Chapter 2: Why Sustainability is Important

If you truly believe in a program and its benefits, you want to see it survive and thrive. As program staff, you work hard to achieve transformative change in your clients, your community, and the environment. But if your funding comes in fits and starts, or ends just when the program is hitting its stride, the potential to achieve these impacts stops abruptly. This uncertainty not only affects your program; it also hurts your community and society as a whole.

Here are 12 reasons why you should be concerned about your program's sustainability.

Love 'Em and Leave 'Em

It doesn't matter who you serve, how excellent your services are, or how much they love you; your funder will still leave you someday. Yes, it's true that *"Nonprofits depend on funders for support, and funders depend on nonprofits to run programs."[3]* But contrary to popular belief, funders don't have a bottomless pit of money. What they do have is an endless demand for what they do. A well-known author of fundraising manuals once said to me,

> *Where did nonprofits ever get the idea that there is such a thing as core funding? I'm not sure it even exists. No one, including ourselves as individuals, is guaranteed of getting a paycheque every week. Where did nonprofits get the idea that they are any different?*

Yes, your work is effective and yes it is important, but as with many things in life, nothing is forever. It may be painful and unfair, but true. As Suzanne from Chapter 1 said, *"As a team, I think we wrongfully concluded that if we just did good work, the funding would continue and that simply wasn't true."* You may have had the same insight.

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[3] Le, V. (2015). Why the Sustainability Myth is just as destructive as the Overhead Myth. Retrieved from http://nonprofitwithballs.com/2015/05/why-the-sustainability-myth-is-just-as-destructive-as-the-overhead-myth/#more-2388.

Change Takes Time

Programs don't usually burst out of the gate achieving outcomes. It takes time. Program managers often tell me they spend their first six months (or more) doing things like setting up administration, hiring staff, promoting their services, building trust, recruiting participants, developing partnerships, and so on. In fact, if your program strives to achieve any significant change, it can be at least three to five years before you begin to see impacts. Long-term change does not result from short-term operations. That's why it's important to manage funders' expectations about impact measurement from the outset.

Nothing Is Forever

Eight years ago my husband, an energy engineer, decided to leave private consulting and take a three-year contract position with a nonprofit doing interesting work in his area. His new position was made possible by a sizeable $500,000, three-year grant from Industry Canada. Before this grant, the organization had limped along with only one staff person. With this new funding, they were given the opportunity to ramp up their operations and make a larger impact. Over the next six months, the organization secured formal office space, hired new staff, purchased new computers and other office fixtures, and got down to the business of advancing their mandate. It was an exciting and heady time. But as his spouse, I was concerned about what was going to happen to his paycheque at the end of the three-year grant. I was pretty sure that Industry Canada was not going to give the organization another half million dollars, no matter how good their outcomes were. I told him now was the time to start thinking about how they were going to maintain the new infrastructure they had built and not three months before the funding ran out.

Cost Savings Take Time

Many programs pilot new policies and practices because of the anticipated cost savings they'll produce. But again, these savings can take years to appear. If you wish to realize cost savings, you need to operate over the long term.

Reinventing the Wheel, Again

We don't need research to tell us that terminating programs only to build them up again can be wasteful of resources in the long run. Remember how the first six months of a program is usually spent on administration

and start up? Now imagine all this effort being for naught if your program has to fold one year later. Or worse, imagine having to go through a regular cycle of starting up, scaling back, starting up, and scaling back again because of funding insecurities. These ups and downs and the continual re-inventing of the wheel are not only inefficient; they're also disheartening for staff and other stakeholders.

Your Credibility is at Stake

Going to the effort of setting up a program only to dismantle it several years later can breed a dangerous cynicism among the population you serve. Disillusioned participants can become harder to mobilize over time. If you adopt the perspective of taxpayers or donors, you know that the general public can sometimes be skeptical of "new initiatives." Over the years, they've seen their tax dollars poured into new programs only to watch them later fold and disappear, time and time again. This cynicism is dangerous as it not only hampers your ability to obtain community buy-in for new projects, but it also affects your credibility as an organizational overall.

Some Problems Never Go Away

Sustainability will always be a concern for some programs because certain problems will never go away. Think about issues such as youth drinking and driving or safe sex. No matter how effective your interventions are, over time, there will always be a new generation or different target group that needs to hear your message again and again.

Bye Bye Staff

Not surprisingly, one unfortunate by-product of funding instability is the loss of good staff. As much as staff may love working with your program, they have mortgages and expenses themselves to worry about. They can only cling to a sinking ship for so long, and eventually, they have to jump to dry land to save themselves and their families. Even if that ship rights itself later on with new funding, they're likely long gone. This departure may be particularly true of the millennial generation, who show less commitment to staying with an employer over time compared to earlier generations.

