Monitoring the Sustainability of Child-Focused Programs: The Philippine Experience

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Introduction

One main contributory factor to the success or failure of a program or project is the absence or lack of sustainability indicators and mechanisms that would ensure the flow of benefits, local action and initiative on the part of local organizations, i.e. once external funding support for the program/project has ceased.

A common experience cited by social development practitioners and managers is the failure of their organization to design an effective and comprehensive sustainability monitoring and evaluation plan, which would have put in place the necessary mechanisms for developing and sustaining local capacities and resources for continuing program management.

Some organizations only began to realize the importance of specifying their indicators for phase out very close to the end of program implementation. The absence of sustainability indicators made it difficult on their part to assess the people's readiness and capabilities to assume the lead role in program management and operation.

Cognizant of these factors, the *"Sustainability Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation"* or *SPME* technology was designed and introduced by the author, who advocated for the application and utilization of SPME in selected development programs of the Christian Children's Fund (CCF), a child-focused organization. The SPME sought to equip concerned sectors with needed knowledge and skills to sustain their programs/projects.

OBJECTIVES

This article highlights the experiences in the application and utilization of the SPME technology in a child-focused organization. Piloted in selected areas of the Philippines, it has the following main parts:

- A. Sustainability Concepts and Components
- B. SPME Development Process
- C. SPME Application and Utilization
- D. Lessons and Insights
- E. Suggested Framework for Installation of the SPME in Child-Focused Programs

Its objectives, as applied to CCF were: *1.* to develop an integrated SPME design for child-focused programs; *2.* to construct SPME instruments to measure program performance; *3.* to monitor and assess the extent of application and utilization of the SPME design; *4.* to provide continuing technical assistance to SPME design users; and *5.* to improve the SPME design based on documentation/assessment results.

A. Sustainability Concepts and Components

Sustainability is the basic measure of success of any program or project at any level. It is the ability of a group or an organization to effectively manage and carry out a program or project after donor assistance ends. It refers to the program's capacity to continue to deliver intended benefits, continue local action and initiatives, and generate successor services over an extended period of time.

A sustainable program or project would have the following components:

1. Organizational structure that will develop, manage and sustain implementing agency's interventions and processes is identified and strengthened. This means that -

   + The community association is able to perform program development tasks with very minimal support from the implementing agency.

   + It has clear vision, mission, goals and objectives that are well understood and accepted by the members.

+ Both officers and members of the association jointly undertake program/activity planning, implementation and evaluation.

+ The association is able to design new or modify existing programs based on assessment of community or sector needs and situation.

2. A demonstrated capacity of a community association to mobilize support from different sources, as well as effectively utilize resources for project implementation. This means that -

   + It can identify available sources of support from within and outside the community.

   + It is able to mobilize needed support and resources (both technical and material).

   + The association has instituted and implemented a system of resource generation and management guided by the principles of transparency and accountability.

3. A capacity to develop and sustain partnership with NGOs and GOs to realize development aims. This means that -

   + It is well represented in local structure of governance.

   + Association representatives regularly and actively participate in group/network deliberation and decision-making.

   + The association can initiate discussion of local or sector issues and advocate for their resolution.

   + The association undertakes community-wide activities jointly with other organizations (government and non-government) operating in their areas.

   + It is able to share and generate resources together with other organizations.

4. The development process is institutionalized or integrated into established organizational systems. Some of the manifestations are:

    + Its members are able to identify and meet their own needs

    + The systems, functions and procedures are clear and properly disseminated to and understood by the members, as well as designed in a participatory manner.

    + The community association (composed of children or parents) has built-in mechanisms and processes for membership or sector participation in program/project development phases: from needs identification to plan formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

Sustainability Factors

Several evaluation studies have shown that the success or sustainability of a program would depend on the presence of the following factors:

PARTICIPATION: Extent of involvement in areas of decision making, resource allocation, and coordination of organizational linkages. It also refers to the demonstration of a sense of ownership and commitment of project constituents and beneficiaries in project management, i.e. planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

LEADERSHIP: Ability and actual demonstration of knowledge, skills and attitude to provide necessary direction to the project, to mobilize the project constituents to action and reflection, and to facilitate effective decision-making within the project organizational set-up.

CAPABILITY BUILDING: Activities to develop the knowledge, attitude, and skills (KAS) of project constituents and beneficiaries to discharge the tasks of project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. It also refers to the development of capacities to set up appropriate organizational structures and systems as well as technologies for the project.

COST RECOVERY/PROFITABILITY: Ability to generate income, employment and savings for continuing or expanded business operation.

EQUITY AND ACCESS: Provision and availability of services, resources and opportunities to as many persons or groups as possible, regardless of sex and religious, ethnic and political beliefs or persuasions.

USE OF LOCAL RESOURCES: Knowledge and utilization of available resources within and around the project areas. It also refers to the adoption of appropriate technologies, i.e. those that are culturally and socially acceptable and within the resource capacities of the community residents.

ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP: Recognition and actual performance of roles and responsibilities to protect, preserve and conserve the natural environment.

SUSTAINABILITY FACTORS

B. SPME Development Process

The SPME Approach has three major phases: 1- Design Phase; 2- Implementation Phase; and 3 – Assessment and Improvement Phase.

Phase One: Design Phase

Prior to the implementation of the SPME, a series of training workshops on SPME technology for various groups was held. The training participants were program managers, project coordinators, project affiliate members, and community representatives. The training workshops articulated the child-focused organization's desire to design an integrated and comprehensive monitoring and evaluation plan in order to systematize its operation and maximize program efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability.

The training series was part of a continuing process towards the finalization of a sustainability monitoring and evaluation design. Further, consultation meetings with management and other program consultants were done to review, refine and finalize the design.

The major programs piloted for the SPME were:

- ✦ Micro-Enterprise or Livelihood Development
- ✦ Integrated Health, Nutrition, Environment and Sanitation (IHNES)
- ✦ Child-Sponsor Relations (CSR)
- ✦ Early Child Care & Development (ECCD)
- ✦ Expanding Children's Participation in Social Reform (ECPSR)

Each program had its own set of indicators and monitoring and evaluation (M & E) tool. SPME sought to integrate the M & E indicators and tools of all these programs, and to systematize and synchronize the conduct of M & E for greater efficiency.

Pilot testing of SPME was done in five project affiliates (PAs) located in different areas of the country. A project affiliate is a field level agency or organization that receives regular funding and technical support for its programs from an outside agency. The main criterion for area selection was the presence of three or more of the aforementioned programs. The SPME Team documented the application process.

The Design Phase included the following activities:

- Consolidation and Validation of SPME Training Outputs
- Formulation of SPME Framework
- Development and Pre-test of SPME Instruments
- Periodic consultation meetings with CCF management and staff

Phase Two: Implementation Phase

This Phase involves the application of the design by the project affiliates. The instruments that were developed sought to facilitate assessment of utility and effectiveness of the design in program management and implementation. SPME Consultants also visited some program areas to provide necessary technical support.

1. **Activities Undertaken During the Field Visits**

The SPME Team undertook the following activities during field visits of the pilot areas.

a. Review of SPME design and monitoring schemes used by each project affiliate.

b. Consultation workshops with the following groups: Project Affiliate (PA) management, staff and the governing board; Parent Association leaders; Children and Youth Association leaders; and partner organizations. The workshops focused on the following:

- Surfacing of issues/problems with regard to SPME design application and utilization.
- Provision of needed technical inputs on issues/problems identified.
- Hands-on exercises on indicator formulation.
- Validation/ Pretest of Sustainability Index/Checklist.
- Identification of next "action steps" for consideration by the team in its subsequent field visits.

c. Organization of SPME Ad-hoc Committee to assist the project affiliate (PA) in its SPME tasks/activities - composed of representatives from the children, youth, and parents associations as well as the

project affiliate staff. The Committee is tasked to assist the PA in its application of the SPME tool, including the validation of monitoring data.

2. Preparatory to the Workshop Proper

Before the workshop proper, the Team met with the PA management and staff to determine specific issues and concerns related to SPME application and utilization and to incorporate responses to these issues/concerns in the workshop content and methodology.

One main concern or area of difficulty expressed by the project affiliates prior to the workshop exercises was their inability to formulate specific indicators according to timeframe - immediate, intermediate and long-term. They also mentioned the need to simplify instructions and format particularly on indicator formulation.

The Team prepared a workshop design that met the needs and expectations of the Project Affiliates.

Based on the assessment of the workshop content and process, participants generally found them more simplified (compared to the previous inputs), clear and easily understood.

3. The Sustainability Index/Checklist

The Team developed a Sustainability Index instrument and corresponding Rating Guidelines for use by the project affiliates in assessing the degree of strength/weakness of each project sustainability factor or component, as follows: *participation; leadership; capability building; equity and access; profitability/cost recovery; use of local resources; and environmental stewardship.* Participants were later asked for their suggestions on how the "weak" component/s of the program can be improved.

The Index/Checklist was validated with the project affiliate management and staff. Corrections/suggestions for further improvement were noted. The final Sustainability Index/Checklist evolved from the Team's consultation and validation meetings with representatives of the five project affiliates. For instance, two more sustainability factors were added to the original list, i.e. leadership and use of local resources. These were found important in sustaining development projects.

The SPME Ad Hoc Committee members translated the Index/Checklist in the local dialects which signified the interest of both the project affiliate staff and the community participants to really apply and utilize the SPME technology.

4. **Post-Workshop**

The Team conducted a debriefing session with the PA Coordinator and staff prior to end of the consultation visits which focused on anticipated problems in SPME application, and the "next steps" after the visit.

