

WHAT DOES 'SUSTAINABILITY' REALLY MEAN FOR SYSTEMS CHANGE PROGRAMMES?

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In a competition for the most overused words in market systems development, I think there would be some strong contenders, but I'm pretty sure the word 'sustainability' is as familiar to you as losing on penalties is to England's national football team.¹

Arguably, our obsession with 'sustainability' is more than justified. The ambition to achieve sustainable outcomes, at scale, is what drove the development of the market systems development approach in the first place. It remains the reason we think all the additional effort, resources and time needed to implement a systemic approach to development is worth it. There's no reason I can see not to make our work all about sustainability.

There's really only one problem: I'm not 100% convinced we all agree on what 'sustainability' in market systems development means.

At face value, sustainability is straightforward to define – it simply means the ability to be sustained. But what is often assumed, and far less often explicitly stated, is *what* exactly should be sustained.

Does sustainability refer to the sustainability of a particular **actor** (for example, a social enterprise grows, reinvesting profits in its services and products), the sustainability of **benefits** (for example, a group of individuals whose income has doubled over the course of a programme is able to maintain or even improve the higher level of income), or the sustainability of **behaviour changes** (for example, factory owners continue to train and employ women)?

Whilst this question is pertinent for any programme, it is of particular importance for a systems-change programme. I know this is controversial in some circles, but I really struggle to get my head around the ethics of stepping in to solve some problem we have identified and calling it 'development'.

- We think young adults aren't getting jobs because they don't have decent training so...*WE'LL TRAIN THEM.*
- We think female small business owners are being discriminated against by banks so...*WE'LL GIVE THEM AFFORDABLE LOANS.*
- We think rural villagers' health is suffering because people don't have enough information about the benefits of improved sanitation, so...*WE'LL FUND A PUBLIC HEALTH CAMPAIGN.*

I'm not saying doing these things is never beneficial... it might be. It might even change some people's lives for the better, permanently. But the bigger problem – the *systemic* problem that caused the injustice and suffering in the first place – will still be there when the money runs out. In fact, the really dirty secret is that it might well be *worse* after the big – but temporary – bucks have undermined longer-term solutions that might have otherwise emerged.

¹ Sorry fellow Brits – is it still too soon?

So if helping a few people doesn't amount to sustainable systemic change, even if they continue to benefit, what does?

Well firstly, we do (of course!) want benefits – or 'impact' as we sometimes call it – to last long after a donor-funded development intervention is a distant memory. It's just that we want those benefits to become 'the new normal' instead of just being available to the 'lucky few' who were supported by the programme.

For this to happen, the *system* needs to deliver the things that will yield those benefits. To take the examples above:

- The *system* needs to provide better quality training to young adults
- The *system* needs to provide more affordable loans to female business owners
- The *system* needs to provide more information about sanitation to rural villagers

To use a technical MSD term, we'd say the 'performance' of training, or finance, or public health information needs to improve in order for people to get jobs, grow their businesses, or improve their sanitation-related health outcomes. (In practical terms, 'performance' is just a measure of the *quality, quantity, price, yield, timing or inclusivity* of something being supplied in the system – in these cases training, finance and information.²)

We're getting closer to a definition of sustainability now: for benefits to last long term, improved system performance needs to last long term. But what about the behaviour changes that drive those improvements – do they also need to stick?

The answer to that is... sort of.

Let's look at our examples again. Imagine that:

- Better quality training is available because public technical and vocational education and training centres are collaborating with the private sector to ensure their curriculum is relevant to the needs of potential employers.
- More affordable loans are available because banks have realised profit can be made from developing financial products targeting female business owners.
- More information is available to rural villagers because the provincial government is disseminating public health messages through multiple avenues, including door-to-door campaigns.

Clearly, for the improvements to last, these behaviour changes need to last... but there is one caveat: adaptiveness is a good thing!

Behaviours that work well now might not work well in five- or ten-years' time. For example, as more rural villagers work in urban factories, going door-to-door with sanitation messages might not be a good way to reach people. It might be better for the provincial government to start using social media to disseminate sanitation information, or maybe it's time for employers to take more of an

² Thanks to Jake Lomax for clarity on this definition. See Lomax (2018) 'Mechanisms of Social Change'. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327883903_Mechanisms_of_Social_Change_Outline_of_a_conceptual_framework

active role in public health messaging. Surely our definition of sustainability needs to account for behaviours growing, adapting and evolving in the face of changing conditions, right?

Yes, right! If behaviours are not adaptive, benefits will not be resilient – and thus will not be sustainable for long. This is the conclusion we have come to. It is insufficient to define sustainability *only* in terms of lasting benefits because those benefits could have arisen independently – they might have nothing to do with programme activities at all. We can't just say "people are getting information about sanitation, ten years later, so our work has been sustainable" unless we can point to a link between what we did and how people are getting information. On the other hand, it is also insufficient to define sustainability only in terms of the ongoing presence of the behaviour changes a programme supported, because we would expect those behaviours to adapt and change in the face of changing conditions. We can't just say "provincial government officers are still going door-to-door with sanitation information, ten years later, so our work was sustainable" because, let's be honest, that might not be a good thing!

So what are we left with, other than a 1,000-word blog about the definition of a single word?

Here's our working definition here at Springfield – markets systems development programmes can define sustainability as:

- Lasting benefits for an identified target group, which are...
- Driven by lasting improvements to system performance, which are in turn...
- Driven by behaviour changes that last for as long as they continue to yield benefits, but then adapt and evolve so that they continue to yield the same benefits over time.

Can you improve on our definition? How do you define sustainability in your programmes?