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Tools for Sustainability

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Abstract

Sustainability of programs, especially those supported by time-limited funding, is a common dilemma. This paper gives a context for a broad understanding of sustainability and describes a sustainability planning process. This four-pronged approach to sustainability goes beyond finding replacement dollars to include a focus on policy change, institutionalization of programs, and community buy-in. Worksheets and tools are provided for these processes.

Introduction

Many years ago, in the early days of my consulting to non-profits and communities, I encountered the issue of sustainability. It would usually arise when I was invited to help a community or an agency address the sustainability of a specific grant project that had been funded by either a foundation or government. The request almost always was in the last months of a multiple year project, and the group would ask “For the last four years we have had \$125,000 per year to do our program. It will end in four months. Can you help us develop a sustainability plan to continue all our work?” In my energetic and naïve youth, I would dive right into the question, only to discover that they really had not thought very broadly about sustainability, nor was there enough time left to achieve the miracle they were looking for.

So I began to think more about sustainability. The issue of sustainability of programs brings up many critical issues in community program development: Why are we here in the first place? Have we succeeded? Who cares? Should we continue? And if so – how?

Surely with a recurring issue like this – one that emerges every time project funding runs out for every foundation and government time-limited funded project – there must be some colleagues out there who have written about this topic. How could we have ignored this phenomenon? But it seems that we had. The literature I found was pretty limited, and almost all of it focuses on fund raising to find the financial resources to replace the disappearing funds. As someone who mainly was working in low income local communities, I knew that these poor communities did not have the funds to pick up the cost of even the most successful pilot program that was coming to the end of its external funding cycle. So what were to do? How could I assist communities that

requested help around program sustainability, and better still, how could we re-think sustainability so that we could plan for it?

My first question was "What do you mean by sustainability?" Too often the answer is finding replacement dollars for a time-limited grant or funding source that has dried up or is on the brink of drying up. Understanding sustainability on a deeper level can help clarify the vision of the program or collaborative and help it achieve this end state.

In the area of coalition building where I do most of my work, sustainability is a constant headache. No one seems to fund coalitions for the long term. But sustainability was just as often a problem for nonprofit agencies doing innovative programming quite separate from a coalition. The issue of sustainability seemed to pervade the whole system of the delivery of community development and health and human services. It is especially crucial in areas of developing innovative solutions to community problems.

In this process I soon discovered a series of myths about sustainability that are best dispelled at the start.

Myth One: Everything we do must be sustained.

It is rare to find a project that has evaluated and honed its efforts so well that every part of its program is known to be effectively helping the program reach its goal. In most programs, we become attached to all of our staff, all our sub-contracts, our overhead percentages and our programmatic efforts. However if we ask the question, "What efforts, staffing, funding, etc. must be maintained to guarantee the same impact?", we may come up with different answers. Of course, the key premise here is that we have some form of evaluative data to help us sort out what has been working and what has not. Once we decide that everything does NOT have to be sustained, we then need a process of evaluating and sifting.

Myth Two: The solution is to find an equal amount of replacement funding.

The exciting part of the sustainability process is exploring ways of sustaining the effort other than or in addition to finding replacement dollars. We can ask "Who else in the community might step in to adopt and institutionalize some of our programs?" We can ask "How can we change community norms, capacity and buy-in so that the community can be the long-term carriers of the solution?" We can wonder about the long-term impact of policy changes as a strategy for sustaining the changes we wish to see in the community.

Myth Three: Sustainability is best thought about in the waning months of your funding.

Clearly we urge all community programs and collaborations to think about sustainability throughout their development. Planning for sustainability is a fascinating process when it is tied

to visioning and strategic planning processes. It allows us to imagine how others can not only support our efforts but also be the long-term carriers of the solutions. It may mean thinking of ourselves as catalysts as opposed to program deliverers.

Myth Four: Communities have the money to fund and sustain all pilot projects that show themselves to be effective and of value to the community.

