



# THE DYNAMICS OF SUSTAINABILITY

## INTRODUCTION

Valuable programs and collaborations can be sustained long-term with foresight and effective planning. The goal of this primer is to provide a head start on planning for sustainability for organizations and collaborations. The primer contains information and opportunities for reflection and discussion that are appropriate for consideration at the initial stage of program development.

A broad range of factors that influence sustainability can be grouped into the following categories: WHO, WHAT, WHY, HOW. These are the dynamics over which you and your partners have influence. A description of each dynamic is provided along with a list of characteristics that were found to correspond with favorable outcomes regarding sustainability. This is not to indicate that all partners must demonstrate all characteristics to ensure sustainability. Rather, it appears that when these characteristics are present among the partners, the likelihood of sustainability increases.

### THE WHO DYNAMIC

The WHO dynamic is related primarily to leadership – style, mindset, influence, and relationships. Having passionate leaders with a strategic mindset appears to have a favorable impact on sustainability. This contributes to the ability to get the “right” partners to the table and to establish rapport and a shared sense of responsibility among all parties required to implement a program effectively. At the most fundamental level, the WHO dynamic involves selecting the partners instrumental to program success. In this regard, collaborators ideally represent the operative agencies and organizations, have leverage to effect the change(s) needed, and are in a position to make commitments of time and resources to implement and sustain the efforts of the consortium or network over time. Strategic leaders appear better able to put day-to-day interactions and decisions into a broader context, seeing the relationship between short-term activities and their ultimate impact on long-term success.

In other circumstances, however, the WHO dynamic may undermine sustainability. In many cases, conflict and/or ineffective communication prevent alignment around a common vision and significantly limit the likelihood for programmatic or organizational success. Further, a perceived need for control may isolate a lead agency, resulting in fewer options for sharing the resources as well as the programmatic responsibilities among key partners once a grant period has ended.



Those agencies or collaborations for which the WHO dynamic is a positive driving force for their programs demonstrate the following characteristics:

- They engage people who are passionate, collaborative, and able to inspire and motivate others.
- They adopt a strategic mindset. They are able to put day-to-day interactions and decisions into a broader context and take into account the impact of short-term activities and their ultimate impact on long-term success.
- Partner agencies are represented by individuals who are in a position to make commitments of time and resources on behalf of their agencies.
- They take the time to understand partners’ agendas and concerns on an ongoing basis. They are intentional about working through conflict, control, and competitive challenges because they recognize that both trust and collaboration among partners are critical to long-term success.



- They are aware of changing needs and circumstances that impact programs and organizations. Programs and relationships evolve to remain relevant and viable.
- There is a culture among partners in which open, honest communication with and among partners is encouraged.
- They work with partners in a meaningful way, sharing responsibility for outcomes. They recognize that simply “reporting out” to collaborators on a regular basis is not sufficient to position the program for sustainability, because this allows partners to assume a passive role, not feeling accountable for long-term impact.
- They are proactive in advocating for what the community’s needs and in communicating the accomplishments of the program and the collaboration.

## THE WHAT DYNAMIC

The WHAT dynamic is related to the substance of the program — its relevance, practicality and value — and the impact of program selection and design on sustainability. The relative “favorability” of this influence is determined by the extent to which programs or activities are aligned with any or all of the following three factors: community need, the partners’ ability to address the need over the long term, and the real or perceived value created by the program. Those who base program design on a deep, shared understanding of the problem to be addressed often exhibit a more durable commitment to sustaining the intervention.

It is important to ensure that the WHAT, meaning the program itself, is practical. An effective programmatic approach is based on understanding the available leverage to create change, the capacity available to implement, and the likely result of the improvements sought. Moreover, addressing a given problem on a fundamental, rather than a superficial, level appears to result in a more sustainable impact over time.

In the most favorable circumstances, root causes of a problem are taken into account when working to address a given community issue from multiple vantage points simultaneously, (i.e., working with local providers, the public, payers, and/or policy makers).

Finally, the WHAT dynamic is related to the extent to which a program and/or coalition creates real and perceived value. In favorable conditions, value is documented in order to make a case for continuation after initial funding.

When the WHAT is a favorable driver in the community, the program is matched to the need and is aligned with existing capacity and resources. The program approach is also matched in scope to the complexity of the program.

