

# UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY

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Paper 4 in PSJP's Defining Key Concepts series

Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace

## About Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP)

Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP) is a network for social change. Its purpose is to support the development and adoption of ideas about what makes a good society, to connect and strengthen the agents of this work and contribute to the infrastructure that supports progressive social change.

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## About PSJP's Defining Key Concepts series

For philanthropy and development practices to have a significant impact on root causes of poverty, marginalization and violence, they need to be better aligned with social change agendas that are people led. This involves 'defining key concepts' that are commonly used in development and elucidating their meaning and implications in practice. PSJP is facilitating a peer-learning environment in order to do this and is exploring the themes such as dignity, community resilience, measuring change, sustainability, community philanthropy, leadership, power among others.

These terms are frequently used in development and philanthropy, and they are included in many organizations' mission statements and performance indicators, but often there is no clear understanding of what they mean in practice or how they can be measured. As a first step to develop this understanding we are facilitating discussions among a diverse set of practitioners in the field on these topics and producing papers which will be shared on <http://www.psjp.org>. We hope to engage in wider ranging discussion in response to the papers and invite you to share your perspectives, experience and research on these themes. To contribute a blog write to us at [chandrika@psjp.org](mailto:chandrika@psjp.org)

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## INTRODUCTION

‘Sustainability’ is everywhere in the language of development and philanthropy. According to the Cambridge English Dictionary, the word means ‘the quality of being able to continue over a period of time’.

It makes sense for sustainability to be a guiding concept for development and philanthropic work. As John Ruskin put it: ‘When we build, let us think that we build forever.’ If programmes and projects produce good outcomes, it is important that they last. This is why NGOs applying for funding are usually asked to demonstrate the ‘sustainability’ of their outcomes or impact.

However, sustainability is used in many different ways that makes this apparently simple term complicated in practice. Terms such as ‘environmental sustainability’ and ‘sustainable development’ suggest economic development without degradation or depletion of natural resources. ‘Social sustainability’ is about the wellbeing of people, their quality of life, and human rights. UNDP’s ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs) have much wider application including all the elements of sustainability mentioned so far and much else. The 17 goals represent an entire framework ‘to end poverty, protect the planet and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity’.

So, away from academic theory, the global framing of the UNDP and the goals of bilateral aid agencies, what does sustainability mean for the people and organizations that do the practical work on the ground?

In order to explore how sustainability works in practice, understand the critical things that need to be sustained, and probe how we measure sustainability, Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace (PSJP) organized three webinar discussions on 23 September 2018 among 14 participants from the fields of development and philanthropy.

This paper is part of PSJP’s ‘Defining Key Concepts series’. These papers are intended as conversation starters and not definitive pieces. Our aim is to provoke discussion and facilitate learning to improve our individual and collective development and philanthropic practices.

We welcome contributions to this discussion via comments and blogs sharing your understandings of the term ‘sustainability’; any tips or tools you have encountered or developed for building ‘sustainability’; the challenges you experience in this work; and the ways you are trying to assess whether or not you are successful. For those who wish to take part in discussion, please write to us at [chandrika@psjp.org](mailto:chandrika@psjp.org)

## CONTEXT FOR THE DISCUSSIONS

It is important to note that while diverse in size, focus of work, scale and location, the organizations that took part in the webinars form a subset of those working in development. They all receive grants from a private funder who lays great emphasis on sustainability. This funder's theory of change suggests that high performance on seven key performance indicators will produce a situation where 'investment in sustainable change is central – so that little or no external funding continues to be required'.

The funder set up an evaluation system to test the relationship between this outcome and the indicators. Using survey data based on grant awards to 52 organizations, the correlation between each indicator and the outcome is shown in the following chart.

