

Getting Started: A Sustainability Self-Assessment

Sustaining comprehensive community initiatives depends on developing a clear, sensible, and convincing plan for marshalling the key resources that are necessary to continue (and often to expand) your work. However, in order to develop a sustainability plan detailing where you want to go, a necessary first step is to take stock of where you currently are.

The Uses of the Self-Assessment Process

This tool is intended to help program developers and community leaders who are working to sustain comprehensive community initiatives assess their progress and identify areas that need extra attention, resources, or technical assistance. This diagnostic process can provide valuable information to guide the development of your sustainability plan, for example, to capitalize on the assets of your initiative, as well as to plan for the development of additional capacity in areas that need strengthening. This tool can also help you make decision about how to target scarce resources to move toward sustainability. This tool is part of The Finance Project's **Sustainability Planning Workbook**, a comprehensive toolkit for developing a sustainability plan.

How the Tool is Organized

Sustaining a community initiative over time requires work both within the initiative, and between the initiative and the broader community. Work within the initiative focuses on deciding what should be sustained, gathering data to demonstrate its value, taking steps to constantly improve over time, and seeking new avenues for sustainability. Work with the outside community focuses on building a broad base of support and working with other people and organizations around common goals.

This tool examines eight key aspects of sustainability and lists individual tasks or steps within each one:

- (1) Decide what the initiative wants to sustain
- (2) Develop a results orientation
- (3) Identify, develop and pursue a variety of financing options
- (4) Encourage and take advantage of changing opportunities
- (5) Develop a broad base of community support
- (6) Develop key champions
- (7) Develop strong internal processes and controls
- (8) Develop a sustainability plan

Each aspect and task is listed in terms of a desired state; initiative leaders can rank themselves on a five-point scale to see how close they are to where they would like to be.

This list is partly sequential, since some items naturally come before others. For example, it is important to know what you want to sustain before deciding how to sustain it. Also, it is necessary to develop a good “product” internally before selling it to the outside world. However, other items will need to be pursued simultaneously. For example, initiative leaders will need to cultivate champions not as a last step but in conjunction with efforts to develop financing strategies.

A brief word concerning language. Just as the goals for sustaining community initiatives may vary, the terms to describe these efforts and their leaders also differ. Some community leaders refer to their work as an initiative, others whose goal is institutionalizing their efforts may use the term organization, and yet others may characterize their efforts as continuing a particular program. To avoid repetition, this tool uses “initiative” to mean an organization, initiative, collaborative, group, program or other entity that is trying to sustain its work. It also uses “initiative’s leaders” to mean staff, board members, volunteers or others who may act on behalf of the initiative.

Suggestions on How to Proceed

This first step in using this tool is deciding what “initiative” means. For some, it may mean the entire initiative, including its partners and collaborative process. For others, it may mean a specific agency or set of services. For multi-site initiatives, this tool can be used in two separate processes, at the larger community or initiative level, as well as at the site level to assist a particular site team in planning their work.

Based on what you determine “initiative” to mean, the second step is to decide who to have at the table during this process. Having the appropriate decision makers participate is key to getting the most out of the assessment process. The absence of a representative from the largest community-based organization in your initiative or of a principal from a school-based site will likely make these conversations much more difficult and much less useful.

It is important to keep in mind that few initiative leaders have time to address all of these items in detail. Leaders should not assume that they must do all of these tasks, to the highest level, in order to succeed. Rather, they need to make their own best judgment about where to focus their attentions. This tool aims to give initiatives a comprehensive array of options to help leaders make their own best decisions about where to target scarce material and human resources to move towards long-term sustainability.

As you walk through this assessment tool, this process may raise questions and issues that you may not want to take the time to address. Jot these questions and issues down in the comments section of the tool to return to at a later time.

Allow a minimum of one and one-half to two hours to complete this assessment process. If you are using this tool with a group larger than 10, you may need to allow additional time for discussion.