The basic concept of sustainability of pilot projects seems deeply flawed from an economic viewpoint. Pilot projects are initiated by institutions with ample resources – foundations, or federal or state government. These large institutions give money to local institutions with the assumption that if successful, these pilot programs will be sustained by local funding. Programmatically this makes sense – if the program has shown its worth to the local community that community should be invested in its survival. But economically it does not add up. Pilot programs often occur in low income, disadvantaged communities. Where in these communities are there funds to pick up the cost of successful pilot projects?

In order to make progress with sustainability, we must ask these core questions:

- What are we trying to sustain and why?
- What is a variety of approaches to sustaining our efforts that include but go beyond finding replacement funds?
- How do we develop a sustainability planning process?

The sustainability planning process below attempts to bring some order to our thinking about sustainability and suggests a planning process for sustainability that is not unlike other strategic planning processes that non-profits often use.

A Sustainability Planning Process with Tools

The sustainability planning process that I use now with non profits involves four steps (see [Tool 1](#) for an overview).

I. The Building Blocks: Who are you now as a coalition?

The sustainability process starts with the existing building blocks of the program or coalition - its mission, goals, objectives, activities, skills, and any evaluation data. The program clarifies what needs its programs are addressing and how **you** know that these are **real** needs. This is information that we generally assume already exists, but if not, it needs to be developed first.

II. Where do you want to get to? Develop a shared understanding of sustainability.

The next phase in sustainability planning finds us asking the questions: Where do you want to get to? What are your visions, goals and anticipated outcomes? What do you wish your legacy to be? What is the ultimate goal, or the end you have in mind? What immediate and intermediate changes do you expect? What resources do you need?

Again, many programs may have a program vision already. Otherwise you may need to lead the group through a visioning exercise. See [Tool 2](#) for an example.

III. What do you want to sustain? Assess what you are doing now.

What are your activities now and what do you want to sustain? In our work with communities, we start the process of examining sustainability by asking them to think about what they want to sustain. Based on their defined vision and legacy, we then ask, how would the future look if you achieved sustainability? If it is violence prevention collaborative, we ask, “What would your community look like if it was peaceful?” If it is an environmental justice coalition, the question is, “What would the community look like if the environmental and justice issues were resolved?”

This process requires a careful look at all aspects of the coalition's efforts: How does it spend its time? Spend its money? And so on. Tool #3 is a good starting point for this discussion.

Sustainability outcomes are divided into two categories: external ([Worksheet 3.1](#)) and internal ([Worksheet 3.2](#)) outcomes.

External outcomes are those we hope to leave in the community. If our goal is to create community change as represented by changes in policies, practices and programs, then these are the first of the long-lasting outcomes we can look to sustain. Changes in community norms and the maintenance of relationships and partnerships formed through the collaborative are other external outcomes to sustain.

Internal outcomes are more closely related to sustaining the specific functions that the program or collaborative has performed in the community. These roles include being a monitor of successes, a catalyst for change, a convener, and a collaborative problem solver. Even here, it is not necessarily assumed that the program or collaborative itself must be sustained, if there are others in the community who can maintain these critical collaborative functions.

For coalitions, we do not ask whether the collaborative itself needs to be maintained until we have asked all the other questions first. Admittedly, this is a tough test for a collaborative, but our experience is that using this instrument allows a collaborative to become much clearer about their present and future role in their community.

After you have inventoried your present program components, you then need to decide on the criteria for deciding which components to sustain. . A sample list might include reviewing each program with the following questions:

- a. Is the program or coalition having an impact? Do results justify continuing?
- b. Do the benefits justify the costs?
- c. Is there still a need?
- d. Is community support strong?
- e. Is there potential funding for sustainability?

Based on the answers to the above questions, you can then prioritize the following: Which activities do you need to continue? Which skills do you need to develop? And ultimately, what is the future of your collaborative?

