Guest Editorial

The relationships of program and organizational capacity to program sustainability: What helps programs survive?

1. Program capacity and sustainability: what helps programs survive?

Even the most effective program faces two challenges: maintaining or expanding its capacity and sustaining its effectiveness over time. An obvious reason for these challenges involves funding issues. Government funding is tight for human services, and it is only getting tighter, due to, among other things, current funding priorities, large budget deficits, and a current focus on aiding an aging population. Although the challenge of sustaining or growing program capacity might not be a primary focus of most, including program funders and evaluators, it is of great importance to the practitioners who run them.

This special issue of *Evaluation and Program Planning* is devoted to better understanding factors that help organizations sustain themselves while they maintain or expand the size of their program(s). It poses the question: How might program planning and evaluations help organizations build on their ideas, develop their capacities, improve their operations, and sustain their functioning? We believe that evaluators have focused insufficiently on organizational and program capacity and sustainability, and such a line of inquiry is long overdue. Program effectiveness, as well as organizational and program capacity and sustainability, are fundamental issues that must be understood for an organization to build and maintain programs. If evaluation demonstrates a program to be effective, then surely other important questions will follow, such as how to expand service slots for those who need it and how to sustain the organization and its related programs into the future.

While practitioners who work in areas, such as internal evaluation and participatory evaluation, touch on these issues, they are rarely explicit about them. At the same time, federal policy analysts often look to expand and replicate empirically validated program models. Although they are ever-alert to the failures of policy implementation, they often operate without appreciation of the local forces that make sustainability and capacity possible.

2. Definitions

In this special issue, we look at capacity at both the organizational and program levels. Therefore, we consider a two-fold definition of capacity that takes both levels into account. *Capacity for both programs and organizations* can be defined as the adequacy of inputs (knowledge, financial resources, trained personnel, well-managed strategic partnerships, etc.) necessary to carry out a program and achieve desired outcomes. It can also mean service capacity, as in the number of clients that can be served and the dose of treatment (i.e. intensity, duration, and relevance) that can be given (Hunter & Koopmans, 2006). In both uses of this term, capacity is grounded in a program's logic model and the organizational theory of change of which it is a part. Such a theory of change must answer fundamental questions such as: what levels and kinds of resources are required to achieve immediate, intermediate, and ultimate objectives, both at the organizational (e.g. long-term sustainability) and program (e.g. strong participant outcomes) levels? By developing a strong theory of change, an organization identifies a clear plan for best utilizing its resources as inputs to create the outputs that (it hopes) will result in the achievement of its desired objectives (including, but not limited to, program participant outcomes).

If we consider how programs and organizations have capacity when they possess the parts they need to perform well, then it makes sense to assume that *capacity building* focuses on the process by which those programs and organizations use those parts in optimal ways. Simply having the resources is not enough. Programs and organizations must develop core skills and capabilities, such as leadership, management, and fundraising abilities, and they must utilize the insight and knowledge they gain in ways that address problems and implement change effectively (Center for Philanthropy & Nonprofit Leadership, 2006).

Program sustainability has been operationalized in a variety of ways. In a recent review of the literature on program sustainability, Scheirer (2005) offers a critique of available operational definitions of this topic and notes that sustainability is defined differently across existing studies. Recently, Pluye and colleagues (2004) asserted that programs are sustainable

when their essential activities are routinized in the organizations that house them. It seems logical that a program—and the organization that runs it—should have capacity in order to be sustainable. In line with this reasoning, we offer the following provisional view of program sustainability: Program sustainability exists when elements essential to a program's effectiveness continue to operate over time, within a stable organization, at stable or increased organizational and service capacity.

Upstream, midstream, and downstream factors affect organizational and program sustainability and capacity. By downstream factors, we mean those issues that directly impinge upon implementation, such as local demand, resources, and staffing. Upstream factors include funding: The priorities and resources of funders such as government, private foundations and the United Way (and, as well, the ability and willingness of clients to pay for the program or service).

