

# EVALUATION'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING INITIATIVE SUSTAINABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

A common complaint about foundation-funded initiatives is that “foundations too often fail to do enough, early enough, to ensure sustainability” (The Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002, p.9). This paper offers ideas for the roles that evaluation can play in helping foundations ensure a discussion about sustainability is started early enough and maintained throughout an initiative. It proposes that evaluation can support initiative sustainability by:

- 1) **Supporting sustainability through strategy** – Evaluators and evaluation can advise and facilitate initiative strategy development. In doing this, evaluators can help foundations to build in a direct and deliberate focus on sustainability as foundations contemplate the formation of the initiative’s strategy, engage in strategic planning, and manage the initiative’s implementation.
- 2) **Supporting sustainability with evaluation** – Evaluation practice should treat sustainability as an outcome, track its progress, and feed back regular information that can be used to ensure sustainability is on course, and if not, to point to opportunities for midcourse corrections. Sustainability is not just about continuous funding, however, and it can be operationalized and tracked in a number of ways.

The ideas presented in this paper are based on Harvard Family Research Project’s (HFRP) broad spectrum of experience in the past two decades with foundation initiatives. Illustrative examples are offered from HFRP’s five-year evaluation of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation’s (WKKF) large-scale Devolution Initiative (DI).

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Large-scale foundation-funded initiatives aimed at community-wide change contain a basic premise, whether articulated or not, that the initiative's work will be continued if the results achieved warrant it. It is the foundation's hope and expectation that positive change created by an initiative's set of actors and activities will be institutionalized and sustained in the long term, after the original initiative funding ends.

Expecting or hoping for sustainability, however, does not always translate into doing something about it, and "foundations too often fail to do enough, early enough, to ensure sustainability" (The Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002, p.9). Often it is considered something to be dealt with in an initiative's later years once some of "the results are in" or when there is sufficient time after the initiative's start up and early implementation to consider the questions of what should be sustained and how.

Unfortunately, the time for doing something to support sustainability may never come, and if it does, it may be too late. Foundations, focusing on their role as catalysts for social change, regularly feel pressure to move on to the next big initiative as another one is ending. Many feel demands to come up with a continuing stream of innovations that will bring a sense of newness to their grantmaking and what gets presented to their boards of directors (Frumkin, 2002). As a result, some foundations feel they are not in the "sustainability business" because "the most 'strategic' use of philanthropic dollars is to function as social venture capital and to underwrite only new, innovative activities that have the promise to reform practice and transform systems" (David, 2002).

Moreover, that same desire for newness and innovation limits initiative sustainability in the sense that one funder is unlikely to pick up where the last funder left off. This causes grantees to engage in an "elaborate dance" trying to fit their organization or activities within the next funder's priorities (David, 2002). When this is

the case and the path to sustainability has not been laid, the potential for an initiative to sustain, in any way, is unlikely or at risk.

This paper is about the role that evaluation can play in helping foundations ensure a discussion of sustainability is started early enough and maintained throughout an initiative. The ideas here go well beyond the traditional and narrow view of how evaluation can support initiative sustainability, which is that if the results are good, evaluation data and reports can be used as marketing tools to solicit additional funding for initiative grantees (The Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002). While we think this is an important function, we propose that evaluation can take a much more vital and deliberate role.

We see evaluation as having the potential to support initiative sustainability by:

- 1) Facilitating a focus on sustainability during strategy development
- 2) Tracking progress on sustainability and feeding back regular information that can be used to ensure sustainability is on course, and if not, to point to opportunities for midcourse corrections

This paper elaborates on these points and draws on Harvard Family Research Project's (HFRP) broad spectrum of experience in the past two decades with foundation initiatives. This experience has included supporting foundations on initiative strategy development, conducting research to inform strategy, documenting and evaluating initiatives, providing technical assistance to grantees, and participating as a grantee.

## **II. BACKGROUND ON THE DEVOLUTION INITIATIVE**

While the ideas in this paper are based on Harvard Family Research Project's full range of experience, they draw primarily from HFRP's five-year evaluation of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's (WKKF) large-scale Devolution Initiative (DI). HFRP began working with WKKF on the DI when it began in 1996, and the evaluation is scheduled for completion in December 2002.

The Devolution Initiative provided over \$60 million in support to 30 research, policy, and state and national advocacy organizations, and minority researchers and community organizers known as Scholar Practitioners, to work together to accomplish three primary goals (see also the DI logic model in Appendix A):

- 1) Create an objective information base about the impact of welfare reform and health care devolution that is useful and useable to a broad group of stakeholders, including community members.
- 2) Share the findings with policymakers and the public.
- 3) Use the information and other community resources to promote public participation in informing policy agendas and decisions.

HFRP was involved in the initiative from its beginning, and implemented an evaluation that fed back formative and summative information to inform these three goals. The evaluation also contributed to ongoing strategy development and management. As this paper demonstrates, sustainability was an important focus of these efforts.

The Devolution Initiative's sustainability issues were primarily focused on the work WKKF invested in at the state level. In addition to funding 19 well-known national grantee organizations,<sup>1</sup> the DI chose to invest in the work of 10 advocacy organizations in five states: Florida, Mississippi, New York, Washington, and Wisconsin.<sup>2</sup>

While each of these state grantee organizations was already known as an experienced policy advocacy player at the state level, the DI encouraged the state grantees to go a step beyond their normal activity boundaries and strengthen or expand their work in communities to build the capacity of people directly impacted by welfare and health care devolution to participate in the policy process. The grantees chose to do this in different ways. For some, DI funding did not fundamentally change their way of doing business, but rather strengthened their existing advocacy capacity by expanding

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix B for a list of national grantees.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix B for a list of state grantees.

their statewide policy advocacy networks and coalitions to include those impacted by devolution. For other grantees, the DI built new organizational directions, and grantees added community and grassroots organizing activities to their more traditional work on statewide coalition building and policy advocacy. Both approaches required considerable staff time and resources to accomplish.

As they approach the initiative's close, these nonprofits face the challenge of maintaining the organizational capacity to continue to implement the ideas and approaches begun under the DI. While these particular organizations are very skilled at keeping their budgets in the black, HFRP has witnessed and tracked the challenges they have faced, and their successes, in replacing DI support with "like money"—that is, "the flexible resources that will allow the continuation of collaborative, community-building processes such as staffing the initiative, community planning, training and capacity-building..." (The Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002, p.13). Fortunately, WKKF has worked diligently with them over the past several years to prepare for sustainability, and the foundation's approach, which HFRP informed, is discussed in this paper.

### **III. SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH STRATEGY**

A discussion about initiative sustainability should begin with a discussion of what, exactly, this term means. The Cornerstone Consulting Group (2002) recently completed a study for the Annie E. Casey Foundation on the "challenge of sustainability" for community-based initiatives. During their interviews with foundation representatives, nonprofits, and opinion leaders, they pursued the question of *what* it was that foundations and grantees want to sustain. They found several answers:

- The *organizations* (grantees) themselves or the *projects* being funded, particularly when the initiative has created new organizations or encouraged organizations to move in new strategic directions
- The *ideas, beliefs, principles, or values* that an initiative is based on or promotes

- The *relationships* between the organizations involved in the initiative, particularly when a purpose of the initiative has been to foster collaboration.