SUSTAINABILITY SELF-ASSESSMENT TOOL

The eight elements of sustainability, along with tasks specific to each element, are described below. Rank your progress on each of these tasks according to a five-point scale that assesses whether the initiative's leaders:

- 1 = Have not started this task
- 2 = Have started initial conceptual and planning work
- 3 = Have begun to implement this task
- 4 = Have made solid progress in implementing this task
- 5 = Have made sufficient progress in completing this task

ELEMENT ONE: Vision						
The initiative's leaders know what they want to sustain.						
	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative's leaders have developed a clear vision for their work.						
B. The initiative's leaders have developed a process to determine what is to be sustained, and by whom.						
C. The initiative's leaders have decided what they want to sustain (for example, a formal entity, a process, a service, a particular practice, a method of operation).						
D. The initiative's leaders have analyzed and can articulate how the initiative fits (or would like to fit) within the larger community.						
E. The initiative's leaders have analyzed and can articulate how the initiative complements, yet is distinguishable from, other initiatives.						

ELEMENT TWO: Results Orientation

The initiative incorporates processes to establish and track performance and process measures. The initiative’s leaders use that information to improve their work over time.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative has an accepted “theory of change” and logic model that shows how its work fits into a range of state and community efforts to improve the lives of children and families.						
B. The initiative’s leaders have identified and use indicators ¹ and performance measures to track the performance of their own work.						
C. The initiative uses indicators and performance measures to plan its work and budget its resources.						
D. The initiative’s leaders examine data on these measures (including input from clients, parents, or both) to find ideas for ways to improve service design and delivery.						
E. The initiative’s leaders implement these ideas, including changing or discontinuing initiatives as necessary.						
F. The initiative’s staff and board collaborate with other initiatives that are pursuing improvements in community-wide indicators that relate to the initiative’s work.						

¹ In this tool, indicators are defined as measures of change in child and family well-being across an entire community. Performance measures track changes in child and family well-being among specific target populations served by an initiative, program, or individual; or the level of activity or quality of a specific service. Most initiatives would use performance measures to track their own work; they would use indicators to see how they contribute to community-wide efforts.

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ELEMENT THREE: Strategic Financing Orientation						
The initiative's leaders have identified a variety of financing strategies that could support the initiative. The initiative has a plan to pursue those strategies and is following that plan.						
	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative's leaders know how much funding is needed to sustain their work.						
B. The initiative's leaders have identified the types of financial resources necessary to sustain their work, such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discrete sources of public funds (for example, one-time, ongoing); • discrete sources of private funds; • institutionalization within an ongoing system or process. 						
C. The initiative's leaders have identified and are pursuing ways to ensure the most efficient use of existing funds (for example, gaining economies of scale).						
D. The initiative's leaders have identified and are pursuing ways to support the redirection or reallocation of funds (for example, using funds freed up through improved outcomes to finance more prevention activities).						
E. The initiative's leaders have identified and are pursuing ways to increase the flexibility of existing funding streams (for example, through pooling funds across agency and program lines or improving coordination of existing funding streams).						

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ELEMENT THREE: Strategic Financing Orientation (continued)

The initiative's leaders have identified a variety of financing strategies that could support the initiative. The initiative has a plan to pursue those strategies and is following that plan.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
F. The initiative's leaders have identified relevant federal funding sources and are taking steps to access these sources (for example, Medicaid, tobacco settlement funds, TANF funds, other federal entitlements, block grants, and discretionary programs).						
G. The initiative's leaders have built public-private partnerships to leverage private-sector funding, create leadership, and garner technical expertise in support of their work.						
H. The initiative's leaders have investigated ways to generate new revenue that the initiative can control (for example, local fundraisers, grants from public- and private-sector sources).						
I. The initiative's leaders have identified and are pursuing ways to support the creation of new sources of public funds (for example, general revenue, expansion or creation of new taxes, and earmarked fees).						

