives suggest that the sustainability value of religious identity within Catholic Women Religious Congregations is contextually contingent and requires further empirical investigation.

Theoretical Integration

The reviewed literature reflects significant theoretical convergence regarding the organisational determinants of sustainability. Multiple theoretical perspectives collectively explain how



organisational practices influence post-donor sustainability among development-oriented institutions (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Hailey & Salway, 2016).

Resource Dependency Theory is prominent in the literature, with studies emphasising donor dependence, diversified financing systems, resource mobilisation, and organisational autonomy. The theory explains that organisations dependent on external donors remain vulnerable to funding shocks and sustainability instability unless they strategically diversify resources and strengthen internal institutional systems (Banks et al., 2015; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

Resource-Based View (RBV) theory further contributes to the understanding of sustainability by conceptualising organisational competencies, leadership capability, institutional knowledge, governance systems, technical expertise, and human resource capacity as strategic institutional assets that support long-term performance and organisational continuity (Barney, 1991; Almutairi et al., 2020). Institutional Theory additionally explains how governance structures, accountability systems, legitimacy mechanisms, organisational norms, and institutional culture shape sustainability trajectories. Within Catholic Women Religious Congregations, institutional legitimacy emerges not only through formal governance systems but also through mission orientation, communal identity, spiritual commitment, and moral authority (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Wakahiu & Salvaterra, 2012).

Stakeholder Theory further reinforces the importance of participation, collaboration, accountability, and shared ownership in sustaining development outcomes. Sustainability is strengthened where communities, beneficiaries, institutional partners, and stakeholders participate meaningfully within planning, governance, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation systems (Freeman, 1984; Kamau et al., 2021). Social Capital Theory similarly contributes to the understanding of sustainability by emphasising trust, relational networks, communal accountability, cooperation, and collaborative engagement as critical institutional resources that strengthen resilience and continuity (Putnam, 2000; Olivier et al., 2015). Complexity Theory and resilience-oriented frameworks also explain sustainability as a dynamic and adaptive process that emerges through organisational learning, institutional flexibility, innovation, coordination, and adaptive responses to uncertainty (Stirman et al., 2012; Hailey & Salway, 2016). Collectively, these theoretical perspectives position sustainability as a multidimensional institutional capability that emerges from the interaction among organisational systems, governance structures, strategic resources, stakeholder participation, and adaptive learning systems (Scheirer & Dearing, 2011; Almutairi et al., 2020).

Limitations of the Review

This review acknowledges several methodological limitations. It is confined to English-language literature published between 2010 and 2025, potentially excluding relevant scholarship in French, Portuguese, or African indigenous languages. It relies on published peer-reviewed literature and may not capture practitioner knowledge or institutional reports from religious congregations. The absence of primary data means findings reflect synthesised interpretations rather than direct empirical evidence from CWRC contexts. The predominance of secular NGO and generalised FBO studies limits direct transferability. Finally, the researcher's positioning as a scholar familiar with the Catholic institutional context may have introduced interpretive tendencies in the thematic synthesis. These limitations notwithstanding, the review provides a rigorous foundation for understanding organisational determinants of post-donor sustainability.

Conclusion

This systematic literature review examined how organisational practices influence the post-donor sustainability of development initiatives implemented by CWRCs. The integrated literature demonstrates that sustainability depends not on donor funding continuity but on the institutional



capacity to establish adaptive leadership, participatory governance, strategic financial management, human resource development, organisational learning, and collaborative accountability frameworks.

The review demonstrates that project design strengthens sustainability through participation, structured planning, stakeholder engagement, and knowledge management. Leadership and governance shape sustainability through adaptive decision-making, mentorship, ethical leadership, and accountability. Financial management and human resource capacity strengthen sustainability through budgeting, diversified financing, monitoring frameworks, and technical competence.

The review further reveals that sustainability is multidimensional, relational, adaptive, and context-dependent. Sustainability emerges through the interaction between institutional systems, organisational capabilities, stakeholder relationships, mission orientation, and participatory governance structures.

Importantly, the review identifies a significant contextual gap due to the limited focus on CWRCs as distinct faith-based institutional actors. It contributes to scholarship by positioning post-donor sustainability among CWRCs as an emergent institutional capability produced through the interaction between project design, leadership, financial management, human resource capacity, organisational learning, and mission-driven accountability.

Overall, sustainable development initiatives within Catholic Women Religious Congregations are most likely to emerge where congregations intentionally strengthen institutional systems, diversify financing strategies, invest in leadership and technical formation, institutionalise participatory governance structures, cultivate organisational learning, and embed sustainability mechanisms within mission-oriented organisational cultures capable of sustaining development interventions beyond donor dependence.

Key Contributions of this Review:

- The first systematic literature review examining how organisational practices influence post-donor sustainability specifically within CWRCs.
- Sustainability in CWRCs is multidimensional, emerging from the interaction of governance, leadership, accountability, and financial management – not any single factor.
- Identifies a critical literature gap on CWRCs as development actors, positioning their religious identity and communal governance as both assets and contingencies needing further research.

Implications for Theory, Practice, and Policy:

- Constructs a multi-theoretical framework drawing on Resource Dependency, Resource-Based View, Institutional, Stakeholder, Social Capital, and Complexity theories.
- Calls for deliberate capacity-building within CWRCs: diversified financing, leadership succession, participatory governance, and M&E frameworks.
- Urges donors, policymakers, and congregational leaders to embed sustainability principles – local ownership, income diversification, institutional learning – into project design from inception, not as an afterthought.

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