We think another aspect should be added to this list—*outcomes*. Foundations and grantees alike are not only interested in seeing the results they achieve under the initiative sustain over time, but also are increasingly pressured to show that what resulted from their considerable investment and effort has value beyond the term of the initiative. That might mean, for example, ensuring policy outcomes are codified and stay in place during times of budget crises, or ensuring community members who are mobilized to act on an issue remain engaged over time.

Clearly, the first of these four areas is the most common use of the term. As The Cornerstone Consulting Group (2002, p.12) quotes, “When anyone says it is not about the money, it is about the money.”<sup>3</sup> After all, it is not realistic to expect ideas, relationships, or outcomes to sustain without the funding for an organization or staff that helps them to do so. While the term “sustainability” throughout this paper is used broadly to imply all four possible aspects of the term, the primary emphasis is on sustainability to mean the ability of foundations and their grantees to secure the *funding* needed to continue initiative work.

## **A. Why Strategy?**

Large-scale initiatives that require significant funding to implement require risk-taking on the part of foundations. There are risks in promoting the ideas and theories that underlie what is to be accomplished and in betting on the people and organizations that do the “on the ground” work. There are risks when required to build a case that investments made a difference (Bare, 2002). And there are risks if the work of an initiative is to be sustained. But as Kramer (2000) asserts, whether to seek or avoid risk is not the challenge, but thinking about risk in a more disciplined way is.

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<sup>3</sup> The Cornerstone Consulting Group (2002) notes that this quote is typically attributed to H.L. Mencken.



Christine Letts, William Ryan, and Allen Grossman (1997), in their comparison of foundation and venture capitalists, identified a general lack of “exit strategies” to help manage the risk of sustainability on the part of foundations as they invest in creating social change. They found that while venture capitalists start with the assumption that their relationships with a growing business will end with a sale to another company, foundations operate in a nonprofit environment where there is “no such mechanism for passing the baton.” As a result, nonprofit grantees are often left to figure out how to continue on their own.

So what can a foundation do to better position an initiative and its grantees to sustain and to manage the risk that goes along with initiative grantmaking? We argue that it is necessary to integrate a focus on sustainability into the initiative’s *strategy*, so that the plan for “exiting” becomes an intentional part of strategic choices made from the very beginning, when the initiative is being planned.

## **B. What is Strategy?**

A number of people, most notably Michael Porter and Mark Kramer, have assessed and written about philanthropy’s practice of strategy development. Their critique overall has not been positive. For example, Kramer (2001, p. 40) writes, “Foundations use the word ‘strategy’ in so many different ways that it is extremely hard to know what a well-developed strategy really consists of.” Similarly, Porter and Kramer (1999, p. 125) write, “Unfortunately the word ‘strategy’ has been so overused in the foundation world that it has become almost meaningless.”

Following from this critique, Porter and Kramer (Kramer, 2001; Porter, 1996; Porter & Kramer, 1999) have offered their definition of what philanthropic strategy should encompass. They note that strategy should include answers to these questions:

- Where can the foundation uniquely position itself to make an impact to address challenges not being addressed well by others?

- How can the foundation make its greatest contribution in a chosen arena beyond the purchasing power of its grant dollars?
- What unique strengths (and weaknesses) does the foundation have that will enable it to create value and make an impact?
- What are the trade-offs of pursuing different strategic options (including scale and resources required)?

They note that strategy should be based on a consideration of a foundation's *internal* capabilities, expertise, views, and resources, combined with a consideration of *external* (outside the foundation) views of priority problems and solutions (Kramer, 2001). "True strategy positions the foundation at the intersection of the internal and external views and asks: which pressing needs are we uniquely qualified to address?" (Foundation Strategy Group, n.d.)

While a foundation can certainly generate and access its own internal knowledge, it may not have the capacity to easily collect and synthesize it. There also may be limited capacity for gathering external data. Getting the information necessary to make strategy decisions, including those pertinent to sustainability, in fact often requires the support, expertise, or facilitation of outside individuals or groups.

HFRP sees evaluators as well qualified to bring this type of knowledge and expertise to bear during strategy development, and at the same time to reap benefits from that type of involvement. In fact evaluators have a vested interest in working with foundations on initiative or program strategy, as evaluation is difficult or impossible to do without it. As Mark Kramer notes (2001, p. 40), "The very concept of evaluation is nonsensical without realistic goals and a fully developed strategy."

### **C. Evaluation's Role in Strategy Development**

HFRP views strategy development as the process illustrated in Figure 1 on the next page. This representation views the actual strategy itself as informed by *strategic*

*analysis*, and as a precursor to *strategic planning* and *strategic management*.<sup>4</sup> The figure also displays the types of information and considerations HFRP associates with each component (e.g., needs assessment, analysis of funding trends, theory of change).

As the figure illustrates, this model views evaluators and evaluation as a support for, or facilitator of, the stages of strategy development. Evaluators, for example, can offer information in the form of a needs assessment or analysis of funding trends to support strategic analysis. Evaluators can also facilitate various aspects of the process, such as the development of the initiative's theory of change, or the initiative's goals and objectives. Finally, evaluators can inform strategic management by reporting and feeding back information being learned from the evaluation itself.

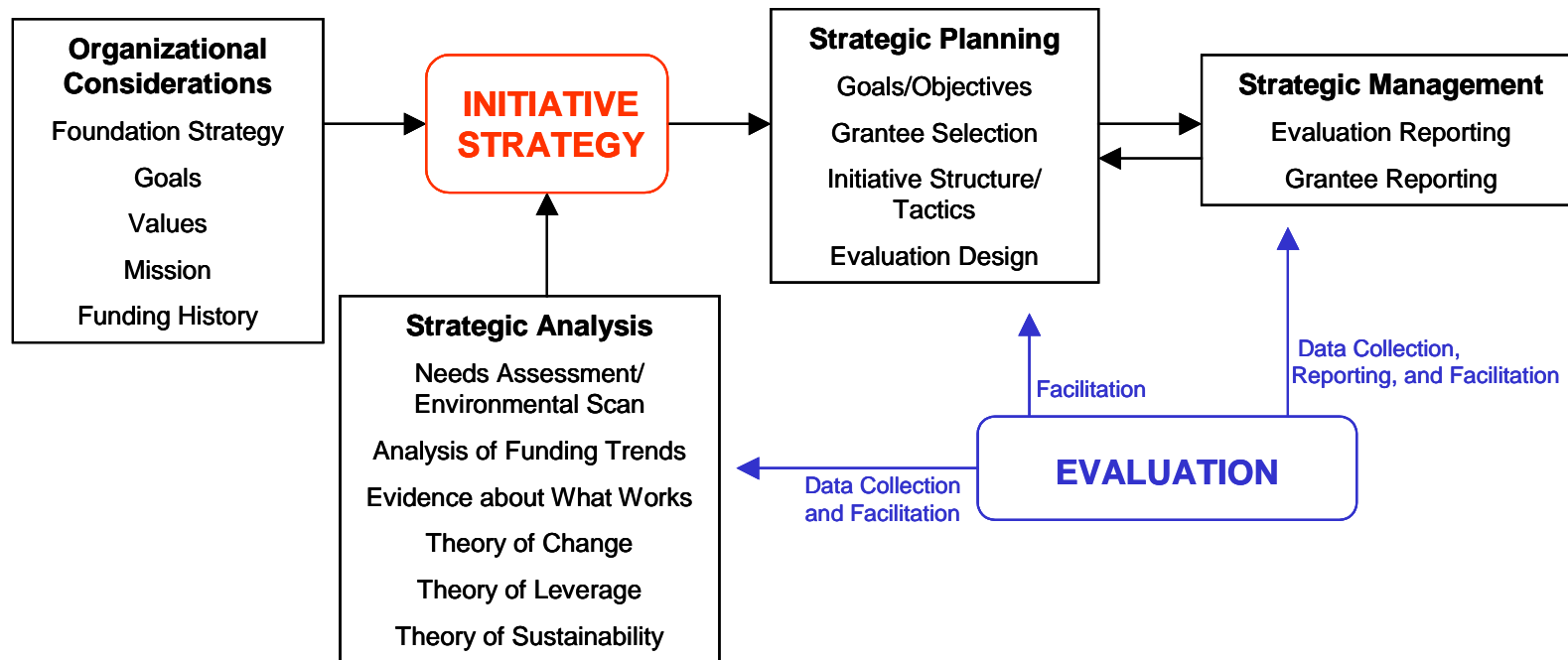
This model requires that evaluators be involved in the initiative from its beginning, and that they be a part of the core strategy development team and process. It also requires that evaluators and evaluation be flexible, responsive to and predictive of the initiative's needs, and a part of the initiative's attempts to create social change.

