

Rural education and sustainability – a short reflection

by Olivia M. Hartmann-Fässler¹, AGRIDEA

Sustainability is a big word in development cooperation. But what does it actually entail and what is most needed to reach and maintain sustainability for an institute of rural education? The author describes sustainability as a dynamic status of change and adjustment, as the result of a multitude of small processes that need to be coordinated and guided well. Stressing the paramount importance of good leadership and management skills she suggests that these aspects should be (more) consciously taken into account and built up from the very beginning of donor support onwards.

Sustainability is a big word in development cooperation. It is omnipresent. Most everything in development cooperation seems to be done with the quest of being or becoming sustainable. So some time ago, in the frame of my assignment with two institutes of rural education, I sat down to reflect on what being sustainable would mean for these institutes. What conditions would have to be fulfilled for these institutes to become or stay sustainable and how would the donor support have to look like to make these institutes sustainable.

The first thing I realized was that despite of the universal use of the term sustainability there are very different definitions of that term and many opinions and personal feelings as to what can and cannot possibly be called “truly” sustainable. For some the most essential ingredient seems to be *financial viability*, for others sustainability is defined predominantly by long

duration. Both approaches make sense, but there are endeavours that are not financially viable but have persisted for long due to a non-financial benefit they provide. And there are financially viable endeavours that were discontinued after a short while because of a shift in political agendas etc. And of course there is always the question what exactly would qualify as “prolonged”, or “not short-lived” or “long-lasting”? How long is long? Is it a number of years that marks the golden threshold to sustainability? And if so, who sets the marks? Some split tongues would say that sustainability is reached as soon as an impact outlasts the project phase or the support period of the donor – but that is not really a satisfactory answer, is it?

And there are more open questions around. For example a government-funded service that was there for the last 30 years... would that qualify as being sustainable? After all it has existed for a long time and the finances for it seem to have been available. But what if the quality of that service was rather bad? Can something be sustainably bad? What about ethical or moral components? Even though in the daily use often these kinds of criteria are silently attributed to it, the term *sustainability* as such is actually free of moral or ethic conditionality. So (modern) slavery would in a way qualify as sustainable?

In view of the multitude of interpretations and opinions I found it best to go ahead and just coin my own working definition of sustainability. Sustainable is, whatever “*can be and is adjusted to new circumstances if and as needed*” (of course without consciously doing harm to anyone and under strict observance of the principles of gender balance etc.). I was tempted to use the term “self-perpetuating” instead of “adjusted”... but that sounded too much like “staying for the sake of staying”... and reminded me in a very negative way of the usual last statement in research papers, namely the urgent need for further studies and research.

¹ O. Hartmann, dipl. Ing. Agr. ETH, has worked in and for various projects related to formal and informal rural education in Asia and Latin America. Her last assignment was in Bhutan where she worked at a training institute for extension agents and supported the development of an agricultural school.

RDTC – Rural Development Training Centre (also called Farmers School) – a newly founded agricultural school with an academically less highly educated, but even the more highly motivated team, offering hands-on practical training to mostly not so well-educated farmers.

CNR – College of natural resources: a well-established institute with highly educated staff where well-educated young people get their professional training as extension agents and later their further education.

Being happy with my personal definition I then went on to see what sustainability defined by this statement would mean for the two institutes I worked with and for (see box). These two institutes have quite a different clientele, but they have the zeal to offer high quality, need-based and relevant training.

Applying the above mentioned working definition, the two training institutes will be/stay sustainable, if they can be and are adjusted to new circumstances if and as needed.

These new circumstances can crop up on various frontiers. What is need-based today is most likely not (as) need-based anymore in two years. The resources available today, the methods appropriate today are not necessarily so anymore in a few years. People change, systems change, professional profiles change...

What would be needed to be able to adjust to any and all of these new circumstances? First of all of course there is the **need to even realize that circumstances have changed, and how**. Without that no adjustment is possible. Some changes cannot be missed, such as political changes, educational policies etc. Sooner or later they will hit an institute and impose themselves onto it. Other changes are more subtle because they happen gradually and slowly. Without active efforts to monitor them and detect them early (enough), they might easily be overlooked for too long, making it very difficult to adjust to them in an appropriate way. In this category would be the needs of the clients, e.g. new market chances and opportunities for farmers, or a shift in the production systems and related shift in the responsibilities of extension agents. Such things don't usually pop up on the market from one day to another; they start small in some corner of the

country, or in some corner of the brain of innovative people. There they brood and develop slowly long before they are noticed and become visible in the media. Once such issues are broadly discussed it is already a very late point in time to start trying to adjust training offers and content. In particular in a situation where there is competition on the market, it might be too late and potential clients will be lost to competitors. But even in a situation without true competition between institutes as in Bhutan it might mean that one or two batches of fresh extension agents will reach the field already with a partly outdated knowledge base, or farmers will miss out one production period and have to wait another year. To avoid such losses, it is crucial that an institute(s staff) is at the top of happenings in their subject matter area. If they nurture the contact with the right people on the one hand (key actors in the scene, clients, important information sources) and are encouraged to have a general attitude of interest and curiosity on the other hand, such changes and trends will come to their ears much earlier. In addition to that a training institute should conduct tracer studies regularly in order to get feedback on the relevance of their programmes and problematic points therein. Last but not least the management should also systematically keep an eye on internal developments related to staff (turn-over, motivation, need for updating knowledge and skills), infrastructure and other resources to feel the trends there and be prepared to react.



So, monitoring developments and changes is the first thing. It is important and is the precondition for the second step – **deciding whether there is a need at all to react and if so, what would be an appropriate reaction**.