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ELEMENT FOUR: Broad-Based Community Support

The initiative's leaders take steps to involve the community in their work and gain community support based on the initiative's positive impact on families' lives.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative has a plan to establish a desired identity and reputation within the community.						
B. The initiative's leaders involve recipients of their services in their work to improve service design and delivery and to build ownership and support.						
C. In addition to service recipients, the initiative's leaders involve a diverse set of stakeholders in their work (such as community-based organizations, government agencies, and private businesses) to improve service design and delivery and to build ownership and support.						
D. The initiative's leaders and community partners understand and communicate the work's value for families in its community.						
E. The initiative's leaders collect quantitative and qualitative data to show the value of their work for families.						
F. The initiative's leaders package those data in user-friendly formats and communicate them regularly to the community, key stakeholders, media, potential funders, and others.						
G. The initiative's leaders recognize and reward people who are instrumental in helping achieve sustainability for the work.						

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ELEMENT FIVE: Key Champions

The initiative's leaders identify potential champions they need to approach on an individual level and are following a plan to do so. These champions include senior decision makers, local community representatives and peer initiatives, and individuals. The initiative's leaders also pursue ways to communicate with stakeholders in a more general (less labor-intensive) fashion.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative's leaders have identified key senior decision makers at the community and state levels who can influence its sustainability.						
B. The initiative's leaders have designed and implemented a plan for tailored outreach to these key decision makers (including appropriate messengers and messages).						
C. The initiative's leaders have also developed other, less labor-intensive ways to contact and keep other potential champions informed (for example, sending them newsletters, inviting them to initiative events).						
D. The initiative's leaders use a variety of strategies to encourage parent champions, such as strongly involving parents in its work.						
E. The initiative's leaders have and use a variety of strategies to encourage peer community champions, such as collaborating with other organizations (for example, public and nonprofit service providers) in service planning, delivery, and financing.						

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ELEMENT SIX: Adaptability to Changing Conditions

The initiative's leaders seek new opportunities for resource development and support and are able to respond to new opportunities (for example, welfare reform, newly elected or appointed leaders) as they arise.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative's leaders monitor changes in the policy and program environment to see how their initiative could fit with new directives and agendas.						
B. The initiative's leaders consider how its work can be framed or positioned to interest different funders and to take advantage of new financing opportunities.						
C. The initiative's leaders use this information to approach new funders.						
D. The initiative's leaders have identified opportunities to participate in efforts to improve the overall policy and program environment (for example, standing advisory groups, opportunities to develop or comment on state plans for expending federal funds).						
E. The initiative's leaders actively participate in decision-making processes about changes in policy and practice.						
F. The initiative's leaders have determined how they can improve their ability to participate in these efforts (for example, by establishing their credibility as technical experts, community representatives, or controllers of resources), and have followed through to increase the likelihood of being able to participate.						

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ELEMENT SEVEN: Strong Internal Systems

The initiative has strong internal processes that ensure a vibrant, durable, and continuously improving initiative.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative has a well-defined team of staff, advisory or governance group members, volunteers, and others that it needs to accomplish its mission.						
B. The initiative's leaders and others understand and accept their roles and responsibilities.						
C. The initiative has strong fiscal processes that allow leaders to stay informed on its current financial status and to be alerted to emerging financing concerns.						
D. Staff and board develop and review projections for short- and long-term revenues and expenses.						
E. Staff and board develop financing strategies to meet those needs; staff and board review and change financial strategies as needed.						
F. The initiative has strong internal systems (for example, accounting, auditing, management information, procurement, personnel) to maintain quality control over its work.						
G. The initiative has strong communication processes to ensure that all partners are kept informed.						

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ELEMENT EIGHT: Sustainability Plan

The initiative has a sustainability plan that enables it to set priorities and take action.

	1	2	3	4	5	Comments
A. The initiative's leaders have a long-term plan for what they want to accomplish.						
B. The initiative's leaders have identified challenges or obstacles to sustaining the initiative, including potential conflicts with alternative initiatives or agendas.						
C. The initiative's leaders have developed strategies to garner needed resources and overcome identified barriers.						
D. The initiative's leaders have a process to reassess and adjust their plan periodically.						
E. The initiative's leaders have identified and communicated with other individuals who have a role in the sustainability plan.						

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