This is a model that fits well with the complex nature of most initiatives, which necessarily evolve over time with no set, common, or predictable script. Evaluation of initiatives should capture and build on their dynamic nature and reinforce them as they are implemented. More traditional evaluation approaches in which the evaluator develops the evaluation design and reports back when the data are all collected and analyzed, are less useful here. A fresh approach underscoring collaboration, feedback, learning, and flexibility is a more appropriate course of action.

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<sup>4</sup> Strategy development is not always, and usually is not, a linear process. Strategy development takes place throughout the initiative's implementation, and different stages may be revisited over time.

Figure 1. Relationship between Strategy Development and Evaluation<sup>5</sup>



<sup>5</sup> This figure is adapted from Hambrick & Frederickson (2001).

While this model has many potential benefits, it also carries the risk of compromising the evaluator's objectivity, and therefore is not one that all evaluators ascribe to, nor one with which all foundations are comfortable. While too much distance from the initiative may diminish useful insight and understanding, too much involvement can also be damaging (Patton, 1997). Evaluators who use this approach need to build in a set of checks and balances to help manage that risk.

First and foremost, evaluators and foundations need to be clear about the boundaries of their roles. This model does *not* propose that evaluators actually make decisions about what the initiative strategy should be; nor does it advocate that foundations relinquish control over their grantmaking. Rather, it proposes that evaluators, who are uniquely skilled in the language and process of strategy development, and who often have the most information about the initiative from the viewpoints of multiple stakeholders, play a *supportive* and key *advisory* role in the strategy development process. This role allows evaluators to remain objective, but involved, in putting together strategy that will help achieve the initiative's social change agenda.

In addition, the basic tenets about safeguarding objectivity that apply to research and evaluation, also apply here. These include ensuring samples are not biased, making certain conclusions or interpretations do not go beyond what the data suggest, and making sure recommendations are based on what has been documented rather than what the evaluator desires (Chelimsky, 1995). Another tactic is to be upfront about the evaluators' perspectives, beliefs, and values that may affect the evaluation, regardless of the amount of checks put in place to maintain objectivity (Patton, 1997).

The successful use of this model also requires that foundations have a set of conditions in place that allows them to engage with strategy development and evaluation in the way that is proposed here. This model requires that foundations be able to be

active contributors to the evaluation, *learn* from it, and apply what is being learned back into the strategy development process (Weiss & Morrill, 1998). Our experience in using this model reveals five essential conditions.

*Participation and ownership* – Strategy development and learning cannot involve only one or two individuals. All foundation stakeholders with a vested interest should be invited and *expected* to participate. In addition, while evaluators can bring information to the table, the *group* has to process the information and come to collective conclusions (not always consensus) about what it means. Learning from the evaluation can be facilitated, but stakeholders need to do the work.<sup>6</sup>

*Culture and incentives for innovation and learning* – The foundation needs to have a culture and incentives that encourage learning and the testing of new ideas. For example, individuals working together on an initiative should be collectively accountable for initiative-wide success and outcomes, not just the individual grants within that initiative. In addition, leadership should support innovation, flexibility, and some degree of risk taking.

*Infrastructure for learning* – Individuals involved in strategy development and learning need to have the time available and regular mechanisms or opportunities for processing and discussing lessons and determining their implications. There needs to be a commitment to, and expectation for, full participation over time.

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<sup>6</sup> Grantees are evaluation stakeholders, and also need to participate in, and have ownership of, evaluation learning. This paper, however, focuses on the relationship between evaluators and foundations.

*Commitment to continuous feedback and information* – Continuous feedback about strategy should not be the responsibility of the evaluators alone. All stakeholders should commit to contributing information and lessons that can support learning and decision making. Also, not all information constitutes a “lesson learned” and these can and should be negotiated (Patton, 2001).

*Opportunities to apply learning* – Inherent in this model is the notion that information and lessons once learned, can be applied. This requires that there be opportunities or outlets for applying what has been learned back into initiative strategy development. Evaluation and strategy are inextricably linked in this model, and opportunities for midcourse strategic corrections and continuous improvement should be built into every initiative.

#### **D. Supporting Sustainability During Strategy Development**

We see sustainability as a consideration that can and should be integrated into all stages of strategy development. Rather than view sustainability as a separate consideration years after an initiative has begun, sustainability should be in the foreground of the discussions about strategy from an initiative’s beginning.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 on the next page describes specific ways to incorporate a sustainability focus into the various types of strategy development components shown in Figure 1. It focuses on the three strategy development stages where evaluators can bring information and their facilitation skills to the strategy-making table – strategic analysis, strategic planning, and strategic management.

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<sup>7</sup> See Gill, Dembosky, & Caulkins (2002) for a noteworthy example of how critical it is to address what is required for sustainability early in an initiative’s strategy.