### *Correlation between seven key performance indicators and sustainability*

Key Performance Indicator	Pearson Correlation with sustainability <sup>1</sup>	Probability
Resources are targeting poor or marginalized people	0.052	0.699
Our staff structure contains people who are poor or marginalized in leadership positions	0.075	0.598
We support people who are poor or marginalized to take leadership positions in other organizations	0.202	0.231
There is significant investment in local leadership (eg through community organizations, national organizations or local leaders)	0.086	0.531
Community assets lead in development work (people and communities are investing their own money, time, land, knowledge or other resources)	0.301	0.023*
People and communities use their resources and assets to support others in their own or other communities	0.288	0.032**
People who are poor or marginalized are centrally involved in meeting their basic needs	0.151	0.268

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The table shows that two factors (the starred items in the above table) are significantly related to sustainability: 'Community assets lead in development work' and 'People and communities use their resources and assets to support others in their own or other communities'.

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<sup>1</sup> In statistics, the Pearson correlation coefficient, also referred to as Pearson's *r*, the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient or the bivariate correlation, is a measure of the linear correlation between two variables *X* and *Y*. It has a value between +1 and -1, where 1 is total positive linear correlation, 0 is no linear correlation, and -1 is total negative linear correlation.

Two related puzzles arise from these results. First, only two of the indicators seem to matter in producing sustainability. Second, closer inspection of the data reveals that performance on the seven key performance indicators is very similar, such that a high score on one indicator tends to produce a high score on all the others. In light of this, one might have expected the correlations with sustainability to be higher. Could this be because people are thinking about the idea of sustainability in different ways?

In the webinar, we asked four open-ended questions to find out:

1. How does the concept of sustainability guide the work of your organization?
2. What does this mean in practice and how do you know if your work is successful?
3. What is the role of money in this?
4. What advice would you like to give to big funders? What kind of funding regimes would you ideally like to see?

In asking these questions, we had no assumptions about the kinds of answers we would receive.

## WHAT ARE WE SUSTAINING? AND HOW?

First, the webinar participants discussed how the concept of 'sustainability' guides the work of their organizations. 'For us sustainability is not a by-product, it's a core objective,' asserted one participant. It appears that this is a widely shared view, underpinning the work of all the organizations taking part in the webinar.

There are two interrelating levels at which development and philanthropic organizations seek 'sustainability'. These are:

- Building organizations and programmes that will sustain themselves
- Developing capacities that will be sustained in the communities they serve

It is important to emphasize the interrelation of these two levels: a local organization will need to sustain itself over a sufficient period of time to help a community develop its capacities, with the ultimate long-term goal of delivering social transformation.

'If you are talking about transformative change, it's got to be generational, not just have an impact on people at one point in time.'

'Sustainability', therefore, is both something that organizations seek for themselves and something they aim to deliver as their impact.

## The organization and its operations

There are some organizations that see themselves as a vital part of the communities in which they operate. This is particularly true for grassroots organizations that are rooted in the communities they serve. According to a community-based organization (CBO) in Romania working with teenagers:

‘if the state would conform there would be no need for a charity like ours but since the need remains we want to provide services for the long term, so sustainability is important for the organization.’

This organization works with teenagers to ensure that they graduate from school and qualify as workers. They believe there is a link between dropping out of compulsory school and poverty.

Grassroots organizations that fill gaps left by the state, or even help to fill holes in the social fabric, serve a critical role in ensuring the wellbeing of their communities in many different ways. Their work is aimed at long-term change. It is therefore desirable that the organization, its services and programmes are sustainable.

Along with longevity, ‘trust’ is another factor that underpins the success of the work these organizations do. As is well known, ‘trust’ takes time to build and a prerequisite would be longstanding presence in the community. An organization working with two communities living in extreme poverty in Indonesia says that it is important for them ‘to be present and have the trust of the community’ in order to make an impact.

‘We focus on only two working areas because we would like to remain sustainable in those areas. We don’t go to an area for a few years and leave. That’s not good for the community. We have been in one community for 30 years and another for 15 years. Our projects are based on long-term goals. We have projects that have been going on for a long time and we want to see the goals being achieved.’

A foundation working to promote and support community philanthropy institutions around the world supports them with core funding as a critical part of their approach.

