

Achieving Sustainability: Eight Critical Elements for Success

(Excerpted from The Finance Project)

This Section describes the eight elements that constitute the sustainability framework. These elements are critical for achieving a stable base of fiscal and non-fiscal resources that, in turn, can help lead to long-term sustainability of community initiatives. Although each element is important, initiative leaders and stakeholders will need to determine the “critical mass” of elements that must be in place for their particular program to continue and thrive. While initiatives will have unique goals and strategies for developing the needed resources that will help achieve sustainability, the following components are key to most successful initiatives and can help guide efforts to develop both short- and long-term sustainability strategies.

In brief, the eight elements are:

1. **Vision:** Having a clear-cut objective that articulates how an initiative’s programs or activities will improve the lives of children, families and communities is one of the most important and basic steps involved in achieving sustainability. Without articulating these objectives and developing a plan for achieving them, no initiative can be truly viable.
2. **Results Orientation:** Demonstrating program success through measurable results (e.g., established indicators and performances measures) is crucial for building support from key stakeholders in the community. Stakeholder support, in turn, increases the likelihood of program continuation.
3. **Strategic Financing Orientation:** Developing a strategic financing orientation is critical for program leaders. It enables them to identify the resources they need to sustain their activities and then develop strategies to bring these resources together to achieve their goals.
4. **Adaptability to Changing Conditions:** Adjusting to changing social, economic, and political trends in the community enables initiatives to take advantage of various opportunities that can help to achieve sustainability. Making these adjustments also allows initiatives to identify and overcome any external threats that could obstruct program continuation.
5. **Broad Base of Community Support:** Achieving a broad base of community support means determining who within the community loves an initiative, who needs it and who would care if it were gone. Often, when an initiative is able to build a broad base of supporters who care about it and believe it is vital, fiscal and non-fiscal support will follow.
6. **Key Champions:** Rallying leaders from businesses, faith-based institutions, government and other parts of the community who are committed to an initiative’s vision and are willing use their power and prestige to generate support for that program will help to ensure long-term stability.
7. **Strong Internal System:** Building strong internal systems, such as fiscal management, accounting, information, personnel systems and governance structures, enables an initiative to work effectively and efficiently. Establishing

these systems also allows initiatives to document their results and demonstrate their soundness to potential funders.

8. **Sustainability Plan:** Creating sustainability plans helps initiative developers and managers clarify where they want their initiatives to go in the future. Such plans provide benchmarks for determining whether initiatives are successfully reaching their goals. They help policymakers, opinion leaders and investors decide whether and how to support certain initiatives.

Collectively, these elements are key to achieving a stable base of resources for community-based initiatives. Although all of the elements are important, it is not imperative to have all eight fully in place to achieve sustainability. The emphasis placed on each element and/or amount of time dedicated to a particular element will vary according to the needs and resources of the individual initiative or community. For example, initiative leaders may not need to dedicate much time to establishing an identity within the community because they have already cultivated a very broad base of community support. However they may need to focus a considerable amount of time on shoring up their internal systems. In addition, there is no predetermined order in which these elements should be pursued, although some do naturally occur before others. For instance, it is important to have a clear vision before deciding what financing strategies are most appropriate. But other elements are not sequential and will need to be pursued simultaneously. For example, initiative leaders will need to cultivate relationships with key community leaders not as a last step but, rather, in conjunction with efforts to develop financing strategies and build a broad base of community support.