**Table 1. Ways to Build Sustainability into Strategy Development**

		<b>Ways to Incorporate a Sustainability Focus</b>
<b>STRATEGIC ANALYSIS</b>	Needs Assessment /Environmental Scan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Obtain upfront grantees' perspectives about their organizational and initiative-specific sustainability needs and wants.</li> </ul>
	Analysis of Funding Trends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Get a sense of what other funders are supporting or are willing to support and whether that matches with the initiative's focus.</li> <li>- Get a sense of the availability of public/private funds now and in the future.</li> <li>- Decide whether the initiative's focus is a short- or long-term foundation trend.</li> <li>- Identify regional or community foundations in grantee geographic locations.</li> </ul>
	Evidence About What Works	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Include sustainability as a criterion when gathering evidence about "what works."</li> <li>- Focus the search on what works in terms of sustainable practice.</li> </ul>
	Theory of Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Estimate how long the foundation needs to commit to the initiative or its focus in order to make a difference.</li> </ul>
	Theory of Leverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Choose programming and grantmaking tactics that fit with the initiative's lifespan.</li> </ul>
	Theory of Sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Determine what aspects of the initiative need to be sustained.</li> <li>- Determine what needs to be in place to achieve sustainability. (E.g., Do long-term large grants engender dependency? Should funding be tapered in the initiative's final years?)</li> </ul>
<b>STRATEGIC PLANNING</b>	Goals/Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Make sustainability an initiative goal and establish objectives for getting there.</li> </ul>
	Grantee Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop grantee selection criteria that fit with both the theory of change and the theory of sustainability. (E.g., David (2002) suggests looking at organizational spirit, values, niche, and capacity.)</li> <li>- Make clear upfront grantee expectations and the foundation's role in sustainability.</li> <li>- Have grantees include a plan for sustainability in proposals.</li> </ul>
	Initiative Structure/ Tactics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provide structure that can support sustainability (e.g. matching funds, technical assistance, funder outreach, public relations).</li> <li>- Include grantees whose role it is to provide sustainability support.</li> <li>- Include direct funding for sustainability activities (or core operating support).</li> <li>- Implement tactics that will support sustainability (e.g., outreach and marketing, regional funder meetings, communications events).</li> <li>- Give the foundation a role in achieving sustainability (e.g., outreach to community foundations, institution building, spin-offs, endowments).</li> </ul>
	Evaluation Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Make sustainability an outcome to be tracked to feed back formative and summative information on progress.</li> <li>- Incorporate opportunities to report back on sustainability throughout the initiative.</li> <li>- Track contextual variables that will impact sustainability (e.g., funding trends).</li> </ul>
<b>STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT</b>	Evaluation Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Build in opportunities to reflect on and make midcourse changes in the strategic plan based on what is being learned about sustainability.</li> <li>- Build in points to ask: Does this initiative deserve to be sustained?</li> </ul>
	Grantee Reporting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop periodic reporting mechanisms that can help grantees assess where they are in their sustainability efforts.</li> </ul>



Foundations and evaluators together can support sustainability by making sure the types of questions and decisions in Table 1 are raised and addressed in a disciplined or systematic way. For example, sustainability should be a consideration in determining *what areas to fund* (Are other funders likely to support this type of work? Should we start something that we can't finish?), *how long to fund it* (Given prospects for gaining other funding, how long should our commitment be?), *which grantees to select* (Do we select grantees that are stable organizationally and have good fund development capacity?), and the *structure and supports* needed to support sustainability throughout the life of the initiative (Do we need to take a significant role in building capacity for sustainability, and if so, do we have the time and resources to do it?).

While forecasting what is required for sustainability can be difficult, addressing sustainability within strategy is one means of minimizing the risks associated with creating ambitious initiatives. If sustainability is treated as an afterthought, choices may inhibit that sustainability from the start. The following pages explain in more detail how evaluation can support sustainability's integration into strategy. Text boxes offer illustrative examples from HFRP's experience with the Devolution Initiative.

## **1) Strategic Analysis**

Along with the critical organizational factors that must be considered, such as the foundation's mission, goals, programming areas, and history of grantmaking, strategic analysis involves the gathering and deliberation of data that informs the foundation's choices about opportunities for funding in a given social change arena, and how and where to position the initiative for maximum benefit and sustainability. Such elements contribute to a foundation's ability to make "internally consistent and mutually reinforcing choices" that provide the basis for a configuration of activities that is reflective of the unique position the foundation has identified for itself and the initiative (Kramer, 2001).

Below are examples of the types of information and considerations that evaluators can contribute to, and how the components of strategic analysis can be used to think about and begin to address sustainability as various strategy options are being considered.

***Needs assessment/environmental scan*** – A needs assessment is a systematic exploration of the way things currently are and the way they can or should be in the future. An example is an assessment of service, research, professional development, or advocacy needs in a given social change arena. For example, to inform the development of one foundation’s literacy initiative, HFRP conducted an environmental scan of existing efforts to support and improve early literacy in a geographic area, and then assessed what the needs were compared to what the foundation could fill given its grantmaking history and capabilities.

A needs assessment can contribute to sustainability by asking upfront potential grantees’ current capacities for fund development and sustainability, and what they think their sustainability needs will be for performing work related to the initiative.

***Analysis of funding trends*** – Philanthropy tends to follow various grantmaking trends. Some of these are idea trends that affect funding directions such as outcomes evaluation and accountability, asset models, or venture philanthropy (Carson, 2000); others are fiscal trends that are impacted by larger economic conditions. Trying to forecast the future of such trends is a difficult business, but the attempt to do so can be critical in choosing a strategy that is sustainable. Examples of this type of information gathering are scans of what other funders are doing on an initiative’s social change agenda (see for example,

Patrizi & McMullan (1998) and Weiss & Lopez (1999)), critical reflection on what patterns of funding foundations have engaged in over time and are likely to continue, or a fiscal analysis to determine the factors that are likely to affect the amount of philanthropic dollars available over the course of an initiative and beyond. While many foundations want to fund innovations or new strategic directions through their initiatives, an analysis of funding trends will help take into consideration whether other public or private funders are likely to support that innovation when the initiative ends.

***Evidence about what works*** – Many foundations now try to make decisions, particularly about strategy and programming, based on a deliberation of “what works.” Understanding what works usually means learning what has been proven effective by methodologically rigorous research or evaluation studies. Information gathering about relevant evidence might mean a literature review of research conducted about the types of interventions being considered for the initiative, or about effective ways of achieving the type of social change being sought.<sup>8</sup> The collection of evidence about what works can incorporate a focus on sustainability by including it as a criterion for selection, choosing effective practice that has also demonstrated staying power. Another option is to focus the search for what works entirely on sustainability; in a given social change arena, what practices are most sustainable?

***Theory of change*** – While it is now a hyper-popular buzz phrase in philanthropic and nonprofit communities, many fail to grasp the true intent and

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<sup>8</sup> The caution with this approach, along with attempts to determine best practices and lessons learned, is that context is important and what proves effective in one context may not work in another (Patton, 2001).

function of a theory of change. As a result it often gets mistaken or substituted for strategy. They are not the same thing. A theory of change informs strategy, but it is not *the strategy*.

A theory of change is how one thinks the social change being sought can occur, and what needs to be in place to make it happen. Typically a theory of change is based on a combination of objective evidence drawn from research or experience, and subjective opinion and personal ideology. Some people, for example, subscribe to a bottom-up grassroots perspective for addressing social issues, while others favor top-down strategies (Frumkin, 2002).<sup>9</sup> Once that theory is made explicit, it is possible to think about what aspects of the theory deserve or warrant investment. Those decisions help lead to choices about positioning and an eventual articulation of the strategy.

A theory of change can help a foundation think about sustainability because it forces the very real consideration of the time and resources needed to achieve meaningful change or to make a demonstrable difference that is going to last beyond the life of the initiative. A foundation not interested in or able to make substantial or long-term investments, for example, may decide to fund only a particular component of the theory of change in which it will take a shorter amount of time and/or resources to make a significant difference.

***Theory of leverage*** – Theories of leverage dictate how the strategy will be implemented and the kinds of philanthropic tools that will create impact and get the “maximum bang for each philanthropic buck” (Frumkin, 2002, p.4).