‘We are trying to invest in organizations that act as brokers in their communities.’

Discussants identify the following factors and practices that help sustain organizations, programmes and their impact.

### Diversifying financial sources

It is no surprise that financial stability is key to ensuring longevity of organizations and their operations. Diversification of financial sources and

investments, particularly reducing dependence on donors by creating their own sources of income via social enterprise projects, are popular strategies. An organization providing palliative care in Zimbabwe has, over nearly four decades, successfully worked on making itself financially sustainable.

‘We have quite a massive asset base. We own three of our properties; we have trusts in the UK and here in Zimbabwe. We have established a nursing agency and other social enterprise initiatives so that when donor funds are no longer available things still happen.’

The grassroots NGO working with poor communities in Indonesia has also developed social enterprise projects in order to reduce donor dependency.

‘Besides looking for donors we also have our own income-generating projects such as organic farming, workshops for groups, education camps where we welcome paying volunteers, students, etc. We are trying to find financial sustainability through income-generating projects so we can sustain ourselves when we no longer have a donor or when we are waiting for a new donor.’

#### Developing sound internal structures

An active board and a robust management help organizations withstand difficult times. The palliative care organization in Zimbabwe considers itself to be ‘very sustainable’. One of the reasons for its sustainability has been

‘the ability to have very good leaders and structures, especially at board and trustee level. This enables us to reflect when things don’t go right, to make painful decisions, and to say that this hasn’t worked and move forward instead of pushing a particular agenda because it’s financially viable.’

The CBO in Romania notes that even the ‘continuation of funding depends on the quality of management and the board members.’

#### Advocacy efforts

For sustainable impact and social transformation, organizations recognize that they cannot always fill in for the state and must advocate for structural change. The vision of the palliative care organization is

‘a Zimbabwe where people have access to quality palliative and bereavement care to reduce suffering and pain and improve the quality of their lives’.

This vision will not be attained by one single organization providing palliative care for an entire nation. Advocating for and working towards structural change at the state health policy level is therefore a rational strategy, along with providing care services themselves.



‘We have worked closely and advocated with the ministry of health and childcare to integrate palliative care into the health system, saying that it’s really unrealistic to expect one national NGO with fluctuations in funding to meet the need for palliative care in the country. That has worked really well such that the government is taking this on, and we are the technical support that is making this happen.’

### Ensuring continuity in programmes

The programmes and services that organizations working within communities deliver are ultimately about people and their lives. Programmes cannot be run in silos as their impact flows into the lives of the same people. If their impact is to be sustainable, organizations working at the grassroots must be sensitive to this. ‘We never abandon a previous project,’ asserts the organization working with poor communities in two regions of Indonesia.

‘There is always a link with previous projects, and we keep a thread with people from different projects because the beneficiaries are the same. That’s the only way! We need beneficiaries to truly benefit. It’s necessary that we continuously build their capacity and knowledge, and that they participate and improve their own skills. Sustainability for me is about that.’

Another organization insists on continuity even with their donors.

‘When we look for donor funds we don’t just look for money, and this is a hard one sometimes, but the funding must always be a part of existing work that we do. It shouldn’t affect our work long term and the communities we serve because that is unethical, and it affects the trust we have gained.’

### Community capacities

Some organizations, particularly those that are outsiders to the community such as big national NGOs, INGOs and international foundations, are looking to build and sustain local capacities. They aim to set in motion a self-sustaining process of change. In the main, this requires enabling the agency in local communities, building their capacities to solve their own problems.

The webinar discussions reveal that organizations seek to build capacity in three interrelated ways:

#### Strengthening community organizations

Local organizations that are indigenous to the communities that they seek to serve are important assets within a community. The international foundation mentioned above that is working to promote community philanthropy provides support to such small community organizations.

Similarly, for a community development organization in Romania the building of community capacities for achieving ‘sustainable results’ means ‘we have to leave in the communities NGOs or groups that can further develop community work’.

