Sustainability

Prepared by Patricia Rogers, Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

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ABOUT ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia’s young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia’s future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

Developed for the Facilitating partners of the Australian Government Communities for Children initiative, this paper is now being made available to a wider audience via the ARACY website: www.aracy.org.au.
SUMMARY

This paper has been developed by ARACY (Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth) for facilitating partner organisations funded under the Communities for Children initiative (CfC) of the Australian Government’s Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2005-2009. Sustainability has been identified as a major issue by these organisations, which have received funding over four years to plan and implement a range of projects which will strengthen families in a defined geographic community. This paper is intended to support discussion within and between partner organisations funded under the CfC initiative and other interested organisations.

Sustainability usually refers to sustained benefits after the funding period ends. This does not always mean that projects should continue indefinitely. There are many different types of possible sustainability, and it is important for organisations to be clear about the types of sustainability that are appropriate and feasible in each instance.

Sustainability can be understood in terms of:

1. Sustained participation of various groups and individuals
2. Sustained outcomes for families
3. Sustained community capacity
4. Sustained project activities
5. Sustained project ideas

This paper discusses each of these types of sustainability in terms of what it means, strategies for achieving it, particular challenges, and what has been learned about it. These discussions draw on published research on sustainability together with what was learned from projects funded under the first Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2000-2004.
Sustainability is more likely to be achieved when organisations:

- are clear about the types of sustainability they are seeking,
- develop and implement plans for achieving it during the early stages of a project, and
- involve other relevant organisations in developing and implementing these plans.

**TYPES OF SUSTAINABILITY**

Short-term projects may be intended to achieve several different types of sustainability.

Consider a specific project.

Which of these types of sustainability are appropriate and feasible?

Would different organisations have different views on this?

Projects are usually expected to achieve the **sustained participation** of families, participating organisations, staff (paid and volunteers), and the broader community. This participation may occur in the planning stages for a project, during implementation, and after the project has formally ended.

Projects are also usually expected to contribute to **sustained outcomes** for families. These may be short-term outcomes, such as reduced parenting stress, or improved family relationships, or long-term outcomes, such as child health.
Most projects aim to build **sustained community capacity**. This could involve the capacity of the broader community - such as stronger supportive networks for families, or increased knowledge or skills of community members. It could be the capacity of community organisations – such as their skills, networks, processes, systems, information, and skills. Most projects develop resources during the course of implementation. Some of these are intended only for immediate, local use, but others have potential to be enduring resources that other organisations can use.

Some projects expect that at the end of funding there will be **sustained project activities** – so that some or all of the activities of the project continue after the period of funding ends. This is often the type of sustainability that people are thinking about when they refer to ‘sustainability’, but it is not always an appropriate or feasible aim for a project.

In some cases, a project is designed to pilot an approach, and the intended result is **sustained project ideas**. This should involve a clearly documented description of the approach, and evidence of its effectiveness, so that other organisations can adopt it in the future. As with other forms of sustainability, it is important to plan for this type of sustainability early in the project. The next sections of the paper discuss each of these types of sustainability in more detail.

**SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION**

**What does it mean to sustain participation?**

Projects often need to work hard to achieve the sustained participation of:

- families
- contributing organisations
- staff (paid staff and volunteers)
- the broader community.
This is important throughout the project - during the planning stages, during implementation, and after the project has been formally completed.

**Whose participation needs to be sustained during the project?**

- What strategies might be used to achieve this?

For some projects it is expected that families will maintain their participation throughout implementation. For others, it is expected that families will participate for a period (such as during the life of a specific group) and then move on, to be replaced by another family.

The participation of contributing organisations may be necessary at key stages of the project (for example - negotiating specific plans and processes for sharing information and resources) or throughout (for example - referring families, or providing ongoing input).

Many projects find it difficult to sustain the participation of staff (including paid staff and volunteers) in short-term projects, particularly in remote locations, and particularly towards the end of the project.

