The Sustainability Curve

Published by SAMHSA’s GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation

Jac Charlier, MPA
Maureen McDonnell, BA
Center for Health and Justice
This work was conducted by SAMHSA’s GAINS Center for Behavioral Health and Justice Transformation, operated by Policy Research Associates, Inc., in collaboration with Treatment Alternatives for Safe Communities’s Center for Health and Justice, and was authored by Jac Charlier and Maureen McDonnell. Support for this work came from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Center for Mental Health Services (CMHS). The material contained in this publication does not necessarily represent the position of the SAMHSA Center for Mental Health Services.

GOALS OF THIS DOCUMENT

This paper presents a new framework for discussing the sustainability of two types of programs — pilot and time-limited (three to five year) — that lie at the intersection of criminal justice, behavioral health, and community systems. It introduces the concept of the “sustainability curve,” which provides a visual way to assess a program’s sustainability, especially as it changes over time. In addition, it introduces the Sustainability Indicator Tool (SIT).

YOU ARE WHAT YOU SUSTAIN

Not all programs are designed with the intent to last. Demonstration programs, which show whether an idea is workable, are slated to end within a predetermined time frame. Pilot programs are short-term studies that help determine the feasibility of a large-scale project. Still other programs are launched with the full blessing of funders, yet to go the distance, must use their allotted time to do more than survive in the present — they must create a path that showcases why they should be allowed to continue for the foreseeable future.

Can we identify the steps programs take today that position them for a healthy future for their mission? This involves looking at factors that contribute to sustainability: the ability to make good strategic decisions to assess which program activities should continue and the foresight to invest resources in ways that render the programs sustainable over the long term.

For pilot and time-limited initiatives, being able to assess sustainability and react accordingly could spell success. Appropriate reactions to specific programs can range from acknowledging that a program or some of its components should end to focused efforts to “bend the sustainability curve.” Being able to gauge sustainability accurately will allow us to withhold our limited resources from projects that should not be allowed to continue and to wholeheartedly support those that merit our full attention.

THE SUSTAINABILITY CURVE

We can view sustainability over the course of a time-limited program as having a start and an end. Between Year 1 of the program and the final year is a period of “ongoing” activity, which can range from two to four years.

These three time periods are represented on Figure 1 on the horizontal (x) axis, which represents time:

Figure 1. The Three Time Periods in the Life of a Program

What becomes clear is that we need a way to represent the level of sustainability so we can see a program’s current sustainability, how it has changed over time, and most importantly, where it is trending. To do this, we take into account that sustainability has both conceptual and practical elements.
**Conceptual elements** constitute the value of the program, which must be reinforced to the individuals, institutions, and systems that can help the program achieve sustainability. Articulating that value will be as varied as the audiences to which the message is presented.

**Practical elements** are the steps programs can take to build a strong foundation for sustainability:

- Start as early as possible in the program to think about, plan for, and support sustainability.
- Ensure your vision has meaning by tying benefits to public sentiment or policy priorities.
- Clearly define your value. Closely tied to your vision, this step involves being able to succinctly articulate the need for your program, its benefit, and the goal you’re working toward.
- Activate your story by involving consumers, peers, and family members, not only in the planning process, but in conversations with stakeholders, policymakers, and the general public.
- Leverage opportunities and relationships by engaging with other programs, groups, or activities whose scope overlaps that of your program.
- Take advantage of technologies such as social media and online video to reinforce the progress and value of your program.
- Be prepared to seize upon news events that offer opportunities for you to cast your vision far and wide.

Each element has its own sustainability value. By value, we mean a numerical way of measuring strength with respect to sustainability. When the respective values of these elements are added together, the resulting value represents the overall level of sustainability. These values are represented on the vertical (y) axis. For our examples, we have arbitrarily assigned values to the three time periods (start, ongoing, end) using a combined sustainability scale of 10, with 5 being the maximum value for conceptual sustainability and 5 also being the maximum value for practical sustainability. Note the sustainability scale could go up to 100, 1,000, or any other number for that matter. The value of 10 is arbitrary, but as we view both conceptual and practical sustainability as equal partners in a program’s sustainability, they are assigned equal values, which together total the top of the sustainability scale (10/2=5). See Figure 2.

