

Guest Editorial

SUSTAINABILITY OF PROGRAMMES IN THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR – Reflections on Some Questions*

INTRODUCTION:

This paper attempts to identify parameters and determinants of sustainability of programmes primarily focused on disability care. It looks at why some programmes grow, develop in a meaningful way and remain creative for longer phases of their evolution; and why some programmes wind up, become inactive or remain stagnant and sometimes even unproductive.

The identification of facilitating as well as risk factors from a collective experience could serve many purposes. The most important purpose of this exercise could be to outline a list of self evaluation questions or issues that would help every organization to review itself and to strengthen its own development by indentifying lacunae in efforts that need to be attended. From the funding partners' point of view, it may help to decide which projects should be selected and which should be supported with caution. This may however degenerate into a 'betting on the winning horse' situation, which is undesirable. More important than both these likely purposes is however, an opportunity to learn from each others' experience.

This paper attempts to bring experiences and perspectives from the larger/wider sector of voluntary effort and to build a framework for exploration by providing some principles and perhaps provocative questions. While much of this comes from beyond the 'disability sector' of voluntary effort, these issues of 'sustainability' are relevant to all types of voluntary projects irrespective of focus or objective.

RECOGNISING OUR DIVERSITY

A short historical overview of voluntary effort in India highlighting key thrust, focus and impulses is necessary adjunct to help one to appreciate the diversity and wealth of experience. Do we realize what a 'mosaic' we represent?

In the last five decades since Independence, voluntary effort in the country has passed through many phases of growth in terms of focus, key thrusts and in its relation and context to government effort. While each decade has had its main theme, as it were, affecting the specific voluntary agency that may have developed in that decade, these are not watertight phases that can help to classify project into one type or another. The concept of diversity in focus or thrusts only helps to understand the reality- that any collective effort of a group of voluntary agencies at any point of time, will discover this diversity and mosaic of expectations and experience and that this can often be tracked back to the original vision or impulse of the voluntary agency at the time of its inception.

Pre-1950's: Most of the voluntary sector was deeply involved and linked with the National Movement for Independence.

1950s: The focus was on collaboration with the Government of India in the common task and commitment to Community Development, and collaboration was significant.

1960s: With the experience of Government programmes, the operationalisation of development strategies

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and a growing understanding of field realities, the inadequacy of the strategies themselves began to emerge. This led to intense dissatisfaction. Alternative socio-political solutions began to emerge in the development sector leading from collaboration to confrontation.

1970s: The realization that alternative socio-political systems needed alternative technology systems, alternative care delivery systems and alternative human power trainers led to the decade of 'Alternative' generation, focusing on health, education, environment, women's issues and trade unionism.

1980s: As the number of voluntary agencies in development increased, two additional features emerged. First there was a growing recognition of the need for collective support and efforts leading to networking. Secondly the alternative generation began to recognize the need of projects that moved from alternative service provision to supporting activities like training, lobbying, issues raising, communicating, research and policy generation. The era of specialization had arrived.

1990s: The overall themes of this emerging decade have been collaboration with the government and 'professionalisation'. The voluntary sector seems to have come of age and is now actively contacted for collaborative efforts by the Government. While this should take the form of a critical collaboration, there is a growing danger that it will be more of a co-option.

The need for professionalization is also sweeping voluntary effort and while this is definitely important in the context of improvement efficiency of efforts and increasing impact, the danger lies in professionalization bringing in market economy values. Both these factors have also led indirectly to a phenomenal proliferation and mushrooming of voluntary effort- high in quantity and low in quality, which seems to be a matter of serious concern.

Where would we place ourselves in this evolving and interpretative history? What are the key thrusts and focus of each of our projects? What are our similarities and what are our differences?

Do we recognize that our diversities are in the area of our focus, our size, our ideologies, our structures, our leadership, our governance, our approaches, our levels of functioning, our methodologies, our linkages, our management and indeed our evolution?

Could we pause and reflect on this diversity, and affirm and recognize the mosaic of experiences and impulses that we represent?

