

EPISODE 02

SUSTAINABILITY HAS MANY FACES

It's more complex
than it first appears.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT — A SUSTAINABILITY SERIES

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain

August 2026

Sustainability Has Many Faces

Rethinking Sustainability - Food for Thought

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain

August 2026

Sustainability becomes considerably more complicated when we realize that the answer can change depending upon what we are looking at - and where we are standing.

COMMUNITY MOUNTAIN | IMPACT EXCHANGE

Sustainability Has Many Faces

We began by asking a deceptively simple question: What are we sustaining? But sustainability becomes considerably more complicated when we realize that the answer can change depending upon what we are looking at - and where we are standing.

More Than One Kind of Sustainability

For many people, the word sustainability immediately brings the environment to mind. Clean water. Energy. Natural resources. Climate. Land. Waste.

Stewardship of the physical world is unquestionably important. But our understanding of sustainability has expanded considerably.

FINANCIAL Can the resources continue?	HUMAN Can people continue without being depleted?
RELATIONAL Are trust and relationships strengthening?	ORGANIZATIONAL Can the institution continue to function?
TECHNOLOGICAL Can infrastructure be maintained and adapted?	KNOWLEDGE Does learning accumulate and transfer?
COMMUNITY Can the wider ecosystem keep responding?	OUTCOMES Do beneficial results continue over time?

Sustainability has many faces. The difficulty is that those faces do not always look in the same direction.

Sustainable for Whom?

Imagine a nonprofit organization facing financial pressure. It reduces staff, increases workloads, consolidates programs and lowers administrative expenses.

Financial sustainability improves. But employees begin burning out. Experienced people leave. Relationships with clients weaken. Institutional knowledge disappears. Volunteers receive less support.

The organization may have become more financially sustainable while becoming less humanly, relationally and organizationally sustainable.

Which assessment is correct? Both.

Now consider a business that reduces costs by automating a process. The business becomes more competitive. Customers receive faster service. Profits improve. But some employees lose their jobs.

From one perspective, sustainability increased. From another, household economic security declined. From still another, technological capacity increased.

The question “Is this sustainable?” may therefore be incomplete. We may also need to ask: Sustainable for whom?

Perspective Changes What We See

A community is not one thing. It is people, families, neighborhoods, businesses, churches, nonprofits, schools, healthcare providers, governments, civic institutions, cultural organizations, informal relationships and countless other participants.

Each has Needs. Each possesses some capacity to Serve. Each consumes resources. Each generates resources. Each affects others. And each experiences sustainability differently.

ONE ORGANIZATION - MANY PERSPECTIVES

Recipient: reliable help
Volunteer: purpose without burnout
Employee: workload, compensation, meaning
Donor: stewardship and impact
Community: is the underlying Need getting better?

Every perspective can be legitimate. None necessarily reveals the whole.

The Billionaire Is in Need

Our tendency to categorize people makes this harder to see. We commonly divide the world into groups: people in need, people who Serve, clients, donors, volunteers, professionals, the poor, the wealthy.

But wealth is not an indication of complete well-being.

ROLES CAN REVERSE

A billionaire can Need.
A person experiencing homelessness can Serve.
A physician can Need. A patient can Serve.
A teacher can Need. A student can Serve.

Sometimes the roles reverse within minutes. Sometimes they exist simultaneously.

Perhaps one of our difficulties is not that reality is too complicated. Perhaps our categories are too simple.

Need and Serve Are Roles

What if we stopped thinking primarily in terms of categories and instead considered two fluid roles?

NEED ↔ SERVE

Need does not define a person. Serve does not define a person. They describe relationships between people, circumstances, resources and one another at particular moments in time.

A person may have significant financial Need while possessing extraordinary relational Serve capacity. Another person may possess tremendous financial Serve capacity while experiencing profound relational Need.

Someone may Need transportation while being able to Serve through knowledge. Someone may Need food while being able to Serve through encouragement. Someone may Need employment while being able to Serve through skill. Someone may Need companionship while being able to Serve through mentorship.

We do not see two populations - those who need and those who serve. We see an interconnected community of people who Need and Serve.

Many Faces Can Exist Within One Person

Now multidimensional sustainability becomes personal. Consider one individual.

Financially, she may be struggling. Relationally, she may be surrounded by a loving family. Educationally, she may possess tremendous knowledge. Physically, she may have limitations. Spiritually, she may possess deep purpose and hope. Professionally, she may be unemployed. Socially, she may be the person everyone calls when they need encouragement.

Is she sustainable? The question almost sounds absurd when posed that way. Human beings are not balance sheets.

Different dimensions can strengthen or weaken simultaneously. And those dimensions interact.

ONE TRAJECTORY CAN RIPPLE

Job loss → financial stress → relational strain → health impact

Relationship → encouragement → hope → action → opportunity → stability → new Serve

**The dimensions are not merely multiple.
They are interconnected.**

Sustainability Between People

This introduces another face of sustainability: relationship.

Communities do not function simply because resources exist. They function because people exchange resources through relationships.