IV. How are we getting there? Consider four approaches to sustainability

Once you are clear on what you want to sustain, the next question is "How will you go about reaching sustainability?" When money for so many worthy causes dries up, we need to think about sustaining our most successful collaborative solutions in new ways. In particular, we need to go beyond the single focus on funding. We have found that by increasing the number of approaches used to achieve sustainability, the greater the chances of not only reaching our goals but doing it in a richer and fuller manner. With multiple approaches, we can begin to think of sustainability as being more than just maintaining funding and staff. We can create an understanding of sustainability that goes beyond just funding by also including: 1) institutionalization and adoption of programs, 2) policy change and 3) community ownership and community norm change. By using all of these approaches, you can expand both the impact and longevity of your program. (See [Tool 4.](#))

Approach #1: Institutionalization and Adoption of Programs and Changes

Definition: Institutionalization involves creating programs so that they can be adopted and owned by other institutions in the community. For example, a violence prevention program may develop a Second Step violence prevention curriculum with the intent of shifting over time its management to the school's health educators or the staff at the local YMCA. Using this approach, your coalition plans and supports programs so that each could be incorporated into existing community institutions. [Worksheet 4.1](#) provides a tool that can help your coalition think through options for institutionalization.

The coalition's role: When the major strategy for sustainability is institutionalization or adoption, then the role of the coalition is that of a catalyst. That is, rather than creating a program with the intent of keeping the program as a part of your coalition forever, programs are created with the INTENT of spinning them off. This requires the coalition to be skilled in the fine art of being a catalyst rather than a program developer. It also means being willing to give up control of programs after you start them. The coalition creates innovations and changes that can be adopted and institutionalized in other community organizations. Clearly, involving other institutions as early as possible increases your possibility for success.

Questions that you might ask yourself about your program when considering Institutionalization include:

- *What programs could be institutionalized?*
- *Which organizations in the community could adopt them?*
- *How will you engage these institutions?*
- *What are the long term implications for the coalition in spinning off its programs?*

Approach #2: Policy Change

Definition: Another effective way to sustain your collaborative solutions is through changes in rules, regulations and laws of the community. By employing advocacy and social change mechanisms that permanently alter policies, practices and procedures within a community, your program can continue to fulfill its mission over time. County wide ordinances that ban smoking in restaurants are an example of sustaining your efforts through policy change. Coalitions can target large policies that emerge from government at various levels (e.g. national, state, county, municipal) or more local policies (e.g. school policies on how drug incidents are handled, or written memos of understanding between police departments and human service providers).

The coalition's role: When policy change is the sustainability strategy, the collaborative's role involves being an advocate for policy change and training the community and its constituents to become more effective at advocating for policy change. [Worksheet 4.2](#) provides a tool that can help your coalition think through options for changes in organizational and government policies.

Questions that you might ask when considering Policy Change include:

- *What policies will get you to your goals?*
 - *Broad policies? (i.e. Legislation, funding policies, regulations, ordinances at the national, state, county or municipal level)*

- *Local policies? (i.e. Protocols, Memos of Understanding, rules, and practices at the local or institutional level)*
- *What must be done to achieve these policy changes?*
- *What will you do to build the capacity of your community to advocate for policy change? Can you train residents in policy change and advocacy?*

Approach # 3 : Building Community Ownership, Capacity, and Norms

Definition: In this third approach to sustainability, the community claims ownership for the coalition's activities. When your work is seen as part of a community development and empowerment strategy, then the goal is to mobilize community residents who will sustain the community efforts. For example, a local citizen group can take responsibility for organizing the annual Valentine's Day Vigil Against Domestic Violence.

Another variation of this strategy is to change community norms. For example, by providing a comprehensive training program to all junior high school students on partner abuse, a program can modify the gender roles, attitudes and behaviors within that junior high school. Critical to this approach is engaging the community early in the process so that they will own and lead the collaborative's activities.

The coalition's role: When a coalition uses community ownership and changing community norms as key sustainability strategies, then the role becomes that of community capacity building. Projects focus on fostering the strengths and capacities of the community, and developing and enhancing resident leaders are often central to these efforts. [Worksheet 4.3](#) provides a tool that can help your coalition think through options for transferring ownership and changing community norms.