Theories of leverage involve decisions about whether the foundation will, for

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<sup>9</sup> Peter Frumkin (2002) lays out five main theories of change that foundations use: (1) training individuals for leadership in a field, (2) building stronger organizations, (3) establishing new inter-organizational networks, (4) influencing politics, and (5) generating new ideas and proposals for a field.

example, adopt a place-based strategy, demonstrate in a new area, support collaborative ventures, fund start ups, provide core operating support, etc.<sup>10</sup> An initiative's theory of leverage complements its theory of change and because it helps to determine *how* the foundation should position the initiative for impact, while the theory of change helps determine *where* to position. Like a theory of change, evaluators can facilitate choices about leveraging by helping the foundation to examine evidence about the effectiveness of various approaches or helping to identify approaches that match existing needs.

The particular theory of leverage a foundation chooses has a major impact on sustainability. Choosing to fund start ups, for example, is likely to be more difficult to sustain than funding established organizations with multiple sources of funding (The Colorado Trust, 2001). This is not to say that investments should not be made in start ups; it merely suggests that if they are, then the foundation has to be prepared for the risk that the start ups might not sustain, or be aware of the fact that the foundation has to be very involved in helping grantees find the funding they need to sustain (like the venture capitalist model).

***Theory of sustainability*** – A theory of sustainability is akin to the theory of change and leverage concepts. It is, as its name suggests, a theory of how one thinks an initiative can be sustained, and it takes the sustainability issue

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Frumkin's (2002) theories of leverage taxonomy divides common philanthropic approaches into two main categories: programming tactics and grantmaking tactics. Programming tactics include: (1) support directed at geographic communities, not program areas, (2) funding of new initiatives and pilot programs, (3) support for nonprofit collaborations, not isolated work, (4) private funding for public programs, (5) funding of commercial ventures within nonprofits, (6) support for organizations designed and set up by grantmakers, and (7) funding of independent evaluations. Grantmaking tactics include: (1) project grants, not general operating support, (2) short-term grants, (3) matching grants, (4) loans and program-related investments, not grants, (5) large grants, (6) grants driven by proactive RFPs, (7) high-engagement grantmaking, (8) joint funding, and (9) technical assistance, planning, and capacity-building grants.

head on during strategic analysis. Again, evaluators can facilitate its development.

Too often a theory of sustainability is either too simple or not well thought out. For example, “Design, demonstrate, evaluate, disseminate, and wait for large-scale public and private funding to underwrite continued operation or even expansion – is the ‘sustainability theory’ behind most community-based initiatives” (The Cornerstone Consulting Group, 2002, p. 12).<sup>11</sup> While this approach may have worked in the past, today’s context is different. “There was a time when foundations saw their role as seeding and testing new ideas that, if they proved their worth, would then receive ongoing funding from government. And, indeed, there were some notable success of that sort; however, that’s far less likely to happen today” (David, 2002).

Articulating a theory of sustainability can help to strengthen the ability to make choices (such as who to fund and for how long) that will increase the likelihood that the work of an initiative can be sustained. These choices and the set of activities that stem from them may otherwise be different if sustainability is not considered as one of the key factors guiding the creation of the strategy. For example, if an initiative is intended to create new organizations, then sustaining those organizations will require a considerably different set of supports than if the initiative revolves around long-standing organizations. Or, if an initiative presses organizations to move in new strategic directions, that push may require a certain level and type of support and commitment for that new direction over a longer timeframe. While there is an argument to be made that it is possible to have a larger impact when you try to get grantees to do something new or change the

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<sup>11</sup> See also Weiss & Lopez (1999).

way they do business, the risk is that the work will not sustain beyond a short-term investment.

**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
*Supporting Sustainability During Strategic Analysis***

The Devolution Initiative supported the work of 10 advocacy organizations to strengthen or expand their health care and welfare reform policy advocacy work among underrepresented groups and communities. These state-based grantees used two main approaches for doing so: (1) community mobilizing to involve “new voices” from communities in grantees’ existing networks and coalitions, or (2) community organizing to build the capacity of these new voices to develop their own plans of structures for participating in the policy process.

Knowing that maintaining and supporting new voice involvement in the policy process would require resource-intensive and long-term commitments on the part of the state grantees, early on, WKKF encouraged participating state advocates to explore the long-term sources of support to sustain these types of activities.

One concern was that community or regional foundations might not be interested in supporting community organizing or policy advocacy work. Studies of foundation giving for nonprofit advocacy organizations generally agree that advocates (1) receive only a fraction of the total funds that foundations give to applied research, social services, and other non-advocacy activities, (2) are funded for one to two years at most, and (3) receive mostly project- or activity-specific funding, not general operating support (Covington, 2001). When the concept of community organizing and mobilizing gets connected to informing policy, funders tend to shy away, leading to sustainability issues. Funders, in some cases, neither recognize the value of mobilization work nor feel it falls within their missions.

In 1999, as a means of following up on this concern and helping WKKF and the DI’s grantees determine their roles in sustainability, HFRP surveyed community and local (i.e., corporate and family) foundations in four of the five states that were part of the DI. The survey collected data from 29 community and local foundations<sup>1</sup> in cities and communities where the DI grantees planned to carry out their activities. The survey’s purpose was to examine the degree of awareness of, and interest in, welfare reform and health issues, and the prospects for securing local support for community mobilizing, organizing, and policy informing activities.

Findings showed that the foundations supported agencies providing services to the working poor, but support for welfare reform and health care community organizing and policy advocacy was limited. The foundations were receptive, however, to sponsoring forums and convening to engage community members around common issues. HFRP used these findings and others to develop implications for how the DI’s state-based grantees could better position their work to increase their chances of obtaining funding from regional and community foundations (Lopez & Hollar, 1999).

## 2) Strategic Planning

Many people regard strategic planning as the process leading up to strategy development. We define it as the process that takes place *after* the strategy has been chosen. It involves making decisions about how to deploy the strategy (Brantingham, 2002), and is a process that typically gets revisited throughout an initiative's lifespan.

Because strategic planning puts in place the nuts and bolts that are necessary for evaluation, evaluators often facilitate parts of the strategic planning process using tools such as logic models or strategy mapping techniques. Evaluators are often skilled facilitators, being literate in the often-confusing language of strategy, and able to navigate the nuances of goals, objectives, tactics, outcomes, and indicators.

Strategic planning typically includes choices about the following elements:

**Goals/Objectives** – While goals are often developed before the initiative's strategy because they provide overall direction, objectives provide the architecture for a plan of action and the selection of tactics. The most obvious way to ensure sustainability here is to make it one of the initiative's goals, and then to establish the objectives needed to get there.

**Grantee Selection** – Incorporating a sustainability focus into grantee selection means coming up with the criteria or selection considerations, in line with the initiative's strategy, which will indicate the potential capacity of grantees to sustain their work. That criteria might include things like the length of time the organization has been in existence, whether the potential grantee has done similar work in the past to the type of work being proposed under the initiative, or



the presence of fund development staff or expertise.<sup>12</sup> Another way to build sustainability into grantee selection is to make clear in the initiative request for proposals (RFP) the foundation's expectations around sustainability, or to ask grantees to develop a plan for sustainability. As Tom David (2002) from the California Wellness Foundation notes, "If a foundation is likely to fund an agency for only three years and then 'give someone else a chance,' this needs to be said explicitly, not only upfront, but repeatedly throughout the lifespan of a grant."