Figure 2. Sustainability over Time

It is normal that programs vary in their starting and ongoing sustainability, but not in their end sustainability, which for time-limited and pilot programs, we will say, for now, is always 0.
It is important to keep in mind that the manner in which a program was *originally* implemented does not dictate its design throughout its lifetime. Indeed, being sustainable is about staying relevant. For example, a program that has almost everything it needs at the start but never works on its sustainability could look like Figure 3.

Figure 3. Program with No Sustainability Efforts

![Graph showing sustainability over time](image)

Similarly, a program that starts with the basics – enough to get going but not in a very strong position – yet works on building its future by focusing on sustainability could look like Figure 4.

Figure 4. Program Focused on Sustainability

![Graph showing sustainability over time](image)

Now, if you look back at Figure 2, you will see a program that started well enough, yet focused minimally on and off on sustainability. As a result, it never grew, but it was able to hang on for a while before it ultimately ended.

From this very straightforward framework, we can make an initial observation. The figures visually reinforce a critical point: a program must focus on both conceptual and practical sustainability. Focusing on only one element of sustainability cannot yield a sustainability value above 5. Likewise, focusing minimally on either yields a low sustainability value. This is represented visually by sustainability values of 5 or less.

The implications of this first observation are several. First, programs that drop below a sustainability value of 5 must quickly redouble their efforts in one or both elements of sustainability. If this sustainability value
represents an overall downward trend, programs should seek immediate technical assistance. Second, programs should not be implemented until they have a starting sustainability value of 5 or at the very least an upward trending value. Further, sustainability can be measured prior to start (“pre-start” in Figure 5 below), with the sustainability value potentially serving as a prerequisite to program implementation. In practice and with sufficient data collection, the Sustainability Start Caution Threshold (SSCT) indicator could be adjusted up or down based on historical data and as desired by funders.

Figure 5. Sustainability Start Caution Threshold (SSCT) Indicator

Low sustainability values are caused by: 1) not having a sustainability plan, which results in efforts that are not strategic and not aligned, and 2) having a sustainability plan and not working on it much or at all, with too much attention focused on day-to-day operations so that sustainability efforts get pushed aside.

A FEW MORE PIECES OF THE CURVE

We can learn more about sustainability by adding other pieces to the curve. First, because sustainability work occurs over the life of the program, sustainability efforts must be started as early as possible, preferably on what is termed “day two.” Figure 6 is an example of a program that does not focus on sustainability early and often enough, and when it finally does, it is too little too late. For this example only, notice the newly added time “end in sight.” Note too how this program’s curve touches the SSCT while in the ongoing time period, a sign to managers that something is amiss.

Figure 6. Sustainability Focus Too Late in the Life Cycle
Second, we can also see that, over time, programs change due to both internal and external forces. A program must work on its sustainability just as it works on its operations; sustainability efforts must not take a back seat to day-to-day operations. Innovations enter the “market” of your work and old ways move out; political supporters come and go; advocates retire; and local, national, and world events may bring sudden, rapid change to your part of the world. These events alone or together can represent disruption, opportunity, and even both.

See Figure 7 with the addition of two new times – “disruption” and “opportunity.” Seen from this new perspective, to be sustainable means your program has a relevant mission over time that remains supported through disruption and expands through opportunity. From the start, taking advantage of the momentum of, interest in, and focus on your program will relieve the burden of having to redo that same heavy lifting down the road. You want your sustainability to trend up from the very start.