SUSTAINABLE

'Reflecting on the dictionary definition of a word helps us to discover the 'true depth' of its meaning. Colloquial usage often focuses on a narrow meaning and in the context of sustainability, it primarily has acquired an economic dimension. There are ten definitions which help us to explore the larger concept of the word 'Sustainable'. These are

To uphold	To perpetuate
To bear with	To maintain
To suffer	To support
To give strength to	To keep alive
To preserve	To keep going

There may be many more.

We should therefore include all this and not just how to 'find the funds for' continuing our programme. Also our focus should not be just on a time bound project but essentially a creative process, which we seek to initiate through our work.

LEARNING FROM EACH OTHERS' EXPERIENCE

While reflecting on our diversities, we might begin to doubt whether our experiences can really be relevant to each other. I believe they can be relevant, if in spite of our diversities we adopt some principles in our sharing and learning.

First, we must recognize that the evolution, growth, effectiveness, methodology and impact of our projects are affected by these diversities. Hence we should not extrapolate from our situation into that of others. We cannot just generalize for all situations from our own micro situation and generalization, if made, should really be suggestions with caution.

We should learn from each other's experiences, focusing on overall approaches rather than making it a quest for models or the identification of 'packages deals' or services.

Ultimately each of us must evolve our own creative response recognizing our own local realities and our own particular constraints.

An intracellular or single experience or single project exploration must be replaced by appreciating multiple experience and multiple projects, which could be termed as a 'balloonlist' overview. This paper is an attempt at building such an overview.

Finally while we learn from reviewing our successes, we need to seriously reflect on our failures as well. Learning from our failures can often be more significant than the appreciation of our success, though this is seldom done.

RECOGNISING THE PHASES OF OUR GROWTH

Sustainability must also always be seen in the context of the phase in which our action is located. All voluntary effort starts with the catalyst phase- about 1-2 years of initial high intensity involvement of a few initiators followed by a growth phase – involving a creative expansion of work and outreach -often sustained for at least 2-3 years.

In most cases the 5th year can be termed the crises phase – with intensive individual styles of the inception phase clashing with the growth collective demands of the growth phase. A sort of evolving mismatch often focused on styles of functioning and processes of decision making, takes place. This is further complicated by factors of routinization, bureaucratization and inadequate decentralization.

The crises phase then leads to a status quo phase if not tackled adequately. Alternatively a re-evolution phase may emerge depending very much on how creatively the organization understands the crises and tackles it. Project or process sustainability must appreciate these phases of the growth process and be sensitive to it. While the overall focus of the project could be similar in all the phase, the time allotted for dimension of work like planning, training, action, team building and evaluation would be different in each of these phases.

FRAME WORK FOR FACTOR IDENTIFICATION.

As a prelude to this reflection, all the factors that in different experiences had led to serious review or enquiry of the sustainability of a project or process were listed. These were then classified into groups, with a logic built up for their classification. The result shows that factors affecting sustainability can be classified into seven groups:

- Internal factors
- External factors (agency-target interactions)
- Funding agency factors
- Agency –Government interaction factors
- Monitoring /evaluation related factors
- Support mechanisms
- National/regional climate factors

EXPLORING SOME FACTORS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Each of the ideas identified in this section is based on a real life problem, but what has been highlighted is the issue and not the actual problem situation, to maintain confidentiality.

This set of questions could help each project reflect on its own state of growth and identify whether that aspect of its work could become an important contributor to the non sustainability of the work in the near future or in the long term.

This is not an exhaustive list. An exploration of the readers experience may identify even the factors and issues. The list will however very likely reaffirm some of the existing and ongoing problems.

INTERNAL FACTORS

These are factors that operate within the management structure of the project/agency and focus on aspects of governance.

Do we have clarity in our goals, objectives, roles and types of services we would like to organize through our project /institution?

Lack of clarity generates ad-hoc responses and confuses the project team and its partners, reducing motivation and job satisfaction as well.