This is also true for an organization working in Colombia with children and young people who are at risk of sexual violence and armed violence.

‘We work with local organizations, based in the communities, and part of our work, aside from the project support, is to strengthen the capacity of those organizations.’

### Developing local skills

Development of various skills at the local level in areas such as leadership, management, fundraising and administration, which are essential for self-reliance, is critical to ensure sustainability in development. An organization working in remote areas of Myanmar hopes to build local leadership skills and eventually work themselves out of a job in the area.

‘We have a very strong focus on sustainability because we work in an area where it can be difficult for anyone from the outside to enter. We focus a lot on making the beneficiaries into the decision makers. It’s up to them what is the most important project to implement in order to meet their needs in the villages. I think this is the key for sustainability: they need to believe that this is something that’s worth carrying on after the project ends and when we are no longer able to go into Rakhine state and implement these things ourselves. Our goal is to give them skills and tools based on their needs and interests.’

An organization working in the Asia Pacific region to promote the rights of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives says that they ‘invest a lot in capacity building and community ownership, including community people in the planning’. However, they also seek to build self-reliance via other skills such as the ability to raise funds and manage projects.

‘That is another way to develop their capacity, which they can use for local fundraising, and even management of the project. It’s not just seed funding that we provide but the ability to access available resources in the country to respond to their needs.’

The organization working with vulnerable children in Colombia also encourages this approach.

‘Our partners identify and work with local community leaders, building their capacity so that once the partner stops working with that group, the local leaders are able to support ongoing work with young people.’

### Facilitating connections and relationships

Another form of support that outside organizations provide to ensure the sustainability of their work is linkages, 'connections between the community people and a broader network so they can work with them'. The international foundation promoting community philanthropy makes a case for this as well:

'we make fairly small grants. The funding we provide isn't going to be the make-or-break factor so it's about what other support we can offer to our partners that will help them be effective. We hook them up with similar actors or peers and provide moral support.'

## HOW DO WE KNOW WE ARE SUCCEEDING IN BUILDING 'SUSTAINABILITY'?

Success will mean that the development processes and/or their impact have been 'sustained'. Knowing we are succeeding therefore requires the ability to go back into the communities after a period of time. Some organizations find this difficult, either because they do not have funding to go back and determine if the impact of the processes they helped catalyse has been sustained after five years, or because they work with communities vulnerable to displacement. What they find helpful in determining sustainability is a budget to enable them to return to a community five or more years after completion of the project. Long term partnerships or networks can also provide organizations with the capacity to assess if the results of their work have been sustainable or not. Finally, they need a set of indicators to establish whether or not they are building sustainability. Towards this end, we found that participants are asking themselves five interrelated questions.

### Is there 'community buy-in'?

Building community ownership of programmes and activities is both a goal in itself and a sign that the work and its impact will be sustainable.

'Local buy-in' is a very important indicator of success for an organization working across the Asia Pacific region on care for the elderly. The key question for them is 'whether the local community will invest in their own community?'

This organization has been simultaneously implementing three different models of development in order to demonstrate the importance of the community investing in its own development. The first involves the organization's own staff delivering a project in a community conceived by a donor. The second involves building the capacity of the community to run the project themselves but it depends on donor funding. The third is about leveraging community assets.

‘We give each village a grant of US\$5,000 to set up their own microfinance so that they will have money every month and will be financially sustainable. We try to make it fun and lively and get local buy-in. This is the most attractive and sustainable and successful model in the region.’

This organization has conducted external and internal evaluations in the last ten years that prove that it is the third kind of model that is most sustainable.

‘After 5 years of no support we went back to the village to see if it was sustainable or not. Type 1 – very little of our work remains after 5-10 years. Type 2 – more still existed. Type 3 – the vast majority of projects were still running, about 80–90 per cent.’

Similarly, an organization working with remote communities in the Himalayas sees community ownership as key to the sustainability of their impact.