WHAT MOVES THROUGH RELATIONSHIPS

**Money • Knowledge • Trust • Food
Opportunity • Transportation • Information
Encouragement • Time • Experience • LOVE**

A community can possess tremendous resources and still experience tremendous unmet Need if the relationships necessary to connect them are weak.

**Sustainability may not reside only within
people and organizations. It may also exist -
or fail to exist - between them.**

The Same Action Can Have Several Outcomes

Suppose a volunteer drives someone to a medical appointment. At the simplest level: Need - transportation. Serve - ride provided. Outcome - appointment reached. Success.

But look again. Perhaps the volunteer loses two hours of work. Capacity was consumed. Perhaps the passenger and driver form a relationship. Relational capacity was created. Perhaps the passenger learns about another community resource. Knowledge capacity increased. Perhaps the

volunteer learns about transportation barriers affecting hundreds of people. Community Intelligence increased. Perhaps the passenger later provides transportation to someone else. Serve capacity emerged.

One interaction produced multiple outcomes across multiple dimensions.

Some effects may be immediate. Others may not appear for months. This is why sustainability becomes difficult to understand when we measure only transactions.

Time Changes the Picture

Time introduces yet another dimension. Something beneficial today may create difficulty tomorrow. Something difficult today may create capacity tomorrow.

Emergency assistance may be exactly what someone needs during a crisis. Repeated assistance without addressing underlying circumstances may produce a very different long-term trajectory. Training requires resources today but may generate capacity for decades. A relationship may appear inefficient compared with a transaction but ultimately produce much greater change.

THREE QUESTIONS THROUGH TIME

**What happened?
What happened next?
What happened after that?**

The Faces Interact

Perhaps sustainability is less like a checklist and more like a living system.

Financial sustainability affects human sustainability. Human sustainability affects organizational sustainability. Organizational sustainability affects service capacity. Service capacity affects people. People affect families. Families affect neighborhoods. Neighborhoods affect schools. Schools affect workforce capacity. Workforce capacity affects economic sustainability. Economic conditions affect families.

Pull one thread and something moves somewhere else. Sometimes we see it. Often we do not.

The Danger of a Single Lens

This may explain why well-intentioned solutions sometimes disappoint us. We see one dimension clearly and optimize for it.

We solve the financial problem. Or the housing problem. Or the transportation problem. Or the educational problem. Or the health problem. Each may genuinely need attention.

But the human being experiencing the problem does not live inside our organizational category. The person lives in all of these dimensions at once.

A solution that works beautifully within one dimension can produce unintended consequences elsewhere.

This does not mean we should stop acting until we understand everything. We never will. It means we should act with humility, observe consequences, learn, connect and adjust.

Perhaps Sustainability Is a Profile, Not a Score

There is a natural desire to reduce complicated ideas to numbers. Numbers can help us see patterns. But perhaps sustainability should first be understood as a profile.

A SUSTAINABILITY PROFILE ASKS

**What is strengthening? What is weakening?
Where is capacity increasing? Where is it depleted?
Where is Need growing? Where is Serve emerging?
Where are relationships strengthening? Where are connections missing?
What is happening over time?**

A community could be economically strong and relationally weak. Financially prosperous and socially isolated. Resource rich and connection poor. Institutionally sophisticated and humanly exhausted.

Or materially challenged while possessing extraordinary relational strength, generosity, resilience and hope.

One number could conceal all of that.

Seeing the Whole Person

Perhaps this is where our thinking needs to begin. Not with the program. Not with the organization. Not with the institution. Not even with the category of Need. With the person.

A person possessing dignity, history, relationships, gifts, Needs, abilities, setbacks, hopes, failures, opportunities and capacity to Serve. A person moving through time. A person whose circumstances change. A person whose Need today does not determine their identity tomorrow. And a person whose ability to Serve may emerge long before their own Needs disappear.

When we begin there, sustainability looks different. It becomes less about maintaining machinery and more about understanding trajectory.

Food for Thought

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- What if sustainability is not one condition but many interacting conditions?
- What if something can be sustainable from one perspective while unsustainable from another?
- What if our categories sometimes prevent us from seeing the people inside them?
- What if Need and Serve are not opposite populations but fluid roles?
- What if everyone in a community possesses both Needs and some capacity to Serve?
- What if we measured not only what people received, but what capacity emerged?
- What if the greatest untapped resource in a community is not money, facilities or programs - but Serve capacity we have never learned to see?

What does this person Need - and how can this person Serve?

ANOTHER QUESTION EMERGES

Can Serve emerge before Need disappears?

We began this Series by asking what we are sustaining. Now we have another problem. If Need and Serve are fluid roles, what happens when we stop seeing someone primarily through what they lack?

Can someone continue to Need while simultaneously becoming a source of strength for somebody else? Can Serve emerge before Need disappears? And if it can, might we be overlooking one of the most important signs of human progress because our categories were never designed to see it?

That brings us to a very ordinary human story with an extraordinary implication.

NEXT EPISODE

Episode 3 - The Billionaire Is in Need

What happens when we stop dividing the world into people who Need and people who Serve? Perhaps the first thing that changes is how we see one another.

COMMUNITY MOUNTAIN | IMPACT EXCHANGE

Clay Coleman | August 2026

© 2026 Community Mountain. All rights reserved.