On the other hand, the WHAT might be a challenge to long term sustainability if the problem to be addressed is highly complex and the funded program or solution does not adequately address such complexity by using multiple, related strategies (in other words, the problem far out sizes the proposed solution). The WHAT dynamic can exert a negative influence on sustainability when the solution (i.e., program or activity) is a stop-gap measure that does not seek to address the real root of the problem.



Those that are able to sustain over the long term exhibit the following characteristics as they relate to the WHAT dynamic:

- The base the program design on a thorough understanding of the needs that they are attempting to address. They use needs assessments and community studies, their own experiences, and consultations with others who are working on the same issues or with the same target populations locally.
- They use multiple, integrated strategies to address complex problems from different angles (policy change, coalition building, individual-level interventions, etc).
- They work to be sure that the strategies “made sense,” that they are practical and likely to accomplish the short- and long-term goals.
- They consider the context within which they are working — professional, cultural, legal, political, economic, geographic, etc. They identify conditions or policies that might present challenges or opportunities for sustaining their efforts beyond the initial period.
- Because they understand the importance of matching the scope of the approach to the complexity of the problem, they avoid taking a “scatter-shot” approach. Trying to address too many problems at once limits the chance of having an impact in any one area.

## THE WHY DYNAMIC

Perhaps one of the strongest dynamics affecting sustainability and long-term impact is the motivation for working together — the WHY. A vision may be short- or long-term, broadly or narrowly defined, held by one organization or leader or shared among partners, be nebulous or clearly articulated. All of these characteristics appear to influence outcomes at the community level, including the extent to which programs and coalitions are sustained.

Programs and coalitions characterized by a clear long-term vision for what they hope to accomplish appear most likely to maintain alignment and continue working together over time. Viewing initial funds as a means to accomplish longer-term goals creates the ability to plan beyond the grant period. This approach enables the development of group identity that is not tied specifically to the implementation of a short-term program, but rather to making a sustainable impact on the community.

In contrast, focusing on short-term resource needs will impact the design of the program and the timeline for planning. In this scenario, the opportunity for resources often drives the design of the programmatic approach more strongly than the combined aspiration of the partners. This may result in a group seeing itself as responsible for implementing a grant program rather than a group that is determined to address a problem over time.

A narrowly defined but long-term vision provides the ability to focus intently on solving a particular problem and improves outcomes. In those instances in which short-term goals are clearly identified, the program strategies may be very effectively implemented during the funding period and discontinued when the grant funds are no longer available. When the vision is to change the broader system, a more strategic, comprehensive approach aimed at impacting the system at multiple levels is required to improve the likelihood of sustaining impact.

In the absence of a clearly articulated vision, it is difficult to achieve demonstrable outcomes or sustain partnerships over time. Similarly, when a vision is held by only one leader or organization, a lack of alignment and common purpose most often results in partners “leaving the table” and, ultimately, insufficient support for continuing programs at the end of the grant period. Communities that experience a significant turnover in leadership are especially vulnerable when the vision for the future is not understood or carried on by other members of the collaborative.



Those organizations or collaborations that are able to achieve some level of sustainable impact demonstrate the following characteristics related to the WHY dynamic:

- They are clear about their strategic vision and specific about what they want to be different in the community five or 10 years into the future.
- They include a broad range of stakeholders in the visioning process and the design of the intervention. These communities see that participation breeds buy-in, understanding, and support for the future. A shared vision is also more durable when there are changes in leadership.
- They build a process for revisiting the vision and goals regularly to keep the partners engaged and create opportunities for feedback and midcourse corrections.
- They view their initial funding as a means to an end. The initial funding is one piece of a larger and longer term effort to solve a problem in the local community.

## THE HOW DYNAMIC

The HOW dynamic refers to the ways in which a plan is put into action, including the strategies employed, the capacity built, and the documentation and communication of impact and value.