‘Our approach to sustainability is context driven. We are dealing with remote communities that are socially and politically marginalized and in regions that can be hard to reach. This means we aim for local community ownership, they need to be invested in the project. We need measures for self-reliance because we can’t count on state support.’

### **Is there enough funding?**

While participants focus mainly on building self-reliance in the community by helping them access assets within the community, for CBOs that play vital roles in a community where the state and other development agencies do not reach, financial sustainability can be very important. For one such organization in Romania one of the indicators of building sustainability is the continuation of funding to be able to carry on existing, running their programmes and serving the community.

### **Have we transferred power and capacity to local communities?**

No matter what the project, whether it is aimed at providing a service like health or care, or helping to build community assets like CBOs, community leadership and other skills, the ultimate step to social transformation appears to be a shift in power to communities to solve their own problems. A number of organizations testify to this. The palliative care organization in Zimbabwe has seen a project become very successful in recent years.

‘A very generous donor gave us seed money to design an intervention for palliative care service provision in a certain district of Zimbabwe. The community was involved very actively in designing it. We spent six

months designing it and when we ended the project, things still continued. For example, at the district hospital where we worked morphine is being dispensed to patients; in other district hospitals in the country this is not the case. In this community the people knew what to do, how to advocate for better access to medicine and pain management. This reflects on the sustainability of the work.'

The organization working in Myanmar takes a similar approach to determine if they are succeeding.

'The way we can see that it works is, for instance, if we go out later and see that a particular project we have helped implement - say, building a road - has been replicated using funds the community have raised themselves, either from among themselves or from local authorities. This is a sign of sustainability because we have given them the tools to work together and raise funds and in unison implement the plan. Other times we see different villages that have been inspired to come together and just do something about a problem. That is how we see a change of mindset working.'

Another organization sees organic growth as a measure of success:

'... projects that don't just scale up and drive forward in a wider area, but a project that spreads itself. Then we have achieved an ideal there.'

### **Is the project or development model being replicated?**

'Replicability' of a project model is also an indicator of success. Some organizations stress the importance of transferability of the work to other areas:

'when a model has been proven across different countries successfully that's a measure of success.'

For others, success is taking the model to scale and seeing the project model replicated by governments.

### **Is the legal and political environment supportive?**

Many participants acknowledge we live in a world faced with 'closing space for civil society' where government attitudes are not always favourable to the work they are doing. Human rights and empowerment of communities is perceived by government as a danger for them:

'We live in a difficult world where we can't always control events'.

This is truer for countries that are seeing an increasingly restrictive environment for NGOs.

‘I’m worried about the sustainability of NGOs in Romania. I worry that sustainability also depends on how much the government invests in the sustainability of NGOs and whether it lets them function and exist. Too much is said about NGOs being representatives of Soros and blamed for being critical of the government. This is scary. It means NGOs are regarded as outcasts and enemies of the government and population, and in these circumstances sustainability is not easy to achieve. Sources of funding are limited anyway. Funds come from private donations and companies and from sources outside Romania. Given that the government has not introduced tools to sustain NGOs, I’m scared about the sustainability of NGOS in Romania.’

## HOW CAN PHILANTHROPIC PRACTICES HELP BUILD SUSTAINABILITY?

Whether the webinar participants were CBOs rooted in communities or INGOs operating as outsiders in the community, they all had in common that they were grant recipients. We therefore asked them what advice they would give to funders about building sustainability. Below we describe what they said. Much of this advice to funders overlaps with participants’ own approaches to sustainability, as described above. This tells us that these are lessons grounded in real-life development practices on the ground.

### Give multi-year grants

All participants agree that single-year grants are unhelpful. The discussions above reveal that they are all trying to effect change that requires being present when there is no social safety net for vulnerable communities; building trust with the communities in which they operate; and building community assets and capacities in the absence of political and economic equality. All of this takes time and many of these participants have been operating for more than 10 years in a single community. Working with vulnerable and marginalized communities in sometimes remote areas, they are sensitive to the fact that it is people’s lives that hang in the balance and they cannot just leave or end programmes.