The participation of the community can be understood in terms of formal community participation structures, or general community knowledge of and support for the project.
STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING PARTICIPATION

Participation of families

Strategies that previous projects have used to sustain the participation of families include:

- Beginning with a community-focused activity with the emphasis on fun before offering activities that focus more particularly on developing skills and knowledge.
- Identifying and removing barriers to participation, such as providing transport and childcare.
- Working with an organisation that has established trust with families and effective ways of linking up with local families.
- Employing people who live in the community or have good knowledge of the region.
- Including families in planning each stage of the project, including identifying activities that will attract the involvement of other families.

Participation of contributing organisations

Contributing organisations are directly involved in a project, either as partners, joint funders, or referring agencies. Strategies for sustaining their participation include:

- Having direct, personal contact with the organisations.
- Selecting a support organisation that has existing relationships with other relevant organisations.
- Keeping the organisations informed about progress of the project.

Participation of staff (paid and volunteer)

Sustaining the participation of paid staff and volunteers can present challenges, particularly given the short-term nature of some projects.
Strategies that some projects have found to be successful, or would recommend, include:

- Project staff spending more time training volunteers to develop a better rapport with them.
- Recruitment of local people, together with training to fill any skill gaps.

**Participation of the community**

Strategies that can be used to sustain the participation of the broader community include:

- Keeping the community informed through newsletters, radio and newspaper promotion, guest speaker at meetings of local organisations such as the Senior Citizens, Citizens Advice Bureau, Country Women’s Association, Apex, Lions Club.
- Gathering responses periodically through questionnaires, surveys, and focus groups.
- Linking community consultations for the project with existing processes of other organisations.
- Including representatives of local community organisations on an advisory group for the project.
- Including representatives of the local community on an advisory group for the project.
- Consulting initially with individual community members before having group consultations.

**Sustaining outcomes for families**

**What does it mean to sustain outcomes for families?**
Sustained outcomes for families may be outcomes that are evident in the short-term, such as improved parenting skills, or in the longer-term, such as the various indicators of healthy young families and child-friendly communities.

What will be needed to sustain the outcomes for participating families?

Strategies for sustaining outcomes for families

Early intervention

The strategy of early intervention is based on the premise that early intervention in problems or in life transitions can lead to lasting benefits – to outcomes that are sustained over time, or that even increase over time. Early intervention works through meeting needs or resolving problems (by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors) before they lead to secondary problems or become entrenched by developing into embedded, habitual ways of thinking, feeling and behaving or brain development. It is important, however, not to ignore subsequent support that may be needed to sustain these positive outcomes.

Individuals and families may well require further support along the way, particularly at times of subsequent transitions such as the birth of a first child, when they are most likely to be both in need of assistance to meet new challenges, and more receptive to new ways of doing things. Transitions can present challenges and stress for all people not just those who are generally more at risk.

Linking to ongoing services

A supportive strategy for sustaining outcomes for families can therefore be to link families to ongoing services run by other organisations. In some projects,
especially those working with recently arrived migrant and refugee families, this may be an appropriate strategy. In some other projects this will not be appropriate due to the lack of ongoing services in the area. In these situations, there is likely to be more emphasis on the sustainability of the activities of the project (which is discussed later).

As the Communities for Children discussion paper on Early Childhood Intervention, makes clear:

Research clearly shows that short-term interventions have limited benefit, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Conversely, the most successful programs are sustained over a longer period, and operate within a service system that provides continuity of support and smooth transitions between sequential services as children move from infant to toddler to preschool child or as individual’s needs change (RPR, 2006, p.6).

**Sustaining community capacity**

**What does it mean to develop sustained community capacity?**

It can be helpful to consider different types of capital that are involved in community capacity:

- **human capital** – skills and knowledge
- **social capital** – supportive networks based on norms of trust and reciprocity
- **economic capital** – money, other financial resources, physical infrastructure
- **natural capital** – the physical environment, including assets such as fresh water
- **institutional capital** – processes, systems and products that can continue to be used after the project ends.

These different forms of capital can relate to individuals, families, the broader community, and to community organisations.
Strategies for developing sustained community capacity

**Human capital**

Strategies for developing sustained human capital (skills and knowledge) include:

- information sessions for participants
- mentoring
- counselling
- training, including train-the-trainer approaches designed to support further spread of knowledge and skills.

**Social capital**

Three types of social capital can be important to address:

- bonding – often strong connections between similar individuals and groups, including family groups and ethnic groups
- bridging – often weaker connections between individuals and groups, for example across family and ethnic groups
- linking – connections between people with different levels of power.