***Initiative Structure/Tactics*** – Structure and tactics means how the initiative strategy will be organized and deployed—the number of grantees to be involved, how decision making will occur, who will be involved in the foundation and the foundation's role, presence of technical assistance and capacity building, etc. There are a number of ways to build in a sustainability focus here. One is funding organizations to support grantees' sustainability needs (as a form of technical assistance, for example). Another is giving the foundation a direct role in helping grantees achieve sustainability. For example, the Colorado Trust's (2001) sustainability roles have included providing funding and technical assistance for resource development, tailoring evaluations to meet local needs, and gradually decreasing levels of grantee funding. In the Devolution Initiative, WKKF crafted a role for itself that included building sustainability plans into grantee proposals, dedicating specific funds for sustainability efforts, providing tailored technical assistance and facilitation, and providing materials for grantees to use for fundraising. With this approach, WKKF encouraged "co-creation" of a sustainability approach between itself and grantees, which is becoming more

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<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that new organizations should not be funded. Rather, that the choice of grantees should be in line with an initiative's strategic choices about timeframe, funding levels, supports for sustainability, etc.

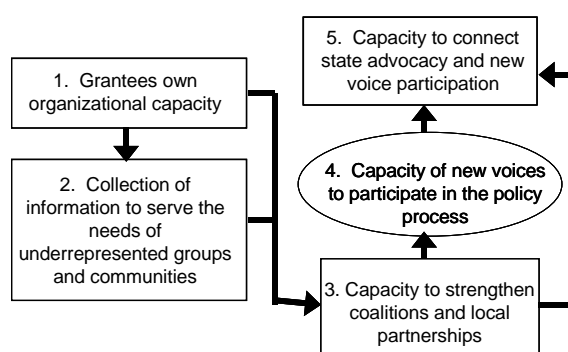
common as “givers and getters increasingly share what they know and the strategies they adopt” (*Foundation Giving*, 2002, p. 5).

***Evaluation Design*** – The evaluation’s design is an aspect of strategic planning because the evaluation needs to feed into learning about what is and is not working and opportunities for modifying the strategy. The evaluation design uses the strategic plan components to determine appropriate outcomes and indicators to track, the methodology needed to track them, and who to report to and how often. As such, the evaluation can be a key source of information about progress on sustainability as the initiative is implemented, and can build in opportunities for considerations about opportunities and midcourse corrections.

### Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation: *Supporting Sustainability During Strategic Planning*

Early on in the Devolution Initiative, HFRP began to investigate the topic of sustainability with grantees. The purpose was to ground the foundation's discussion and strategic planning about sustainability in what their grantees and their community-based partners had to say about what needed to be sustained, and what grantees were doing already on sustainability.

HFRP interviewed 47 individuals in the DI's five focus states, asking questions about sustainability broadly, and giving respondents the opportunity to provide their own definitions of what sustainability meant to them. The grantees identified five main areas in which the DI was adding value that they wanted to sustain. These areas are shown below and mapped onto the structure of the Devolution Initiative logic model (see Appendix A).



Once those areas were identified, this framing guided the evaluation's sustainability focus. Based on the information generated and what we were hearing in the states, HFRP developed lessons and implications about what could be done from the foundation's perspective to help sustain what the grantees were saying was most valuable to them about their participation in the initiative (Harvard Family Research Project, 2000).

### 3) Strategic Management

This third stage in strategy development represents the ongoing decisions made throughout the initiative's implementation to ensure the strategy is able to achieve its maximum potential and that the strategic plan stays on track or is revised as needed. The critical component here is *learning*—building in opportunities to examine what is happening during implementation, how the context is changing, what is and is not working, and the implications of that information for the initiative's strategy.

**Evaluation Reporting** – Most evaluations now include a commitment to feeding back information regularly, rather than waiting to submit a final report at the end. Done in this way, evaluation becomes a key mechanism for learning about what is and is not working and about possible midcourse strategic corrections that will ultimately lead to better outcomes. Summatively, that reporting will determine whether sustainability targets are being achieved. Formatively, it will flag where the initiative is not meeting its benchmarks and spark corrective action. Evaluation reporting on sustainability should not happen only at the end of the initiative; it should be an ongoing focus from the beginning.

**Grantee Reporting** – In addition to using evaluation to support strategic management, grantees are often given their own opportunities for providing feedback on progress and emerging needs. Ideally this reporting does not just become just another grantee formality that never gets used, but it is structured in a way that complements, and does not duplicate, the evaluation. This reporting can focus on sustainability by including progress updates and challenges grantees are experiencing as they try to sustain their work.

**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
*Supporting Sustainability During Strategic Management***

HFRP developed an evaluation “learning system” for the Devolution Initiative that continuously fed back evaluation results to inform strategic management. Structurally, this system included quarterly evaluation reports or briefs on timely topics (40 in total over five years), followed by “learning meetings” (also quarterly) with a core team of foundation decision makers to discuss the implications of the evaluation findings. HFRP facilitated these meetings, which occurred separately from initiative management meetings, to ensure adequate time and discussion was devoted to the evaluation.

While HFRP stayed true to the original evaluation plan and design in terms of outcomes being tracked and methods, the evaluation remained flexible in terms of choosing which topics to report on and when. As a result, the evaluation was able to offer “just-in-time” learning that could be used to inform strategic decisions as the initiative developed. Sustainability was a key aspect of that learning.

HFRP began to report on sustainability from the beginning of the initiative, and devoted entire evaluation reports and learning meetings to this topic, especially in the early stages of the initiative to inform strategic management, and then again at the end to determine success to date and lessons that had been learned.

HFRP also developed *state-specific* lessons and implications and discussed them separately with the five foundation program officers assigned to grantmaking in the five states. The data HFRP brought to bear helped to inform the foundation’s role in sustainability, which was tailored to the needs of each state, and the strategic supports offered to grantees to help them with their sustainability pursuits (Harvard Family Research Project, 2001).

#### **IV. SUPPORTING SUSTAINABILITY DURING EVALUATION**

The last section described how evaluators can support sustainability by helping to ensure it is considered during initiative strategy development. This section describes how the evaluation can support sustainability by treating it as an outcome to be operationalized and tracked over time, starting from an initiative’s early stages. Few evaluations take this more purposeful approach in either their evaluation design or their reporting.

## **A. What to Track: Operationalizing Sustainability**

Earlier, we offered four ways to think about initiative sustainability: (1) funding for the initiative's organizations or projects, (2) the ideas, principles, beliefs, and values that underlie the initiative, (3) the relationships supported and encouraged, or (4) the initiative's outcomes. Other definitions may also exist. The first step in designing an evaluation to track sustainability is to determine which aspects are of interest to the foundation.

Once that focus is determined, evaluators need to operationalize sustainability so the evaluation can track its progress over time. Table 2 offers examples of data evaluators might look for in the four areas of sustainability. This is not a comprehensive list; the articulation of indicators to track these areas will be dependent on the initiative being evaluated. This list was informed by HFRP's Devolution Initiative evaluation.