Phase Three: Assessment and Design Improvement Phase

Monitoring of SPME design application was done on a periodic basis. The SPME Consultants conducted an assessment, applying methods of participatory research techniques and in-depth examination of project reports and other pertinent documents. The assessment focused on whether the design has helped in ensuring that sustainability mechanisms have been put in place and are actually functional.

C. Lessons and Insights

The following are some of the lessons and insights gained from the application and utilization of the SPME technology:

1. What do project affiliates need to attain sustainability objectives/indicators?

+ Familiarity and appreciation of SPME concepts and technology.
+ Enhanced capability to analyze and utilize monitoring and evaluation (M & E) data from the perspective or framework of project sustainability.
+ Validation of M & E data (drawing of implications there from) with the target sectors (parents, youth, children, staff).
+ Creation of a structure for ensuring the application and utilization of SPME for policy and program development purposes.

2. What issues and concerns were identified in relation to the attainment of sustainability objectives/indicators?

+ The need for a more simplified monitoring and evaluation tool for easier understanding and appreciation.
+ Limited capability for data consolidation and analysis.
+ Possible resistance due to perceived implications on workload; lack of readiness and willingness to undergo SPME because of possible "pressures" to perform/deliver as expected.
+ Need for a paradigm shift – for greater innovativeness and creativity in designing project interventions to enhance the chance of project sustainability.

3.   How were the aforementioned issues and concerns addressed?

+ Development of a manual (detailed guidelines) for SPME design application and utilization.
+ Provision of technical assistance in data collection and analysis.
+ Conduct of motivational strategies to address resistance to change, lack of readiness and willingness.
+ More systematic and integrated approach in project interventions.

4. What were some effectiveness measures of the SPME tool?

+ Progressive movement of project indicators (or improvement in level of project performance) over a specified timeframe (from immediate, intermediate to long-term).

+ Demonstrated capability of the project affiliate staff and community participants to conduct M & E on their own.

+ A shift in approach to monitoring on the part of the National Office staff – with more time spent on discussions of technical inputs rather than on review of project records/documents during field visits.

+ Demonstrated capability of the National Office and PA staff to consolidate and analyze field level data, and identify appropriate interventions or project response to address recurring issues and concerns at the field level.

+ Increased capacity of the National Office and PA staff to utilize SPME data for policy and program development purposes.

D. Suggested Framework for Installation of the SPME in Child-Focused Programs

A combination of factors has produced readiness for installing SPME in child-focused organizations:

The following is a formula for introducing change in an organization, which may be used.

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PARTICIPATION

$$C \times C = (D + V + K) \times BIS - PC$$

Where:

$C \times C$ = Choice and Commitment to change

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While change in an organization can be effected through the coercive power of the leaders of the organization, change is deeper and more enduring if there is a deliberate choice and personal commitment to change by those who are affected by, or will implement, the change.

If there is no deliberate choice and no commitment to the change, i.e., both are "0", then, change will not happen. There must be a conscious decision to install SPME — at the top level of management as well as at the operational level.

D = Dissatisfaction with the status quo

There must be a strong feeling that the present system of managing projects, which does not deliberately look at sustainability, is not meeting desired expectations. Benefits from projects are not being sustained. Projects themselves are not sustainable. Therefore, there is need for change.

V = Clear vision of the way the project is to be

Project affiliates have to have a clear picture of a project that is producing benefits, recovering its costs, participated in by beneficiaries, and has very high chances of continuing, even after external funding assistance has ceased.

K = Knowledge of the first steps

This refers to knowing the first few activities that have to be undertaken to institute the change. In the case of SPME, this may include:

+ Raising awareness on concept and importance of sustainability
+ Equipping key project affiliate staff on skills and knowledge on how to monitor sustainability
+ Providing further training and technical assistance on SPME

Note that $\underline{D + V + K}$ must be added up; taken together, they enhance the readiness for change.

BIS = Belief in Self and one's ability to change

The project affiliates themselves must possess the belief that they can learn SPME, that they can install it in their project; and that they can undertake sustainability project monitoring and evaluation.

If $BIS = 0$, that is, the project does not believe that it can install SPME, then change will not happen, even if there is *dissatisfaction with status quo*, there is a *clear vision* of the way, and the *first steps are known*.

PC = Price of changing, in economic and psychological terms

Installing SPME in the project will have a price. Time, money and effort must be invested. Furthermore, there will have to be a 'letting go' of the way M & E has been done before.

The price of changing has to be compared with all the preceding factors, because the 'push' towards change must be strong enough to effect the change.

Taking the various terms altogether:

✔ If the price of changing *is greater than* the 'product' of the *Belief* that the project is capable of changing and the sum of the {dissatisfaction with status quo + clear vision of the way you want it to be + knowledge of first steps} then the desired change will not happen.

✔ Conversely, if the price of changing is less than those factors taken together then change will happen.

References

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