Questions that you might ask when considering Building Community Ownership, Capacity, and Norms include:

- *How have you assessed the assets of the community?*
- *What community norms do you wish to change?*
- *Who in the community can influence these norms? How do you engage them?*
- *What parts of the coalition's activities would you like to have owned by the community?*
- *How have you mobilized residents who are committed to sustaining activities to improve the community?*
- *How can you engage and change the media?*

Approach #4: Finding Resources to Sustain the Effort

Definition: In this final approach, sustaining the coalition means finding additional sources of revenue to support your ongoing activities. This is the definition of sustainability that is most commonly used. The rationale is simple – finding new funding sources allows the successful coalition to continue its success. The advantage of this approach is that the program can continue to fund staff and programs it has created. The peril is that finding new dollars is often seen as the only approach and does not allow for other strategies that might involve more community ownership of both the issue and the long-term solution. Obviously, the severe shortage of resources for many excellent programs also suggests that it is best to not put all your hopes on finding new funding.

[Worksheet 4.4](#) provides a tool that can help your coalition think through finding resources to sustain the effort. Questions that you might ask when Finding Resources include:

- *What resources are needed to sustain your collaborative activities?*
- *Which activities can be continued with hard dollar resources?*
- *Where will you find these dollars?*
- *Which of the following sources might you tap?*

For more details on Finding Resources see The Community Tool Box:

http://ctb.ku.edu/tools/en/sub_section_main-1330.htm

Conclusion

The four-pronged sustainability approach presented here has been used successfully by a number of collaboratives. One notable example is The Sierra Foundation in California, who adopted this approach in their major, multi-site initiative *Community Partnerships for Healthy Children*. From the start in year one, they required their grantees to report their progress on sustainability in each of the four areas presented here. A variation of the instrument they used for their grantees is available in Wolff (2003) and also on-line (<http://www.tomwolff.com/resources/backer.pdf>).

The lesson that the Sierra Foundation learned was that urging their grantees to think about sustainability from the start and to think in a broad manner increased the success of these programs to actually have a ‘life after funding.’

My experience with these sustainability tools is similar to that of the Sierra Foundation. Helping programs and coalitions understand sustainability in this four-pronged manner allows them to feel more optimistic about achieving sustainability success and to actually be more successful.

Tool 1: The Four Steps of the Sustainability Planning Process

I. Start with the building blocks: Who are we now as a coalition?

- A. What are our foundations: our mission, goals, objectives, activities, skills?
- B. What needs are we addressing? How do we know that these are real needs?
- C. What evaluation data are available?

II. Develop a shared understanding of sustainability: Where do we want to get to?

- A. What is our vision? What do we wish our legacy to be? (See Tool 2: Visioning.)
- B. What is the ultimate goal, or the end we have in mind?
- C. What immediate and intermediate changes do we expect?
- D. What resources do we need?

III. Assess what we are doing now: What do we want to sustain?

- A. Inventory existing program components. How does the collaborative spend its time and its money? What are the desired outcomes?
 - a. What are our activities?
 - b. What are the external outcomes that we hope to leave in the community -- changes in community norms and relationships, in policies, practices, and programs? See Tool 3.1.
 - c. What are the roles that the collaborative serves in the community, now and in the future -- a monitor of successes, a catalyst for change, a convener, a collaborative problem solver? See Tool 3.2.
 - d. Does the collaborative itself need to be maintained? Are there others in our community who can fill these roles?
- B. Decide on criteria for deciding which program components are worth sustaining. Example criteria include:
 - i. Is this component having an impact? Do results justify continuing?
 - ii. What are the costs and benefits?
 - iii. Is there still a need?
 - iv. Is there strong community support?
 - v. Are there sources of potential funding?
- C. Prioritize: Which activities should be continued? Should the collaborative continue to be responsible for these activities, or can they be maintained by others?
 - a. Which skills do we need to develop?
 - b. What is the future of our collaborative?