**Table 2. Operationalizing Sustainability as an Outcome**

Sustainability Focus	Evaluation Focus
1) <i>Organizations and/or Projects</i> – securing additional funding for grantees or projects begun or supported under the initiative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presence of grantee effort to obtain additional funding</li> <li>- Grantee success in obtaining additional funding</li> <li>- Presence of grantee revenue generating strategies to support initiative-related work</li> <li>- Presence of multiple funders to support Initiative-related work</li> </ul>
2) <i>Ideas</i> – maintaining the initiative's core principles, values, beliefs, and commitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Core ideas operationalized in grantee policies, structures</li> <li>- Initiative principles applied to other grantee projects</li> <li>- Commitment to continuing work started or supported under the initiative (e.g., generation of new ideas, migration of initiative ideas, new research projects, etc.)</li> </ul>
3) <i>Relationships</i> – maintaining connections among people and institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Collaboration involving higher-order ways of working together (e.g., joint projects or products)</li> <li>- Collaboration present over time (not just a one-shot effort)</li> <li>- Collaboration that is not initiative-driven</li> </ul>
4) <i>Outcomes</i> – maintaining initiative results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Codification of outcomes (e.g., in policy, procedures, legislation)</li> <li>- Support/demand (public, policymakers, etc.) for outcomes</li> <li>- Continued involvement/commitment of people over time</li> </ul>

## A. Tracking Sustainability

While some of these four areas might be aspects of many initiative evaluations, they typically are not examined through a sustainability lens. Using a sustainability lens means examining them in terms of how they are developing *over time*, and collecting information needed to determine their prospects for sustaining once the initiative ends.

### 1) Organizations and/or Projects

As mentioned earlier, ensuring funding exists to continue an initiative's work or grantees is almost always the highest priority and the aspect of sustainability that is also the most obvious. The focus of the evaluation here is fairly straightforward—to

determine what the initiative grantees are doing to generate additional funding, and determining if they are successful in their efforts.

Perhaps as important, particularly in the earlier stages of the initiative, is the collection of information about the factors that are affecting grantee success in achieving this outcome. After all, “much of what is central to sustainability lies outside the influence of foundations” (David, 2002). For example, and as mentioned earlier, the availability of public dollars that can pick up where private foundation dollars left off is increasingly less common. In addition, many foundations in their attempts to innovate and position themselves in new and emerging areas do not choose to fund in areas where others are investing. Contextual factors such as these are indicative of other foundations’ receptivity and willingness to support existing organizations or projects.

Other factors affecting grantees success are the grantee’s capacity to devote time, staff, and other resources to fundraising, their ability to market their successes, and their ability to “spin” what they do to make it attractive to other funders. The Colorado Trust (2001, p.20) also suggests that “one of the topmost forecasters of a program’s sustainability is local recognition that it is indispensable in the community.” This requires strong leadership, community collaboration, proven results, and the ability to impact an issue important to the community. Evaluators are well positioned to establish a baseline understanding of these types of factors in an initiative’s earlier stages and to follow them throughout implementation. Ongoing information about these factors can help foundations make strategic adjustments based on the changing context and how well grantees are adapting, and can be beneficial for gleaning lessons for future initiatives.



**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
Tracking Organizational/Project Sustainability**

For the Devolution Initiative's state grantees, one of the most urgent sustainability needs was the ability to maintain full-time staff in communities (e.g., community organizers) who build the relationships necessary to ensure that community members can inform the policies that affect them. This type of funding is not easily obtained, as many funders shy away from investments in both community organizing and policy advocacy.

Alerted to this fact early on, HFRP tracked grantees' experiences with this aspect of sustainability. Results show that while most grantees have been able to get additional funding, making sure a community-based staff presence can be maintained has been an ongoing challenge for most. At least two grantees had to scale back their community-based staff during fundraising, and three reported dealing with staff vacancies or turnover. Finally, three grantees found the need to restructure their community-based staffing structure to better meet their current organizational capacities.

A lesson from the DI was that when community engagement is an objective of an initiative that is relatively short-term, and sustainability is a primary concern, groups that have a recognized presence in communities, and the organizational capacity to do community organizing, leadership development, or grassroots mobilization may be a more workable alternative than funding for established advocacy groups that have little or no infrastructure for working with new voices and communities. As such, grantees must have the capacity to be effective in communities. Grantees that demonstrate this capacity might have:

- Organization and/or its staff represent communities served
- Established principles for organizing individuals and communities
- Sound leadership development strategies
- Strong presence in communities where the organization works
- Organizational capacity to carry out the work
- Capacity to work with community organizations as well as state-level advocates

However, when funders make a longer-term commitment to community engagement, investment in organizations that do not yet have the infrastructure to work effectively with new voices and communities but that have the potential, may be appropriate (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002c). A decision to choose these organizations is influenced, in part, by the initiative's *theory of leverage* or ideas about how the initiative will be implemented and is best made early on during strategy development.

## **2) Ideas, Beliefs, Values, Principles**

Sometimes sustainability does not mean that the specific work or grant supported under an initiative needs to continue. Instead it might mean that grantees sustain a commitment to the interests, ideas, principles, or beliefs supported by the initiative. For example, if an initiative supports research about the health-related needs of underserved populations, the foundation may desire for that commitment to continue, but in potentially different ways than was supported under the initiative. Or it may mean that the grantee

focuses on fostering the dissemination and application of what has been found in the original research, thereby sustaining a commitment to the original work, but taking it a step further.

Evaluators who are positioned to be part of an initiative's core management team from the start are well aware of the ideas, values, and principles underlying and supporting an initiative. As such, they can build into the evaluation attention to these elements through, for example, indicator development. Doing so not only establishes sustainability of these elements as something to track, but provides a mechanism through which data can be collected and used to determine the speed at which grantees are institutionalizing initiative ideas, as well as to identify trends over time. This is particularly useful during initiatives that span a considerable number of years or that are designed to impact a large number of grantee organizations.

**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
*Tracking the Sustainability of Ideas, Values, Principles***

The Devolution Initiative wanted to institutionalize several core principles into the work of its grantees. Among these was thinking in new ways about how to disseminate and package information so that it is more useable and accessible to a wider range of users. This was in line with the fact that decision making about welfare and health care related issues was devolving to a new set of policymakers at the state and local levels with new and ongoing information needs that would aid them in their decision making. This meant grantees should do things like shorten their publications, summarize their information more, disseminate information or research findings in multiple formats, and use multiple channels of dissemination (e.g., media, Web, print) to ensure the information reached its target audiences. WKKF had a strong interest in seeing these principles sustain in grantee practice well beyond the end of the initiative.

From the evaluation's beginning, HFRP tracked whether these principles were being put into practice. The evaluation used an annual document review to content analyze grantees' publications for evidence that information was being developed and disseminated in different ways. The document review tracked a series of indicators that included, among others:

- Length (# of pages per document)
- Type (e.g., fact sheet, policy brief, research report, journal article, etc.)
- Scope (national, state, local)
- Content (health, welfare, both)
- Format (e.g., use of bullet points, executive summary)

HFRP content analyzed over 1200 grantee documents over a four-year period. The data, which could be analyzed by individual grantee, showed a definite adoption of new information development and dissemination principles. As important, however, was the analysis of trends over time, which showed an increasing migration toward the adoption of these principles. This trend, combined with data collected through regular interviews, determined that these principles had become institutionalized in grantee operations and would sustain well beyond the Initiative (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002a).

### **3) Relationships**

Relationships and collaboration are a key aspect of most, if not all, initiatives. By its very nature, an initiative assumes that there is value in overlaying an initiative framework onto a group of grantees, and the foundation often plays a critical role in introducing individuals and organizations and acting as a catalyst in what is hoped to be ongoing relationships. A key evaluation question then becomes whether those relationships are developing, and whether they will sustain beyond the life of the initiative, or beyond the point at which the foundation ceases to support activities and events that bring initiative grantees together. The challenge for an initiative evaluation is

to find ways to measure the development of relationships to determine if this is in fact occurring, and to judge their prospects for sustaining.

