

How can the sustainability of a public health (food fortification) program be ensured?

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This rapid response was prepared by the Uganda country node of the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative.

Key messages

- Sustainability starts with the beginning of program development and as such, should not be conceived as a final phase of development.
- 'Routinization' constitutes the primary process permitting the sustainability of programs within organizations and may lead to program-related organizational routines.
- Standardization constitutes the secondary process permitting the sustainability of programs. Institutional standards introduce a higher degree of program sustainability. Such standards are materialized by state-level rules and policies, and constrain organizational routines.
- The processes of implementation and sustainability are concomitant. Certain specific events influence sustainability, and others, implementation. Others influence both implementation and sustainability, as joint events belonging to both processes.



Who requested this rapid response?

This document was prepared in response to a specific question from a policy maker in Uganda.

! This rapid response includes:

- Key findings from research
- Considerations about the relevance of this research for health system decisions in Uganda

X Not included:

- Recommendations
- Detailed descriptions

What is a SURE Rapid Response?

SURE Rapid Responses address the needs of policymakers and managers for research evidence that has been appraised and contextualised in a matter of hours or days, if it is going to be of value to them. The Responses address questions about arrangements for organising, financing and governing health systems, and strategies for implementing changes.

What is SURE?

SURE – Supporting the Use of Research Evidence (SURE) for policy in African health systems - is a collaborative project that builds on and supports the Evidence-Informed Policy Network (EVIPNet) in Africa and the Regional East African Community Health (REACH) Policy Initiative (see back page). SURE is funded by the European Commission's 7th Framework Programme.

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Background

Although knowledge, facts and information on program planning, implementation, and evaluation are common, those on health promotion program sustainability are less abundant and tend to be fragmented. The concept of sustainability refers to the continuation of programs and therefore accordingly a sustained program is defined as a set of durable activities and resources aimed at program-related objectives. There are at least four reasons why sustainability concerns public health decision makers and practitioners. First, sustained programs can maintain their effects over a long period allowing for the study of long-term effects. Second, there is often a latency period between the beginning of program-related activities and their effects on population health so the program has got to be able to live through the latent period for it to realize its effects. In addition, if a program were perceived as being beneficial for the health of targeted populations, the absence of sustainability would lead to an investment loss for the organizations and people involved; and yet a discontinued community program brings disillusion to participants and therefore poses obstacles to subsequent community mobilization. For these reasons which are by no means exhaustive, sustainability is crucial for any intervention considered beneficial to the population. This paper looks at how an organization can ensure sustainability of a given program and it is based on a review of the literature on program sustainability done by Pierre Pluye et al. [1]. It focuses on the structural and temporal (time) dimensions of program sustainability. The authors of this rapid response emphasize that sustainability starts with the beginning of program development and as such, can hardly be conceived as a final phase of development.

Summary of findings

Social structures of sustainability

Organizational routines

Message: 'Routinization' constitutes the primary process permitting the sustainability of programs within organizations and may lead to program-related organizational routines. These routines allow for the analysis of program sustainability. Memory, adaptation, values, and rules define organizational routines.

An organization is a form of organized collective action with indistinct borders where the wishes of members do not necessarily coincide. In this broader meaning of organizations, several

authors, while discussing program sustainability, suggest that programs are sustained within organizations that allow coalition (or community) members to control or influence a program. The coalition or organization in this case may be formed by health professionals, industries, administrators, community leaders, researchers and others at the start of the program. It is an alliance between people and organizations whose objectives typically differ, but who pool together their resources to effect changes, something they each would not achieve on their own. In fact, the program can be sustained when the coalition formed for its implementation continues to operate even after the professionals have withdrawn from it, in which case it would have formed strong foundational structures.

In their books, R. K. Yin and M. Weber suggest that program sustainability comes out of 'routinization', where an innovation becomes a stable and regular part of organizational procedures and behaviour [2, 3]. The process of 'routinization' assures that a social activity is established on a durable basis. Sustained programs are primarily 'routinized' within organizations. The social structure that characterizes program sustainability is an organizational routine. So, whether the will to ensure sustainability is located within communities or within public health organizations, the programs intended to be sustained must be backed up by some form of organized action, an organization. It is further pointed out that the regularity of social activities becomes customary when activities depend on routines. A routine is a typical procedural operation and routines are integrated in organizations like the memory of actions or procedures shared by the stakeholders. Organizational routines are defined in terms of memory, adaptation, values, and rules and they reflect the values, beliefs, codes, or cultures of the organization by means of symbols, rituals, and language. Furthermore they adhere to rules that govern action and decision-making such as manuals of procedure, rules of information transmission, or plans.