Strategies for developing these different types of social capital include:

- Developing support networks with clear principles of respect for diversity and processes for addressing conflict.
- Involving the broader community in projects with participating families.
- Creating opportunities for local community organisations to meet and work together on areas of common interest.
Economic capital

Where projects have developed physical infrastructure, such as refurbishing a community hall or building a playground, strategies for sustaining this capital may need to include:

- Negotiating for ongoing maintenance by another agency or establishing a network of volunteers for this purpose.
- Developing processes for providing access to it, such as a booking system.

Natural capital

This can include:

- natural resources, such as water, timber and air
- natural eco-systems
- aesthetic aspects of nature.

Although natural capital is unlikely to be the prime focus of the Communities for Children projects, it may be one of the outcomes of projects that either focus on environmentally sustainable implementation, or on involving the community in environment-focused activities.

Institutional capital

Strategies for sustained institutional capital can include developing:

- information kits/brochures
- training material
- videos, CDs, DVDs
- newsletters, articles, bulletins
- books, magazines, publicity
- websites and other online resources
- community registers
Sustaining project activities

What does it mean to sustain project activities?

The activities of a project, during funding, may be sustained after funding ends:

• on a reduced scale
• on a similar scale
• on a larger scale.

After initial funding, project activities might continue:

• with the same participants and current activities
• with new activities, building on the previous project activities
• with similar activities but with new participants (who might be similar to the previous participants, or deliberately different – for example, a project that has focused on mothers might focus next on fathers)
• at a different location or in a different community
• with amendments to respond to changes in what is required or feasible, or based on review of the effectiveness of previous activities.

**Strategies for sustaining project activities**

Strategies include:

• obtaining further funding (short-term or ongoing) from one or more sources
• incorporating project activities within an ongoing program
• developing activities that generate income such as fee-for-service, sale of resources
• develop self-managing networks to continue the activities without the need for ongoing funding.

Resources needed to sustain activities may include:

• funding
• in kind support
• community support
• specific expertise or skills, including professional services
• volunteer time
• support of existing networks, linkages and referrals from community organisation
• employment and training programs.

**Factors associated with sustained project activities**

Research into the sustainability of project activities has identified that projects with particular features were more likely to have sustained activities. These features can be grouped into those that relate to:
• the project
• the organisation in which it is implemented
• the broader situation in which it is implemented.

It is important to remember that while the research showed that projects with these features were more likely to have sustained activities, there were also many exceptions, where activities were not sustained, despite these features.

Which activities are important to sustain?
What strategies might be relevant to increase the likelihood of this?

Clearly these factors relate to different strategies for sustaining project activities. For example, having diverse funding sources is associated with sustainability in terms of securing further funding to support sustained project activities. Organisational flexibility is associated with sustainability in terms of incorporating project activities into the processes of an ongoing organisation.
Projects more likely to have sustained activities after funding ended