**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
Tracking the Sustainability of Relationships**

Like most initiatives, collaboration was a key Devolution Initiative theme. Through the unique mix of grantees across different functions (research, advocacy, policy), and geographic areas of focus (national and state), WKKF sought to promote relationship building and collaboration within function (researchers with researchers, advocates with advocates, etc.), and within geographic areas of focus (nationals with nationals, states with states). The DI also sought to foster “crossover collaboration” across functions (research, advocacy, and policy with each other), and geographic focus (national with state grantees).

WKKF encouraged collaboration by holding regular grantee meetings, sponsoring joint grantee events, developing joint grants, and encouraging individual connections.

HFRP used the following framework to track collaboration and its development over the course of the DI. Data gathered to assess the indicators that fit within this framework were collected from semiannual interviews and questionnaires.

Level	Type of Collaboration (with example indicators)
High ↑  ↓  Low	<b>Collaboration</b> – Prepare joint reports, conduct joint training, conduct joint meetings, prepare joint proposals
	<b>Coordination</b> – Coordinate data collection, develop joint messages (e.g., for press releases)
	<b>Contribution</b> – Respond to information requests, provide input on reports
	<b>Communication</b> – Put grantees on a mailing list, share information informally

The expectation was that collaboration would evolve over time in several ways. First that it would increase in terms of the level of effort required, from basic communication in the initiative’s early stages, to more time-intensive coordination and collaboration later on. Second, that over time collaboration would over time require less foundation intervention or facilitation to occur. And third, that collaboration would happen regularly or at least periodically, and would not be a one-shot effort.

Interview and questionnaire data on indicators derived from the above framework showed that when collaboration made sense or opportunities presented themselves, important relationships developed or strengthened that did not exist prior to the initiative, they developed over time, and sustained beyond WKKF’s encouragement for them to do so. As might also be expected, and not unlike findings from other initiatives, significant collaborative relationships did not develop between every grantee involved, and overall most of the collaboration fell into the communication and contribution categories. Collaboration was more successful and sustainable when WKKF played a direct role in fostering it. It was not as likely to occur “on its own” simply because grantees were part of the same initiative (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002a).

#### 4) Outcomes

Ultimately, foundations and grantees hope initiative outcomes will sustain beyond an initiative's lifespan. Foundations are supporting more initiatives that intend to achieve codified or institutionalized outcomes that presumably will have a higher degree of "staying power" once the initiative ends. For example, foundations increasingly are focused on creating favorable policy environments that are conducive to sustaining outcomes for service recipients by building public will and demand for specific policy-related issues, or focusing on informing policy directly.

Another example is initiatives targeted toward the well-being of children, youth, and families that fund *systems change* – "a change in political will, policy agendas and policy implementation arrangements" (Briggs, 2002) that ultimately impact the flow of public resources toward the initiative's cause. Systems change efforts often promote the institutionalization of ideas in the public sector and are reflected in the development of financing and service restructuring that lead to the availability and accessibility of high quality supports for children, youth, and families at risk.

Similar to the idea of doing longitudinal research after an intervention or program ends to determine if outcomes are sustaining, an evaluation interested in outcome sustainability ideally would include an opportunity for tracking outcomes after the initiative ends. With the Devolution Initiative evaluation, for example, HFRP continued to track and report back on the sustainability of the Initiative's policy outcomes a full year after the initiative's end.<sup>13</sup> This practice is uncommon, however, and the evaluation typically ends when the program or initiative ends.

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<sup>13</sup> While WKKF continued to provide funding to state grantees in 2002, initiative-level activity essentially ended in January 2002.

**Example from the Devolution Initiative Evaluation:  
*Tracking the Sustainability of Outcomes***

A primary Devolution Initiative intent was to inform state-level policy. The state grantees' acting as individual advocates, and the coalitions they led, were expected to inform and achieve policy-related outcomes that would codify their positions on health care and welfare reform in legislation or administrative policy.

An important focus of HFRP's evaluation, therefore, was to track advocates' efforts to inform specific policies, and the nature of the policy outcome (favorable/unfavorable to advocates' positions). While the evaluation was not intended to demonstrate causality between advocates' efforts and policy outcomes, the evaluation determined whether a plausible case could be built that the advocates played a role in informing those outcomes.

A critical factor in this analysis was the extent to which policy outcomes sustained from year to year. This was particularly important in the initiative's later years, as the economic and budget climate in states changed dramatically and grantee priorities shifted from the expansion of programs and policies in the late 1990s, to "holding the line" in 2000–2002 to ensure that programs and services for low-income families were not eliminated.

Grantees informed policies that fell into the areas of child health insurance (CHIP), Medicaid, immigrant access to health care, income supports and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child care, transportation, housing, and budget/taxes. In 1999–2000, HFRP's policy tracking revealed that evaluation advocates informed 22 specific policies in these areas, with "favorable" outcomes on 17 policies. In 2000–2001, grantees informed 47 specific policy issues, with favorable outcomes, including sustained outcomes on previously informed issues, on 32 policies (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002b).

## **V. CONCLUSION**

As we all know, sometimes even the best-laid plans can go astray. The recent changes in this nation's economic conditions remind us yet again that despite careful attempts to plan for sustainability, the context or conditions can change quickly and render that plan unviable. As Ruth McCambridge (2002), editor of *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, recently wrote:

We are beginning to hear stories about grant commitments being cut by half, about lengthy grant negotiations being suspended, and even about organizations being asked to return a portion of their state contract money—after the work has already been done! There are rumors of established organizations getting ready to fold—how accurate and at what scale, we don't yet know, the situation is still unfolding.

The lesson here is that what worked one year, may not work the next, and plans for sustainability need to adapt to the potentially shifting contexts in which the initiative is operating. We see the evaluation ideas demonstrated here as a critical factor in ensuring those adaptations can occur.

To summarize, we see evaluation's role in supporting sustainability as ongoing, from the beginning of the initiative to its end. We call for initiative evaluators and foundations to:

- Respond directly to the criticism that foundations do not do enough, early enough to ensure an initiative's sustainability by building considerations about sustainability into the initiative's strategy from the very beginning. Evaluators can act as key informants and facilitators during the strategy development process to ensure that information relevant to sustainability is being considered and that key sustainability decisions are not being overlooked.
- Plan for the tracking and revisiting of sustainability throughout the initiative. Make sustainability an outcome to be tracked over time, and build grantee feedback and participation in the process through the evaluation.
- Operationalize sustainability as more than just continued funding. Think also about how the foundation can support, and the evaluators can track, the sustainability of an initiative's ideas, relationships, and outcomes.
- Examine the contextual factors that are likely to impact sustainability over time, and adapt the initiative's strategic approach to sustainability to account for those factors to the extent that it is possible.

While these approaches will not solve "the sustainability challenge" all initiatives inevitably face, they offer ideas for where foundations can find unexpected allies among evaluators in their sustainability pursuits. At the same time, evaluators need to be more open to aiding in foundations' sustainability endeavors. While sustainability is now a regular and established part of philanthropic rhetoric, it is not one that most evaluators are tuned into. Evaluators, who heretofore have not been seen as assets when it comes to sustainability, have much more to offer than either foundations or evaluators may currently realize.

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# APPENDIX B

## Devolution Initiative Organizational Structure

