

Building for Impact: Building Sustainable Collaborations

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Abstract

Creating a sustainable collaboration is usually an afterthought of the collaboration planning process than a designed and intentional practice. The Tamarack Institute, which supports more than 400 place-based collaborative planning tables, developed a useful guide that identifies 10 core factors that build sustainability and 10 resiliency practices. The ability of collaborations to identify sustainability at the beginning of their process also increases their ability to be innovative and agile. The guide includes advice for both practitioners and funders about how to build sustainability and resilience from the start in community change planning processes.

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, Tamarack Institute has coached and supported over 400 place-based, collaborative planning tables to move the needle on complex issues, including ending poverty, building youth futures, addressing social isolation and loneliness, and engaging in climate transitions. The experiences of these cross-sector collaborations have been variable. Some collective tables have thrived, grown, and achieved significant investment and impact. Other tables have struggled. The tables did not recruit the right leaders, struggled to achieve investment to move forward their shared agenda, and unfortunately lost momentum and withered away. The capacity of collaborations to consider sustainability directly impacts their ability to innovate and navigate community change.

In January 2023, Tamarack published [10: A Guide for Building a Sustainable and Resilient Collaboration](#) (Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023) to capture the lessons about building sustainable collaborations from the onset. The guide content was informed by an Advisory Committee composed of practitioners, funders, and collaborative leaders. The Guide describes a series of 10 factors that are essential to building sustainable collaborations from the get-go.

The guide also identifies 10 practices for collaborations to navigate the shifting world of community change and impact. In addition to the sustainability factors and resilience practices, the guide includes 10 stories of community collaboration efforts that have been sustained over a longer term.

Building for sustainability in collaborations and organizations is about ensuring that the collaboration effectively manages the people, resources, process, and impact factors in a way that drives toward deep and durable impact.

What is Sustainable Collaboration?

There are many different factors that enable the development of sustainable collaboration.

Sustainability incorporates many factors, including leadership, funding, community engagement, and the ability to influence policy and systems that lead to a program or a collective impact. Without these factors in place, collaborations may struggle to innovate and scale their approaches. Whereas resilience focuses on the internal conditions related to collaborative health and well-being, sustainability includes investments and outcomes that can have a lasting impact. These concepts are tied together and can affect one another. (Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023)

The 10 sustainability factors described in the Guide fall into four categories: people factors, process factors, resource factors, and impact factors. These ten factors create a 360-degree lens. Embedding equity and inclusion into the collaboration process and ensuring that the individuals engaged in and impacted by the work are critical people factors. Process factors include a compelling case and shared vision, as well as a defined process for ongoing learning and reflection.

People Factors

- 1 Equity and inclusion embedded in design
- 2 Strong ties between partners
- 3 Broad community engagement

Resource Factors

- 4 Adequate human and financial resources
- 5 Partners contribute to shared outcomes

Process Factors

- 6 Compelling Case drives work
- 7 Ongoing reflection and learning

Impact Factors

- 8 Data and Evidence informs approach
- 9 Progress and Impact is tracked and reported
- 10 Influence policy and systems change

(Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023)

Resource factors include ensuring that the collaboration has considered what human and financial resources are needed to achieve the shared vision and that the collaboration partners can

contribute to shared outcomes. Finally, the impact factors are critical to building ongoing commitment and support. These include the use of data and evidence to inform progress and identifying how the collaboration influences policy and systems change.

Constructing a Sustainable Collaboration Model

Creating a sustainable collaboration model requires a multi-faceted approach that considers the needs and perspectives of all involved partners, including those engaged at the collaborative table and those being impacted in the community. It is important to build trust amongst partners, identify the goals and objectives of the collaboration, and who will be involved and impacted by the process. Focusing on the people factors of collaboration will ensure that each partner is aware of their roles and responsibilities and that the collaboration is focused on achieving the desired outcomes. (Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023)

The collaboration process should be developed to ensure that each partner is able to contribute to the objectives of the collaboration. This could include setting up regular meetings, developing policies and procedures, or creating a collaborative platform to facilitate communication and collaboration. It is also important to develop a plan for resource management. This plan should include a budget and timeline (Tamarack Institute, 2020), as well as strategies for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the collaboration. This will help to ensure that the collaboration is able to meet its objectives in a sustainable manner.