An important concept related to the “how” dynamic is “beginning with the end in mind,” which helps build programs into or as a part of existing infrastructure or organizations. The logic and desire to build upon assets in the system helps minimize short-term costs and anticipate the need for sustaining resources, for personnel and overhead. In addition, building additional capacity within partner organizations and sharing responsibility for implementation results in increased awareness of the initiative and enhanced commitment. Conversely, thinking about “sustainability” near the end of the grant program or just before the funds are exhausted is dangerous. Merely focusing on implementation and the need to “get things done,” may prevent the ability to put day-to-day decisions into a broader strategic context. And, when funds are used to develop a new, free-standing infrastructure (staff, equipment, overhead), programs are often more costly to maintain which can result in reductions in service, or in more extreme cases, a decision to discontinue programs.

Often a significant challenge is acquiring and maintaining capable skilled staff to “do the work,” since the capacity required may not readily exist in rural communities. Without sufficient capacity, it may not be possible to effectively implement interventions. However, when capacity is built among existing staff and the training is conducted as part of the grant implementation, long-term assets are created for the local health system, even if programs or collaborations are ultimately reduced in scope or discontinued.

It is important to view evaluation as a critical dimension of the “how” dynamic — an essential element of a sustainability strategy which includes carefully monitoring progress, discussing experiences with partners, and refining programs to improve efficiency and outcomes. Evidence of impact at individual,



organizational, and/or population levels is imperative for making a case to funders, partners and even policy makers that additional resources should be committed to sustain local efforts. In contrast, when evaluation is seen more as an “extracurricular activity” or a grant requirement, the result is greater difficulty demonstrating value and securing the investments needed to support ongoing efforts.



Those that are able to sustain impact over the long term exhibit the following characteristics as they relate to the HOW dynamic:

- They consider sustainability options from the beginning. Programs and partnerships are built with an awareness that the needs they are addressing are for the long term.
- They recruit or hire capable staff with the necessary skills for implementing programs effectively. These groups anticipate the organizational capacity and human resources needed, since training, recruitment, and retention often prove problematic.
- They build on local assets rather than creating new ones that would require additional support. They share staff, equipment, and space with partners when possible to maximize resources and minimize costs over time.
- They are strategic in the design and implementation of the program evaluation. They include indicators of impact that are of interest to partners and potential funders.
- They consistently communicate the value of their efforts with key audiences – internally and externally.

## ASSESSING YOUR POTENTIAL FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Now is the time to make an inventory of the dynamics at play in your own community and think about how to build an impactful program in your community. The inventory below is not comprehensive, but may help to get you started in identifying those areas where some attention and work needs to be focused.

### THE WHO DYNAMIC

Look at the other people sitting around the table. Are they

- The people who can make commitments and decisions on behalf of their organizations?
- Passionate about the work that you are doing, fully committed to the vision and able to inspire others?
- Have the ability to attract support and financial resources for your efforts?
- Able to put aside their personal agendas and work collaboratively?
- Clear on their stake in this project and having their organizational and individual needs being met?
- Engaged in meaningful ways in the planning and implementation of the program?

## THE WHAT DYNAMIC

Think about your program approach, the issue you seek to address, and the context within which you are working. Do you

- Have a clear understanding of the need that you are addressing? Is that understanding based on a recent and comprehensive needs assessment that included input from your target population?
- Have a programmatic approach that “fits” the issue you seek to address? Is your approach matched in scope to the complexity of the issue you seek to address?
- Have the partners engaged with you that have the power to make the change you seek to make?

## THE WHY DYNAMIC

Think about the vision for this program and its impact in your community. Is the vision

- Limited to a grant funding period?
- Clear and shared by your partner organizations? Did your partners participate in the process of defining setting priorities and clarifying goals?
- Can your partners articulate your vision and describe the ways in which they can and will contribute to the success of your initiative, both short- and long-term?

## THE HOW DYNAMIC

Think about your program approach and how your plan will be put into action. Is your program

- Staffed by people with the necessary skills and expertise to effectively implement the program?
- Strategic in building on existing resources and infrastructure? Are you sharing staff, equipment and space when possible to maximize existing resources and minimize overhead costs?
- Being evaluated to document outcomes and demonstrate value? guided by a comprehensive communications plan that includes tailored messages for key audiences about the value your program creates. Are you communicating with both partners internal to the program and stakeholders external to the effort?

### GEORGIA HEALTH POLICY CENTER

*Andrew Young School of Policy Studies*

GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

55 Park Place NE, 8th Floor . Atlanta, Georgia 30303

404.413.0314