Midstream factors include the characteristics of the organizations that house and run programs. The diversity is enormous in terms of scale, complexity, and reach. Think of neighborhood-based single-service providers (e.g. faith-based after-school programs); community mental health centers; community development corporations and settlement houses; local school districts; Federally Qualified Health Centers; or the national organizations sponsoring local affiliates or chapters (e.g. the American Heart Association, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America). Organizations may house more than one program, as when a school district operates both an adult education program and a special education program that is split off from its 'mainstream' schools. Or, programs may be implemented across many organizations, as when the federal Compensatory Education program spans state educational agencies and local school districts, or when the Heart at Work program is implemented by local Heart Association chapters. While many of this country's largest and most important social or human service programs are run by the public sector, some are offered by the corporate sector. This special issue of *Evaluation and Program Planning* particularly focuses on nonprofit organizations and the programs they run.

It should be obvious that *organizational capacity* comprises an important set of midstream factors that influence program capacity and sustainability. We define organizational capacity as the ability to (1) manage its operations successfully over time, (2) run programs in conformity to the performance criteria spelled out in their logic models, and (3) implement and complete new projects or expand existing ones.

Evaluators sometimes make the valid point that organizational survival and capacity are not the same things as program sustainability and capacity (Scheirer, 2005). However, programs are inherently context-constrained—they are implemented locally, by organizations. Therefore, we believe that *local* program sustainability and capacity are intimately linked with *local* organizational survival and capacity. And, *across* settings, program sustainability and capacity are linked to *prevalent* organizational capacity

and survival. The point is simple: Just as it is difficult to build a solid house on a cracked foundation, it is virtually impossible to build a high-quality, effective and sustainable program in an organization that lacks resources, staffing, and leadership to stand on its own. This perspective raises a fundamental question that more often than not goes unasked: If organizational capacity affects program capacity and sustainability, which organizations can implement which programs? We believe that implementation or process evaluations look at this matter obliquely and always through too narrow a lens. It is essential that such an effort assess the organizational capacity as a whole when examining program implementation. Only if this happens can formative evaluations, and the summative (outcome and impact) evaluations that follow, provide helpful guidance for assessing the validity (effectiveness, efficacy, and sustainability) of programs.

It is well recognized that upstream and midstream organizational characteristics have powerful effects on program implementation (e.g. Brock, 2003; Davis & Salasin, 1975; Pressman & Wildavsky, 1984; Scheirer, 1981). At the same time, organizations that house programs are strongly affected by program decisions. It must be noted, however, that capacity building is rooted in collaboration between organizations and their programs. In order to expand capacity, organizations and programs must share ownership and power in advancing their successes and solving their problems (Gray, 1989). This is not an area that has received much attention from evaluators. As seen in several articles of this special issue, programs and the organizations that house and deliver them are engaged in a dynamic relationship and exercise reciprocal influences on each other.

3. Article highlights

Seven articles comprise this special issue. These derive from the efforts of two major philanthropies, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (EMCF) and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF), to understand both organizational and program capacity and sustainability. The approaches of EMCF and RWJF offer an interesting contrast. RWJF takes a fairly conventional approach to program development and evaluation. By contrast, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation has departed dramatically from foundations' usual approaches to program development and evaluation. EMCF takes a novel approach to building and sustaining program capacity: It uses an extremely rigorous due diligence process to identify youth-serving organizations that house programs with empirical evidence of effectiveness and a commitment to tracking participant outcomes (as well as strong leadership, organizational depth, financial sustainability), and then invests in organizational capacity development, including (but not limited to) the building of internal evaluation capacity. In this way, internal evaluation capacity is developed and used for ongoing program performance and quality management. At some point in the process, an external evaluation of program impacts may be appropriate, but EMCF's grantees are encouraged not to undertake this prematurely.