Any organisation looking to make a program sustainable, be it fortification or other, needs to develop routine behaviour and procedures for the given program; these clearly define its values and beliefs that is characterised for. It is its culture and social structure that would be carried on for generations.

Institutional standards

Message: Standardization constitutes the secondary process permitting the sustainability of programs. This process is superimposed upon the primary process of routinization and may lead to program-related standardized routines that are more sustainable than simple organizational routines. Institutional standards introduce a higher degree of program sustainability. Such standards are materialized by state-level rules and policies, and constrain organizational routines.

Although the organizational routines described above help to resolve the problem of recognizing the social structures of program sustainability, they are not sufficient. To focus solely on

routines would lead to a limited intra-organizational perspective of program sustainability, which perspective does not take into account external pressures that influence organizations. The existence of other structures for the analysis of sustainability is acknowledged and these are institutional rather than organizational. Institutionalization comes about through the elaboration of social system-wide principles, norms, laws, and rules. Without denying the interconnectedness of organizations and institutions, differentiating them permits not only the identification of different types of sustainability but also, different degrees of sustainability. Institutions are social structures of a higher order than organizations and these are infused with social ideologies, values, norms, and preferences, and, in turn, they provide society with rules and policies. At the level of the organization, programs and technologies may be constrained by some of these rules and policies. Institutional standards directly constrain organizations or actors. A standard refers to any definite rule, principle, or measure established by authority. State-level rules and policies that constrain organizations and people make institutional standards operational. In health promotion, a state-level healthy public policy is a legal institutional standard. Such a policy may constrain organizations' routines or actors directly. For example, in a food fortification program, if a mandatory law or policy is enacted, it obliges all industries to fortify given foods under given standards and this obligation introduces new routines in the organizations of food industries and manufacturers. It would also introduce new routines for other stakeholders like the Uganda National Bureau of Standards, the Ministry of Health, the Consumers' organizations and others.

A program may be considered sustained if it is integrated into organizational routines or an existing policy, or if it introduces a new policy. Furthermore, some researchers argue that diffusion of intervention programs to a policy level is necessary for durability. Traditionally, institutions are stable and institutional changes are rare and come about in a radical manner after the mobilization of the population or after hierarchical, authoritarian decisions. In fact Lefebvre has suggested that institutions represent a maximum and final degree of sustainability in health promotion [4]. However, another school of thought supported by neo-institutionalists suggests that institutions are not the paragons of stability they were believed to be, showing that institutions change in a progressive manner as a result of learning. They acknowledge that although institutional standards do not correspond to a final degree of sustainability, they are more resistant to change than are organizational routines. A standardized routine is more sustainable than a routine that is not standardized.

The above when combined suggest three degrees of sustainability as shown in table 1 below.

Table 1: Three degrees of program sustainability in organizations

	Weak sustainability	Medium sustainability	High sustainability
Continuation of organizational activities aimed at program-related objectives			
Non-routinized activities	X		
Routinized activities (activities meeting all the characteristics of organizational routines)		X	
Standardized routines (routinized activities complying with a state-level rule or policy)			X

Temporality of the sustainability process

Message: The processes of implementation and sustainability are concomitant. Certain specific events influence sustainability, and others, implementation. Others influence both implementation and sustainability, as joint events belonging to both processes. The presence of these events suggests means by which to influence, evaluate, and study the processes of program sustainability.