The Changing Face of HIV

When HIV/AIDS first surfaced in the early 1980s, the epidemic was largely centred around men who have sex with men (MSM). After a concerted education, prevention, and treatment response, infection rates decreased considerably in this target group. Over time, the epidemic shifted to marginalized and street-involved populations who inject drugs so that by the 1990s, the majority of new infections were diagnosed in an entirely different population. Consequently, attention and resources shifted to address this new priority population. However, as time went by, observers noted that although there was a decline in infection rates among injection drug users, the number of new diagnoses in MSM was once again becoming a concern. Why? The diversion of resources towards injection drug users meant that gay men were not receiving prevention and care services during this time. A new cohort of young gay men emerged that not only failed to receive the same amount of safe-sex education as the previous generation had, but also had not grown up seeing their friends and lovers die during the pre-treatment era of AIDS. Of course, other factors contribute to the current epidemic of HIV among MSM. But from a sustainability perspective, the changing course of the infection and recognition of the complexity of the epidemic among MSM has led internationally to an increased emphasis on renewing this public health response.

Bye Bye Partnerships

Partnerships are a critical aspect of many programs. Many managers tell me that the biggest predictor of a successful collaboration is the personalities of those involved. If one manager knows and trusts her peer at a partner agency on a personal level, that partnership is likely to be more effective and last longer. However, think about what happens if one manager leaves either organization. All the time spent building a trusting relationship goes out the door with that manager, possibly placing the partnership at risk. Or new efforts and resources have to be applied to building a new personal relationship with new players.

Bye Bye Organizational Memory

When staff leave, you lose a lot more than just talent. Since 90% of the knowledge in an organization is tacit[4], consider this. When staff go out the door, a part of your organizational memory leaves with them. Your staff carry an immense amount of knowledge about the program and its history in their heads. This information is critical for the program to move forward efficiently and effectively.

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[4] Wah, L. (1999). Making knowledge stick. In Management Review (pp. 24-29). New York, NY: American Management Association International.

All Hands on Deck

Dealing with a sustainability crisis can significantly drain your organization's reserves in the short-term. If you're already concerned about sustainability, you might not have the capacity to deal with these sorts of emergencies too often.

Code Red

Years ago, I volunteered on the board of a large multi-service organization that operated a much needed early child care program in my community. One day the director of this program received word from their primary funder that they were about to lose a significant amount of funding, which would essentially force them to close. Believing that the program provided a critical service to parents in the community, the organization quickly drafted a plan of action to save it. Over a period of several weeks, they:

- held planning meetings with other similarly threatened programs
- distributed posters and flyers at parent activities
- prepared press releases

- met with their elected provincial and federal representatives
- coordinated a town hall meeting
- held a local march
- traveled to a large rally in the provincial capital

As you can imagine, all this activity took a lot of time and energy away from the organization's other regular services. Although the staff were successful in reinstating the funding, the toll on the organization was significant. Because the program was so small, it was forced to draw on the help of staff from other programs in the organization to carry out the immense task facing them. Various staff were drawn away from their regular duties for several weeks. The organization also "spent" a good deal of its social capital by calling on the support of its allies, which can't be done that often. In the end, it was worth it, but it took time before everyone felt back on track.

Don't Touch My Program

Sustainability research tells us that programs with strong community connections and feelings of "ownership" are more likely to stick around than those without. But cultivating this level of community ownership takes time. A lot of time in fact, and certainly more than most funding arrangements provide.

Stuck in Pilot Mode

Do your long-term strategic goals ever feel like a target that continually moves farther and farther into the distance? It doesn't help when you have to reduce or cease your operations due to funding cuts, only to turn around and ramp everything up again a short time later. These disruptions can have a "one step forward, two steps backward" effect on your ability to meet your long-range goals. You might dutifully go through a regular strategic planning process, but if you're not able to sustain your services, how can you begin to tackle your long-term agenda? You may end up stuck in pilot project mode, never moving beyond the short term.

So What Are the Benefits of Sustainability?

Let's consider all these negative impacts again, but this time in a positive light. Take a look at the two programs on the next page. Which one would you prefer to be?
I'm sure you'll agree that Program B looks a lot more attractive. Sustainability is critical to the success of many programs.

Program A	vs.	Program B
constantly writes grant proposals		writes occasional grant proposals
stuck on short-term outcomes		makes progress on intermediate and long-term outcomes
high staff turnover		stable and talented staff
weak organizational memory		strong organizational memory
staff time spent on program start-up and fundraising		staff time spent on advancing mission
continually re-inventing the wheel		able to fine tune activities over time
short-term labour-intensive partnerships		long-term beneficial partnerships
evidence of program efficiency		evidence of program effectiveness
funding with strings attached		funding with no strings attached
low credibility with stakeholders		high credibility with stakeholders

While Program B may seem like a distant dream, let's explore some tangible ways you can work towards making it a reality for your program. In the next chapter, we'll begin to look at what makes a program more resilient and sustainable.

Chapter 2
SUMMARY

- There are many compelling reasons to ensure your effective programs are sustained over time. Beyond the continuous provision of service, long-term sustainability can impact your organizational efficiency and effectiveness, stakeholder credibility, human resources, and partnerships.

- A lack of sustainability can impede your overall mission advancement and long-term change in our communities and society as a whole.