![Figure 7. Sustainability Showing Disruption and Opportunity](image)

Not only do programs change, but the balance between conceptual and practical sustainability can also change. For example, consider a new program that starts with great hope and a flurry of activity to better address the challenges of domestic violence victims who are charged with crimes related to their abuse. With much fanfare and sincere commitment, it begins with a 5 in conceptual sustainability and a 4 in practical sustainability (we have omitted pre-start for this example). This runs for a few years. Suddenly, a major political shift (disruption) takes place, and the elected and appointed champions of the program are no longer in positions of influence. The 5 in conceptual sustainability drops to a 3, as does practical sustainability. Ongoing disruption continues to erode both elements of sustainability. Eventually, a few years down the road, only a few vestiges remain of what once was. And that brings us to our next point.

Notice something new on Figure 8. The end value for overall program sustainability is 1, not 0 (due to practical sustainability having a value of 1). This visually represents that the program itself has ended, but what was learned has future value.

We have so far represented all programs as concluding, which means at the end they have an overall sustainability value of 0. This is true at some point for the program in its original form; however this may not actually be the case for parts of the program at its conclusion. Ideas, policies, processes, staff, and other resources can be sustained elsewhere, perhaps in a redesigned or modified version of the original program. Over its life, your program did some good things. If recorded, remembered (institutionalized), evaluated, and supported, those pieces may be replicable, adjusting for context, and worthwhile to implement elsewhere. This may be a new case management model, an IT system, a collaborative decision-making platform, or whatever people saw as important, useful, and worth telling the world about.
In this context, the “new” program that evolved from the original one will start with a sustainability score greater than 0.

Note that it may be either the conceptual (the idea) or practical (the procedures and process) elements of sustainability, or both, that go on to live another day. We term this “sustain” in Figure 8.

**Figure 8. Know What You Want to Sustain**

![Graph showing sustainability curve]

**PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE SUSTAINABILITY CURVE**

Finally, we offer three more time periods to the sustainability curve: “momentum,” “normalization,” and “decay.” These, along with “pre-start,” “start,” “disruption,” “opportunity,” “end” and “sustain,” complete the curve.

**Figure 9. The Full Sustainability Curve**

![Graph showing full sustainability curve]

Momentum represents the energy, excitement, and focus in your program. Your staff is excited, sponsors are focused, (new) things are happening, and there is energy in the air. Capitalize on this before it passes. Momentum is not long lasting and is visually represented by a short-lived line moving upward, possibly at a steep angle. Momentum differs from opportunity in that opportunity will show a line rising, possibly gradually, for a longer period of time.

Normalization involves achieving a balance between operations and sustainability that works for the present program demands, as well as the future vision of the program. The balance need not incorporate
equal amounts of each but does require the “right” amount of each. What works for one program may not for another. Further, normalization does not mean stable operations, as one might assume. There may be external volatility, but internally, program components continue to function as they should. To draw an analogy, consider an airplane flying in turbulent weather. The plane is functioning properly, the in-flight movie is playing, passengers and crew are doing what they do, but the flight is bumpy. Despite the bumpy flat, the plane lands just fine. This is visually represented by a line moving slightly up, slightly down, oscillating between up and down, or remaining flat. This turbulence is normal.

Decay results from the loss of relevance of the vision that was once the basis of the program. It is due in large part to a declining effort by the program on sustainability. Decay, which can last many years, is visually represented by a line gradually moving down, as juxtaposed to disruption, which is represented by a line that declines rapidly and possibly over a shorter time. Prolonged periods of repeated flat lines can be a precursor to decay, depending on the sustainability value associated with the curve.

**APPLYING THE SUSTAINABILITY CURVE FOR YOUR PROGRAM: THE SUSTAINABILITY INDICATOR TOOL**

The value of the sustainability curve lies in having a quick, visual way of assessing your program’s sustainability. The Sustainability Indicator Tool (SIT) will help you to draw your program’s unique curve. SIT is a brief screening tool that allows you to determine the values associated with conceptual and practical elements of sustainability that can then be plotted on a simple figure. From there, you can assign labels indicating momentum, decay, opportunity, etc., so you can quickly see where you are trending, if you need to act and how quickly, and when it is time to celebrate. When used over the life of a program, you gain data that can provide a historical perspective on sustainability. Further, with sufficient data collected over many programs, sustainability modeling can be conducted.