‘There are funders out there who think that one-year funding is enough to make an impact and it’s difficult to do that. It’s difficult to explain to them that it’s the impact for just the year and not on a long-term project. Donors need to rethink their funding period.’

Participants felt quite strongly about the impact of short-term interventions and encourage funders to question ‘the impact of not being sustainable’. Particular attention was drawn to an aid programme in Zimbabwe that saw negative

impacts on livelihoods when the programme was abruptly halted. ‘The gains were lost.’

### **Build capacities and connections**

The international foundation promoting community philanthropy stresses:

‘sustainability for us is realizing that money will only go so far, and we need to provide other kinds of support.’

Many participants think that capacity-building support from the donor is essential for sustainable results.

‘They need to think about capacity building of beneficiaries and also of the people in the NGOs and foundations.’

Another participant who has seen positive outcomes in their work as a result of linkages facilitated by their donor argues:

‘donors should be open to the capacity issue and to learning across partners. It helps to support one another and develop collaborative work to make a larger impact.’

### **Enable personal development of staff**

While some funders may provide capacity-building support themselves, some organizations think that funding for training can be helpful.

‘The majority of donors we work with would like to see 100 per cent of the grants go to beneficiaries. We need costs for professional development. Our grants only allow for funding linked to children we work with. There is no time for study or training for development of staff.’

The discussions also called upon donors to be more sensitive ‘to the human side of the work’.

‘It’s about the way donors treat people. It’s about looking at the health of the individuals and organizations. How do you care for yourself and stop potential burnouts? This is sustainability at another level and it would be nice to have donors be sensitive to this.’

The Healing and Solidarity Conference,<sup>2</sup> an online conference held in September 2018, addressed some of the difficult issues that development practitioners often face about being ‘responsive to the people whom we support while allowing our values to stay intact’; disrupting ‘colonial attitudes,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://healingsolidarity.org/>



racism and corporate structures' in the field; addressing 'our wellbeing and being self-reflective as practitioners'; and 'building just cultures in organizations, communities and initiatives which create the collective care we crave'.

### **Be holistic in your approach to problems**

Participants lament that funders tend to approach different community problems and needs as isolated issues, which is reflected in their funding.

'Most funders are single-focused, and we find that single-focused projects are very hard to make sustainable, like working on just health or just care. What the people need is a holistic approach. We hope that funders will move to a more community-driven approach, look at community needs first. That will be more holistic and sustainable, have more impact and generate greater buy-in from the community itself.'

### **Build on existing work**

Donors tend to look for "new" and "innovative" ideas rather than supporting programmes that are already running in communities. Participants would like them to support existing work.

'The donor community wants to see only pioneering projects, innovative projects and enormous, phenomenal impact. I do agree that new and innovative methods should be invented and used but this goes against the sustainability of projects ... we also need to talk about sustainability through continuing the work of other donors.'

### **Be flexible, adjust to context**

Stress is laid on the importance of flexibility among donors when supporting work in remote communities, conflict areas or restrictive legal environments. As an example one participant stresses:

'if you want to help local NGOs you need to be less strict about things like registration in a country because that might be too expensive.'

### **Provide seed funding**

We have seen that building local capacities and agency - ie local ownership, leadership, organizations, skills - and leveraging other financial and non-financial community assets, among other things, is the key to building sustainability. Providing seed funding, ie small grants to support a group or community to catalyse their work, serves as an important tool in setting up sustainable processes of change. We have seen above how the palliative care organization was able to run a successful programme with sustainable impact in the community because of seed funding provided by a donor to engage the community in designing the initiative.



Based on their positive experience this organization's advice to donors is to

'invest a small amount of seed funding for deliberations to take place in communities'.

Other participants agree, based on their own experiences, that

'Seed funding for communities is very useful ... it is about building their capacity to do things themselves.'

Published by Philanthropy for Social Justice and Peace

December 2019



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