Do we have hidden agenda in our work? Political? Religious? Economic? Or even the pursuit of power, status and individual glory? All these make our work less sustainable in the long run, diverting effort from stated objectives to other pre-occupations.

Does our management style- planning, decision making, supervision and evaluation involve the whole team in an increasingly participatory way or do we continue to believe in orthodox top-down hierarchical and authoritarian models of management? When team members at all levels experience a sense of participation in the project evolution, long term sustainability is greatly enhanced.

Do we have a rational process of staff selection and provide team members with adequate financial and other forms of work security? Or we ad-hoc in this aspect of management as well – eg, selecting staff in an ad-hoc manner, paying some more or some less and generally deciding issues on extraneous

influences? Work under voluntary auspices- whether part time or full time; truly voluntary or getting some remuneration needs a higher degree of commitment and motivation because of the nature of the work and the insecurity of the situation. Rational and meaningful staff security including social security can go a long way to increase sustainability.

While we cannot always get the type of volunteer and team member we need, do we have an ongoing process of staff development and enrichment that not only orients the staff to the goals of the organization, but consistently upgrades their knowledge and skills? Creative staff development provides space for every team member to discover his own strengths and potentials, and prevents the 'cog in the wheel' feeling that can be detrimental to sustainability.

EXTERNAL FACTORS

These are factors that operate at the interface between the project/agency and its targets, beneficiaries or partners.

Are staffs adequately oriented about whom they are trying to reach through the project initiatives? In institutional care this was relatively easy because we had a 'captive' target. In community oriented programmes this clarity is crucial. Are we focusing on all the community or those who are more marginalized or underserved? Are we reaching those who can be reached easily or are we focusing on reaching the unreached?

Does our team work from a superior cross cultural position looking down upon the community and its culture as different and inferior from their own? Or do they make attempts to reduce the gaps between 'us' and 'them', between literate and illiterate by identifying with the local culture and building bridges of understanding and share values?

A cultural gap between the 'provider' and the 'community served' can be a far greater barrier than even a physical structure like a wall between the project and the community.

Does our team understand our efforts as a skills transfer, demystification process so that the community and all our field partners grow in knowledge and skills or do the skills and information remain confined to us at the end of the process? My surmise is that sustainability of a project is directly proportional to the levels of demystification and skills transfer in a project since this is one of the key investments in community level sustainability.

Does our concept of participation mean the 'myopic' version that is rather common, of the community participating in the services we provide or does it involve the 'wide angle' view that 'we need to involve the community and its representatives' in all aspects of the planning, decision making, organization and evaluation aspects of the programme'? In the ultimate analysis this is probably the most crucial component of long term sustainability. Have we been able to generate a need, consumer awareness, and more importantly a consumer commitment to the continuation of the programmes?

Do our team members give primary importance to learning from their own field experience or do we base our actions on concepts and solutions imported from elsewhere? A corollary of this is the importance we give to feedback from the community and our field practice- especially from the grassroots level field worker and the community based volunteers. The more we focus on grassroots realities the more we will respond with creative solutions to local problems and the more sustainable will be the process we seek to promote.

FUNDING AGENCY FACTORS

Most funding partners are concerned about the issue of sustainability of projects they support and rightly so. However most of them do not realize that they themselves can be a major factor in the sustainability process, sometimes supporting it positively, and sometimes causing a problem.

Do our funding partners have a project or process orientation?

Understanding the work initiated by a partner as a process in the community, and not just as a time bound project with fixed time schedules and targets is very helpful since it allows the project to evolve gradually responding to local needs and constraints. However close may be the partners interaction or experience with a community, a project proposal can never predict all the possibilities and is at best a guesstimate or probability. So when targets are not achieved within a time schedule, both partner and funder must evaluate the problem together, asking why? And not, why not? This helps long term sustainability.

Do our funding partners have a quantity or quality orientation in evaluation?

Linked to the above factor is also the problem of evaluation by funding agencies which most often focuses on quantity indicators and not on quality indicators. Quantity indicators such as how much immunization was given and how many pills were distributed are given far more importance than quality indicators such as how many decisions were made by the locals and how many mothers have skills or knowledge now, which they did not have before etc. when 'providing' becomes more important than 'enabling'. Community participation which is crucial for long-term sustainability, is not activated adequately.