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<tr>
<th>The project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial resources during the project</td>
<td>Projects with diverse funding sources. This may reflect broader support from a range of organisations or increased opportunity to secure subsequent funding from other sources. (Light, 1998; Marek et al, 1999; Rogers et al, 2006) Projects where fundraising started early on. (Fagen, 2001; Pluye et al, 2004; Goodson et al, 2001; Steadman et al, 2002)</td>
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<td>Project effectiveness</td>
<td>Projects that were perceived to be effective, that addressed an acknowledged local need and those that had credible evidence of their effectiveness. (Steadman et al, 2002; Shediac-Rizkallah &amp; Bone, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Johnson et al, 2004; Pluye et al, 2004; Rogers et al, 2006)</td>
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<td>Scope for activities to be incorporated in existing organisations</td>
<td>Project activities that could be readily incorporated into the everyday activities of existing organisations and ongoing programs. (Goodson et al, 2001)</td>
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<td>Forward planning</td>
<td>Projects that started planning for sustainability early. (Pluye et al, 2004)</td>
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<td>Regular monitoring and evaluation</td>
<td>Projects that regularly monitored and evaluated their progress. This may have helped to focus their efforts, to identify problems early so they could be resolved, and/or provided better evidence of effectiveness. (Weiss &amp; Bohan-Barker, 2002)</td>
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<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Projects that effectively communicated their achievements. (Steadman et al, 2002; Shediac-Rizkallah &amp; Bone, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Johnson et al, 2004; Pluye et al, 2004)</td>
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<td>Organisational stability</td>
<td>Projects that operate in a stable organisational context, with well-developed procedures and goals. (Goodson et al, 2001; Chovav &amp; Weinstein, 1997)</td>
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<td>Organisational flexibility</td>
<td>Projects that operate in an organisational context that is flexible, with opportunities for mutual adaptation. (Goodson et al, 2001; Chovav &amp; Weinstein, 1997)</td>
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<td>Incorporation into the organisation</td>
<td>Projects that are incorporated into the auspice organisation. (Shediac-Rizkallah &amp; Bone, 1998; Goodson et al, 2001; O’Loughlin et al, 1998) Projects with effective support from the auspice organisation. (Rogers et al, 2006)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Project champions</td>
<td>Projects with both internal and external champions. Projects with support from senior leadership of the organisation. (Scheirer, 2005)</td>
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<td>Community support for the project</td>
<td>Projects which developed community support. (Marek et al, 1999) Projects that engaged in diverse activities to engage community support. (Rogers et al, 2006)</td>
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<td>Partnerships with other organisations</td>
<td>Projects with diverse and effective partnerships. (Light, 1998; Foreman et al, 2001; Steadman et al, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Chovav &amp; Weinstein, 1997)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of community ownership</td>
<td>Projects with a greater sense of community ownership. (Light, 1998; Foreman et al, 2001; Steadman et al, 1998; Johnson, 2000; Chovav &amp; Weinstein, 1997)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Political and economic climate</td>
<td>Projects that are aligned with current policy and funding priorities. (Scheirer, 2005)</td>
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Sustaining the project ideas

What does it mean to sustain the project ideas?

For projects that have developed a successful approach, it is particularly important that the idea is sustained and used by other organisations. This involves providing other organisations with sufficient information about the essential aspects of the project for them to be able to implement it appropriately in their local situation.

Who is likely to be interested in sustaining the project idea?

How can they be involved in the project and in documenting the idea?

It is advisable to identify those people/organisations who are likely to take up the project ideas during implementation of the project, as it is likely to be more effective than requesting commitment after the project has been completed.

Strategies for sustaining the project ideas

Recording the project ideas

Strategies include:

- During implementation of the project, documenting it carefully, and gathering evidence about its effectiveness. This might be done as part of formative evaluation and/or action research. In addition, it will be important to provide information about features of the local situation that need to be addressed for successful implementation – for example, having an auspice organisation with existing links with the community.
• After the project has been completed, undertake a separate project to write it up so others can understand and apply the project ideas.
• Under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy, organisations can nominate a project to be evaluated through the Promising Practice Profile. This will assist documenting effective approaches and making this information available to other organisations.

Making information about the project ideas available to other organisations

Strategies include:

• involving potential audiences in the project during implementation
• presentations at conferences, seminars and meetings
• project information made available in hard copy and on the web.

WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT SUSTAINABILITY

Be clear about the types of sustainability that are desirable and feasible

Since there are different ways in which a project might be said to be sustainable, there is a risk that the different individuals and organisations involved in a project might have different expectations about the type of sustainability. In particular, it is important that expectations about sustained project activities be clarified and agreed.

As the discussion paper on Sustainability prepared for Communities for Children make clear:

Facilitating Partners are also required to manage community expectations around what the initiative will deliver and the implications for the community should services funded under the initiative no longer be available.
Develop a sustainability strategy early

The strategy for sustainability may have different components that address the different aspects of sustainability that have been agreed to be appropriate and feasible.

Identify other parties that need to be involved in implementing your sustainability strategy

Most of these strategies for sustainability involve other individuals and organisations. It is important that they are identified and involved as early as possible. For example, if an organisation is expected to adopt the service model developed in the project, what would they consider credible evidence of its effectiveness? If an organisation is expected to incorporate the project activities in its usual procedures, what features will make this incorporation easier or more difficult?
REFERENCES