The development of programs is often modelled as a linear sequence of phases. The sequence is typically one where planning, implementation, evaluation and sustainability phases follow one another chronologically with minimal overlap and with each phase being marked by specific events. A close examination of implementation and sustainability in practice suggests a deception in this 'stage' model. It suggests that a sustainability phase naturally follows a successful implementation phase in which case sustainability would mean that problems in implementation have been encountered but have, hopefully, been dealt with successfully. This model does not take account of the spontaneous character of sustainability or of the continuous adjustments that shape the sustainability process. In a 'stage' model, what is sustained, in theory, prolongs what had been implemented. Thus, sustaining a program consists of finding the means of reinforcing, and making last what had been implemented. A lot of research now acknowledges that program implementation and sustainability are not distinct and successive phases but are concomitant and related processes. G. Altman who has done extensive research in this field indicates that sustaining programs in communities requires collaboration from the

beginning with professionals or volunteers that represent the communities and other stakeholders [5]. A sustainability strategy has to be put in place from the beginning because the initial aim is to create a self-sustaining health-promotion structure embedded within the organizational fabric of the stakeholders that continues to function after the end of initial funding. Conceptualizing implementation and sustainability as concomitant processes suggests means of impacting sustainability. It places both program sustainability and implementation in the mindset of public health practitioners and decision-makers. For example, the stability of resources is one of the factors that influences program sustainability. It is necessary to keep in mind resources for long-term program development when planning programs. Several research has attributed the majority of sustainability failures to the inadequacy of long-term resources [6, 7].

In fact, if every implementation event is potentially a sustainability event, and if one does not distinguish specific sustainability events, then one risks blindly influencing, evaluating, or studying those events that are conducive to implementation as if they were events conducive to sustainability. In particular, the same event may have different effects on different processes. Using the example of resources, it is considered traditionally that the more resources there are, the better the program is implemented. Sometimes, however, ‘too many’ external resources may be unfavourable to sustainability [8, 9]. In order for the ‘concomitancy’ conceptualization to be useful, therefore, either specific events have to be associated with each process or some events have to be shown to influence different processes in different directions. To explore the existence of events specific to each process, three types of events are suggested (see table 2 below); (1) those specific to sustainability; (2) those specific to implementation; (3) and joint events that belong to both sustainability and implementation. For example, three specific events that favour sustainability are (1) the maintenance of financial resources that guarantee supplies, (2) the maintenance of technologies and their updating through a long-term contract, and (3) the maintenance of ad hoc training.

Table 2: Illustration of types of event, either specific or common to implementation and sustainability of programs

Types of event specific to sustainability processes	Standardization of programs by means of state-level rules and policies Stabilization of organizational resources allowed for programs (staff, funding, equipment, training) Risk-taking by organizations in favour of programs Integration of rules relative to programs into those of organizations
Types of joint sustainability and implementation events (events common to, or ‘bridging’, implementation and sustainability processes)	Incentives reward organizational actors involved in programs (vs. costs discourage actors) Adaptation of programs according to effectiveness and needs (vs. competition or failure) Objectives fit (vs. reorientation) Transparent communication between actors (vs.

	misinformation)
Types of event specific to implementation process	Investment of adequate resources to complete activities (staff, funding, equipment, training) Technical or practical compatibility of program-related activities with those of organizations (vs. disruption of the operating work flow)

Other issues to consider

This paper assumes that other factors have been taken care of. However these factors are vital to the sustainability of a program and will be summarized here.

- **Actors:** Strategic actors have to be wooed and brought into play. Different actors have different power and these have to be studied. A complete stakeholder analysis is inevitable for continued sustainability of a program.
- **Pilot projects:** for interventions, these help to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and identify which elements of the model may need to be revised. Interventional programs have numerous repercussions for the organizations where they are implemented and implementing them without a pilot may bring up several unexpected outcomes some of which may not be welcome.
- **Effectiveness of the program:** only effective programs should be sustained; not every program or intervention is worth sustaining and thus sustainability may be premature when efficacy is not established. Program sustainability will be hindered if the results indicate the absence of efficacy or if actors perceive failure. Conversely, sustainability will be favoured if there is some efficacy or if the efficacy is uncertain. In other words, actors and stakeholders will believe in the potential efficacy of programs, and they will sustain 'their' programs, unless they are convinced of some unexpected inefficacy.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that for the sustainability of a public health interventional program, an organization needs to consider social structures of sustainability which includes organizational routines set within institutional standards. It has further pointed out that implementation and sustainability of programs are related processes and should be treated as such acknowledging that certain specific events influence sustainability and others implementation. The presence and distinction of the different events provides means by which sustainability can be influenced evaluated and studied.

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Conflicts of interest

None known.

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The Regional East African Community Health-Policy Initiative (REACH) links health researchers with policy-makers and other vital research-users. It supports, stimulates and harmonizes evidence-informed policymaking processes in East Africa. There are designated Country Nodes within each of the five EAC Partner States.

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