Is the relationship between our funding partners and us – an imposing or supporting relationship?

The funding agency- partner linkage is a major issue. When it is a true partnership with both funder and partner seeing the available funds as being held in trusteeship on behalf of the people, then sustainability is enhanced because the partnership is based on a relationship between two adults.

When the funder-partner linkage is a donor-beneficiary relationship, then the linkage become one between un-equals, and a parent-child or master-servant situation develops which is unhealthy. Funding agencies make subtle demands or lay down conditions couched in legal language and partners play games with the funder- presenting strengths and glossing over weaknesses. Transactional Analysis would then be a better solution than management theory!

Do our funding partners impose ideas from outside?

Closely linked to the above is the style of the funding agency. Does it impose ideas from outside? Does it force strategies that may have worked in other cultures and other countries but are not necessarily relevant to local realities? Does it derive all its professional support from resource persons in its own country or does it try to understand each country's realities and initiate dialogue with resource persons closer to the project situation? Does it stifle local initiative or support the generation of creative solutions by the locals themselves? Does it support collective exploration of locals themselves? Does it support collective exploration of local experience among its project partners?

Is our funding partner flexible or bureaucratic in its management style?

Is the planning, organization and evaluation of projects including funding decisions done in a flexible, participatory way or is the funding agency bureaucratic, imposing all sorts of requirements, reports, forms to be filled, indicators to be provided in a top down, bureaucratic way? The funding agency's

field/project officer can be a major support or block to the process of sustainability. However flexible or participatory the funding agency's management may be, it is at the interface between project officer and project partner that the process succeeds or fails. Orientation of field officers is therefore a major step towards the larger goal of building sustainable linkages.

Are we 'scaling up' due to pressure from our funders?

To expect successful efforts to scale up so that the impact of their efficiency or creativity can reach large numbers is a sensible proposition. But when scaling up, pressures from funders are imposed for extraneous reasons, such as a spirit of competition with other funding agencies, a reallocation or a self imposed diversion of funds to a predetermined objective, or based on naïve management theory that what works in 10 villages will now work in a hundred, or even worse, to keep administrative costs of the funding agency low: then these affect the sustainability process greatly. For example, scaling up of operations from 10 villages to a 100 villages in a year, or from 2 lakhs to 20 lakhs will put pressure on a process that will, in spite of earlier successes, make way for new unprecedented problems. Small is beautiful and creative, and does not necessarily continue when it becomes large! Also, a gradual scaling up helps the project to evolve its own realistic dynamic, creating linkages with the community resource groups and building up supportive funds, will gradually making the process more viable in the long run.

AGENCY –GOVERNMENT INTERACTION FACTORS

Do we collaborate with, compete with, or confront Government services?

The voluntary agency's own ideology vis-à-vis government programmes can be a major factor in sustainability. Does it collaborate, compete or confront government through its programmes? While all these may be perfectly legitimate in the context of the ideological framework in which the voluntary agency evolves, it does affect its sustainability – especially in terms of relationship or support from government.

Are we an accountable voluntary agency?

An accountable voluntary agency - accountable to the community, to the support groups (including funding) and to the government in the context of legal status etc - is far more sustainable than one that is isolationist in its ethos and world view and ad-hoc in its style of management.

If we collaborate with Government – is it 'critical' or co-opted collaboration?

Collaboration with government is an increasingly possible role because of the increasing recognition of the success and effectiveness of 'voluntary' effort. However there is a danger of co-option into the government system or loss of identity. The agency should therefore critically collaborate which means in practice, collaborating actively but complementing it with continuous feedback about grassroots realities including the community experience of government programmes and initiatives. Critical collaboration also means choosing programmes that fit with the agency's objectives and building up the space to experiment with alternative methods of functioning.

Is the Government attitude to us at state or local level, one of suspicion or of policing?