Finally, it is important to ensure that the collaboration can continually improve and evolve over time. This could include developing new strategies, engaging in research and evaluation, or setting up a feedback loop to measure the success of the collaboration. Through these processes, the collaboration will be able to meet the changing needs of its stakeholders in a sustainable and effective manner.

The Importance of Partner and Community Engagement

Partner and community engagement is important because it helps ensure that the collaboration is connected to and in sync with community-identified needs and priorities. When partners and the broader community are invested in the collaboration, they are more likely to remain committed and continue to contribute resources to the effort. Deep engagement also helps foster better relationships between participants and makes it easier to communicate and work together to reach common objectives. Finally, partner engagement helps to ensure that the collaboration is successful and has a lasting impact on the community and beyond. (Attygalle, 2019)

Navigating Challenges to Achieving Sustainability

Achieving sustainability for nonprofit organizations and collaborations can present many challenges. These challenges can include:

- determining the appropriate balance between short-term gains and long-term sustainability

- creating policies, systems, and structures that are effective in achieving sustainability
- finding the human resources and funding needed to support sustainability initiatives
- finding a consensus among all stakeholders on what sustainable solutions should look like
- navigating regulatory and legal frameworks that can impede progress on sustainable initiatives
- addressing the unequal access to resources that often exists in collaborations and organizations.

Another challenge in achieving sustainability is the lack of awareness and understanding of sustainability and its importance. Many people are disconnected from the environmental and social issues that need to be addressed to achieve sustainability, making it difficult to mobilize support or resources. Furthermore, a lack of understanding of the value of sustainability can lead to under-investment in sustainable solutions or initiatives.

Finally, achieving sustainability requires a long-term commitment and dedication from all stakeholders. This can be difficult to maintain, especially when there are competing interests or short-term demands. Sustainability also requires a shift in the way solutions are developed and implemented, which can be difficult for those who are used to traditional ways of doing things.

There are subtle differences between how a program or individual organization operate and how a collaboration effort functions and is structured. These differences impact sustainability. One challenge, in a collaborative context, is that there are many different elements to collaboration. These include investing in the people and process of the collaboration: recruiting partners, determining how to work together, developing a plan for change, and working collaboratively to enact the plan. There is also the impact of collaborative effort: developing a funding proposal, engagement of community members, the coordination or delivery of services, achieving impact, and evaluating and communicating results. The people and process aspect of collaboration is often the most difficult to secure funding for, and yet is integral to achieving success and impact. An important question every collaboration should ask is this: What needs to be sustained? Keep in mind that there are options. If the work has fulfilled its core purpose, it does not need to be sustained. In other cases, some of the collaborative outcome might eventually be embedded in the core work of one or more partners around the collaborative table. (Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023)

The Long-Term Impact of Sustainable Collaborations

Building sustainable collaborations can lead to improved efficiency, enhanced effectiveness, and greater success in achieving shared goals. It can help to create a long-term, positive impact on society and the environment by promoting sustainable development, reducing risks, and increasing access to resources. Sustainable collaborations can also help to build stronger relationships between organizations, leading to increased trust and cooperation. This can lead to

increased opportunities for innovation, more effective decision-making, and greater access to resources. Furthermore, it can lead to better communication, improved collaboration, and a greater understanding of different perspectives, which can generate greater goodwill between organizations. Lastly, it can lead to increased financial sustainability and reduced costs for participating organizations.

The community-based stories included in the guide illustrate the impact of collaborations that focus on sustainability over the long term. The Roving Campus innovation developed by Communities Building Youth Futures (CBYF) Portage la Prairie identified core sustainability elements that have been instrumental to their collaboration, including advocacy for the students in the initiative, community partnerships, evaluation, and building a case for support, staff support, and a results-driven over process-driven approach.

Calgary Reads, for example, described the importance of building strong and trusting relationships between partners as they had to return to core values to navigate the next phase of their collaborative effort.

In the example of Calgary Reads, the learning and the community efforts are sustained and will hopefully continue to demonstrate resilience over time, even if the organization in its current form is not. Sometimes we can be more creative with solutions and the ways we address community needs and opportunities if we are not wedded to a particular structure or form. (Weaver & Des Jardins, 2023)

Collaborations built with a sustainability focus from the onset can achieve deep and durable impacts, even as they shift and change over time. The sustainability and resilience guide contains useful resources, community, funder insights, and direction. Tamarack Institute will build on the content of the guide by developing accessible self-assessment tools and resources to consider how your collaboration might build collaboration sustainability to achieve community impact.

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