IV. How will we get there? Consider these four approaches to sustainability.

- A. Institutionalization and adoption of programs and changes (See Tool 4.1.)
- B. Policy change (See Tool 4.2)
- C. Building community ownership, capacity, and norms (See Tool 4.3.)
- D. Finding resources to sustain the effort (See Tool 4.4.)

Tool 2: Visioning: A Tool for Creating a Common Vision

Instructions: Think about the scenario below and discuss with your partners. Record your answer on newsprint or a regular sized worksheet.

It is two years from now and a local newspaper has decided to do a feature story on your school. The story will focus on the changes and accomplishments that have occurred in the school over the last two years. The reporters have interviewed you and many other school and community members about the history, problems and issues in the school, how the school and community came together, and the changes the school and community has undergone. The focus of the article will be on both the accomplishments and changes in the way the school functions and is structured.

What does the article say?

Think about:

Any changes that have taken place in the school and community

As a group do the following:

- A. Write a headline for the article
- B. Note the specific priorities that emerge for the next two years
- C. Be prepared to report out to the whole group

Remember: This is your VISION of what could happen if the initiative were organized and working together for common goals and changes. Be daring!

Tool 3: Sustainability Outcomes Worksheets

Worksheet 3.1: External/Community Outcomes

For each item ask:	What parts of your effort need to be sustained?	How are you planning to sustain this component?
Programs		
Policies		
Practices		
Funding policies		
Changes in community norms		
System changes on the social determinants of the problems being addressed		
Relationships sustained?		
Partnerships sustained?		

Worksheet 3.2: Internal Outcomes: Roles Filled by the Coalition

For each item ask:	What parts of your effort need to be sustained?	How are you planning to sustain this component?
Role as gatherer/convener		
Capacity to be a catalyst for change		
Capacity to provide ongoing monitoring of the sustainability process		
Capacity to collaboratively solve emerging problems?		
Maintain the program/coalition structure, staffing and funding		

**Worksheet 4.2: Sustainability Approach #2:
Policy Change**

Strategy for Achieving Your Legacy:	Policy Change
Definition	Rules, regulations, laws, policies, and practices at the organizational and community levels are permanently altered
Why <i>Policy Change</i> is essential:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By employing advocacy and social change mechanisms that permanently alter polices, practices and procedures within a community, your program can continue to fulfill its mission over time.
How important is this strategy for achieving your legacy?	<p align="center">Not at all 2 3 4 Extremely</p> <p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
List examples of how you are currently engaging the community to change organizational and public policies:	
List ideas for how you might engage the community in the future to effectively to change organizational and public policies:	

**Worksheet 4.3: Sustainability Approach #3:
Building Community Ownership, Capacity, and Norms**

Strategy for Achieving Your Legacy:	Building Community Ownership, Capacity, and Norms
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-building and empowerment strategies are utilized to mobilize the community to sustain specific activities and change community norms around violence
Why <i>Community Ownership</i> is essential:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informed and engaged residents and stakeholders adopt new attitudes and behaviors that support the legacy • Informed and engaged residents and stakeholder can mobilize to challenge media messages and images that are harmful to the legacy • Organized residents can take ownership of specific programmatic activities or events
How important is this strategy for achieving your legacy?	<p>Not at all Extremely</p> <p align="center">1 2 3 4 5</p>
List examples of how you are currently engaging the community to build ownership and change norms:	
List ideas for how you might engage the community in the future to effectively build ownership and change norms:	

Worksheet 4.4: Sustainability Approach #4

Finding Resources to Sustain the Effort

Strategy for Achieving Your Legacy:	Finding Resources to Sustain the Effort
Definition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional or continuous resources are generated to support ongoing activities
Why <i>Finding Resources</i> is essential:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The rationale is simple – finding new funding sources allows the successful coalition to continue its success. • The advantage of this approach is that the program can continue to fund staff and programs it has created
How important is this strategy for achieving your legacy?	<p>Not at all Extremely</p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 2 3 4 5</p>
List examples of how you are currently engaging the community to Find Resources:	
List ideas for how you might engage the community in the future to effectively generate resources:	

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