Governmental regulations are increasing and there are times when the regulations are based on suspicions of voluntary sector motivations or linkages. At the local level this can often result in government functionaries being threatening or 'policing' in their attitudes. This greatly affects sustainability of the process because vested interest or status quo forces at the community level can often use this as a means

to neutralize efforts. A good dialogue relationship with government at all levels is a 'preventive' that is worth investing in. While each agency cannot do this, networks associations, consultative committee etc, are good means of ensuring and evolving this relationship. Being active members of such networks and associations therefore helps sustainability.

MONITORING /EVALUATION RELATED FACTORS

Have we built good feedback mechanism from grassroots level upwards in our work?

Good feedback mechanism at all levels of a project and especially supportive of feedback at the project team- community interface is an investment in sustainability, since it ensures that the process is alive to local problems and emerging constraints if any. Regular feedback also helps to make concurrent or mid course corrections in plans.

Do we focus only on 'successes' or explore 'failures' as well?

Evaluation and monitoring often focus on strengths and Successes and not Weaknesses or failures. It seldom focuses on available Opportunities and assessment of Threats. Sustainability is greatly enhanced when a process is reflected upon in all these dimensions (SWOT sessions). Reflective evaluation on weaknesses and threats can help build staff morale. Both positive staff morale and creative alternative plans help the sustainability process.

Have we initiated a participatory process in our evaluation strategy?

Evaluation is often thrust on a project/process from outside, with experts coming to study the project. While this may inject a certain objectivity, it also causes insecurity. A participatory form of evaluation helps both project team and members of the beneficiary community to understand the objectives, the processes, the problems, and helps evaluation to become a learning experience for the future, thereby greatly enhancing its sustainability.

SUPPORT MECHANISM FACTORS

It has been mentioned earlier that sustainability is often seen only in financial/economic terms, but needs to be seen in a wider canvas, which have been outlined above. This is however not in any way to reduce the importance of finances or adequate monetary resources to meet our objectives. The attempt is to highlight that funds are an important factor but not a sufficient factor for sustainability.

Is our fund raising system a single source or a multisource one?

Multiple funding partners for activities conducted by organization help sustainability. A single source causes much insecurity on a long term, because of the vulnerability that could be caused by a change in relationship or policy. Each funding partner can support one sub-unit s that there is a stake in a specific activity, but funders should also be ready to pool resources for core costs, providing a small percentage of the budget.

Do we have a network of supporters or only large institutional grants?

Apart from large grants, voluntary agencies that build up a network or regular volunteers and support through small but regular financial contributions even from individuals, greatly enhance their own long term sustainability. The increased number of people who would be committed to seeing them through a financial crises or a problem enhances sustainability.

Do we have Patrons/Friends committed to our growth and development?

Many voluntary agencies initiate the concept of patrons and friends and because of the legal provisions they also need an executive committee and /or a governing board. Organizations which create these linkages with individuals for notional reasons and accept or even promote passive indifference are compromising their own sustainability. Committed and involved patrons and friends can be a great support in tapping available measures resources and can support fund raising particularly.

Do our friends and associates include competent technical resource persons as well?

Any organization that builds up linkages with friends who can be technical resources also help their own sustainability process. Sometimes technical resource or competence is as important a problem solver as adequate funds or managerial competence.

Is the national climate suitable for voluntary effort?

Finally, but not the least important, is the whole national climate –socio-economic, political and cultural- a contributory factor to sustainability! When there is stability, a sense of well being, a sense of direction and committed visionary leadership, such a climate itself acts as a great support to all types of voluntary effort. On the other hand as in the past two years in the country, when political instability, communal violence, strife and terrorism abound, pessimism sets in, affecting voluntary effort greatly, by paralyzing initiative and stifling creativity.

Sustainability therefore is a multi-dimensional concept and it is necessary for voluntary agencies and funding partners to explore a wide variety of factors to contribute to it. By operationalising meaningful strategies to make these factors positive supports and not negative obstacles to the evolving process of voluntary effort, sustainability can be ensured.

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