Of course not every noticed change and development necessitates immediate action on part of the institute. Some changes can be noticed only, others, however, call for action. The important thing is that the information gathered is consciously scrutinized and made use of instead of piling up possibly unused in the minds of different lone individuals within the institute. To ensure this scrutiny there needs to be a process or procedure to ensure that the relevant observations are brought to the attention of the management or other concerned people. That could be very simple, for example in the form of a standing agenda item in regular unit and management meetings.

Handling such feed-back and information in an appropriate way – neither overreacting, nor denying – requests an open and self-critical mindset, an institutional culture of introspection and reflection, the understanding that we are all learners and that making mistakes is not a problem but not correcting them is. It is again the management and leadership of an institute that has the decisive influence on whether such a culture is lived or not.

If the objective and neutral scrutiny showed that there is a need to make adjustments, as a third thing **related measures are to be defined**.

Of course the mere decision and definition of measures does not mean that they are automatically implemented. There is a crucial step from “can be adjusted” – having the necessary information and using it well – to “is adjusted” – actually implementing changes. And I think this is where there is one main difference between more successful and less successful institutes in terms of sustainability. People, and with them the systems they are involved in, exhibit a natural resistance against change. Changing things most of the time means investing time, thought, funds and energy. It often is more hassle than just going on with a status quo. So the management needs to first of all allocate the necessary funds and time, be transparent and give clear mandates and instructions to concerned people. And, secondly and most importantly, it needs to **keep track, follow up and enforce the implementation** with a firm hand.

This is an up hill task. And only a management (team) that is fully convinced that change and adjustment is necessary and good for the long-term good, the sustainability, of the institute will sustain this continuous effort.

For western ears this may not sound very new and spectacular. We have long become used to the fact that persisting in an ever-changing market is only possible with continuous adjustments and changes. In a setting where up to very recently sustainability typically had more to do with tradition and conservation than with adjustment and change, the necessity of continuous change and adjustment is, however, a rather suspect a concept. It is, in fact, a concept that goes against all that was thought to be good and correct before. A major change of a curriculum may, for example, well be interpreted or perceived as being disrespectful towards the one(s) who shaped it in its present form.

Under such conditions the first obstacle to overcome when striving towards sustainability is the perception of change as something negative and undesirable. As long as such an attitude prevails, particularly in the management or leadership – be it openly or as a hidden but very strong cultural feeling – the persistence and motivation in following up and if necessary pushing through the needed changes will be rather limited. And without consciously giving priority to these changes and the processes related to it the usual plethora of requests and wishes from all sides – most all of them with seemingly more urgency and of more immediate effect – will very fast absorb the available (staff) time and resources.

From this I conclude that

- sustainability is not something that can be achieved, ticked off the to-do list and then looked at with pride for endless times to come.
- sustainability does not happen automatically once a training institute is built up and running well.
- reaching/maintaining sustainability needs a conscious effort in terms of a continuous cycle of monitoring, analysis, adjustment and change. Stimulating, coordinating and overseeing this cycle needs to be one of the main concerns of an institutes management and leadership.

- Any phase of inconsiderate practising of status quo or of relaxing in the splendour of a given achievement even means actually a deterioration of sustainability.

So, what is needed to become or remain sustainable? I would see two important things:

- a well concerted lot of specific and adequate systems and processes
- AND a consequent follow up and prioritized implementation of identified necessary changes.

From all this I dare to say that **the most important precondition for sustainability is a strong and capable management that is convinced of the importance and necessity of changes and adjustments for the long-term good of an institution.**

Consequently, **one of the main concerns of donors, when supporting training institutes towards sustainability should be to build up and establish a management and leadership** that has all these qualities and is open for change and willing to implement it.

I am sure that implicitly this has been and still is one of the goals of donor support. Interestingly enough I could not find this concern reflected specifically in the project documents. The main focus of donor support in both institutes I worked for was on rather “technical” issues, e.g. developing curricula, furthering teaching skills of staff, building up necessary systems for quality control etc. Institutional development or managerial issues, if at all, were approached mostly in terms of building up and maintaining the necessary and right kind of systems, resources, tools and linkages. Of course it is important and crucial for a training institute to provide good, high-quality training and a conducive teaching-learning environment. Sound teaching methodology, good materials, transparent and standardized performance control, updated contents, controlled and institutionalized review of curricula in terms of relevance and weighting of individual subjects... – for all these the necessary capacity, systems and processes need to be set up, people need to be trained and capacitated. But even if that is done beautifully at the outset, it is still the management that has to ensure that these standards are monitored

and enforced, that new people in the system are made aware of them, trained in them and consequently own them as much as the initial core crew did. Without that an institute runs danger to have its main goal and reason of existence slowly but steadily eroded by a conglomerate of uncoordinated individuals’ wishes and zeals, therewith putting into danger any other investment made.

Donor support therefore needs to have or add a very conscious focus on issues of leadership and management from the outset of an endeavour onward. Donors often have no say in personal matters (and that rightly so), but they can consciously invest in the given leadership combined with a constant lobbying for the importance of good management and leadership in the realms, where the leaders and the management team of institutes are chosen. These are the same realms where management decisions and the guidance of the institute – e.g. giving priority to issues of change and adjustment – need to be backed up.

I hope that in the future this aspect is taken seriously when planning and implementing new endeavours in rural education, that as much thought is given to such managerial issues and issues of long-term institutional development as to the “technical” teaching and learning or the infrastructure side. I believe in that this would greatly enhance the success and sustainability of donor support. In particular, I believe, it would reduce the need for revitalization that seems to have cropped up in various institutes of rural education around 10 to 15 years after foundation.