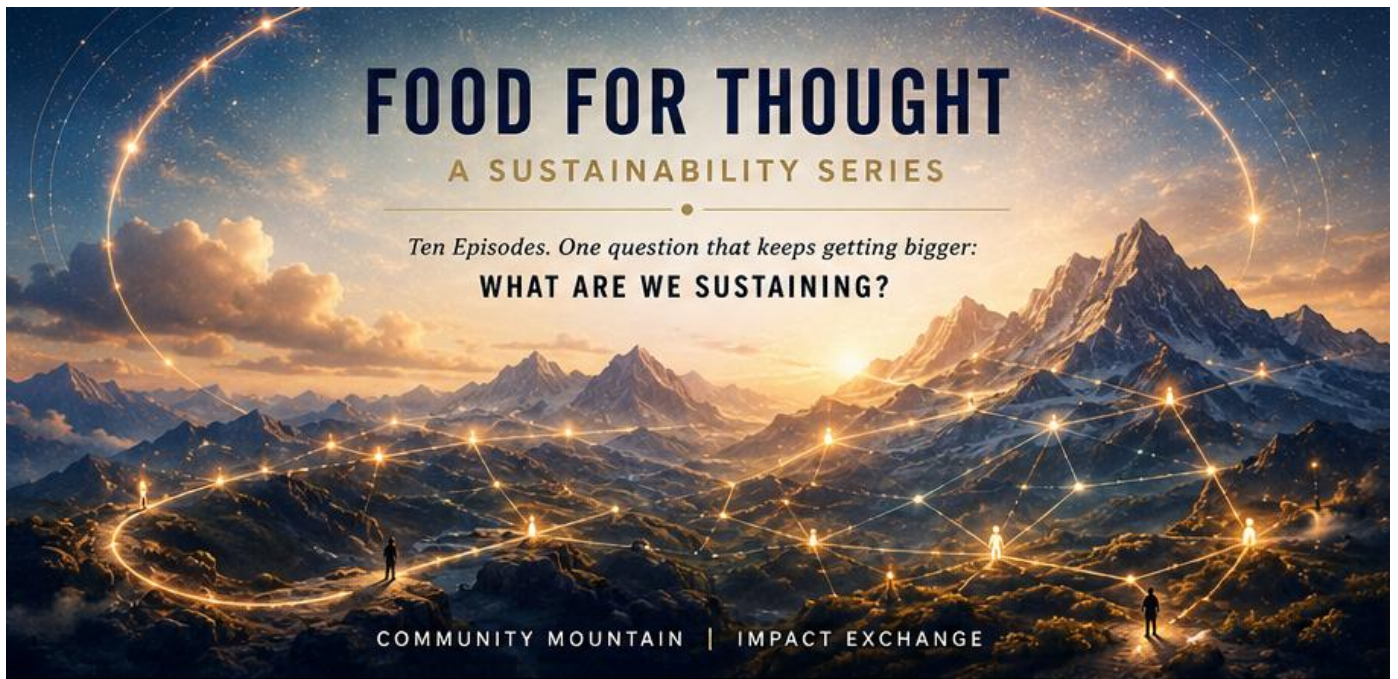




EPISODE 01

What Are We Sustaining?

Rethinking Sustainability - Food for Thought

Clay Coleman | Community Mountain

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Before we ask how to make something sustainable, perhaps we should ask a more fundamental question: What are we sustaining?

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What Are We Sustaining?

Sustainability has become one of the defining aspirations of our time. But before we ask how to make something sustainable, perhaps we should ask a more fundamental question: What are we sustaining?

A Familiar Idea

One of the most widely accepted descriptions of sustainable development comes from the 1987 Brundtland Commission report, Our Common Future:

OUR COMMON FUTURE, 1987

Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

It is an enduring and useful idea. It encourages us to think beyond today. It asks us to consider future generations, responsible stewardship, limited resources, and the consequences of our choices.

Over time, our understanding of sustainability has expanded beyond the environment. We now routinely discuss economic sustainability, social sustainability, organizational sustainability, financial sustainability, human sustainability, and community sustainability.

But there may be an important question hiding underneath all of them.

Is the ability of something to continue necessarily a good thing?

Persistence Is Not the Same as Good

We naturally use sustainable as a positive word. A sustainable organization sounds healthy. A sustainable community sounds desirable. A sustainable program sounds responsible.

But consider the underlying phenomenon of persistence - the ability of a condition or system to continue or reproduce itself over time.

PERSISTENCE CAN BELONG TO BOTH SIDES

**Poverty can persist. Violence can persist.
Distrust can persist. Corruption can persist.
Generational disadvantage can persist.**

In fact, harmful conditions can develop remarkably effective mechanisms for reproducing themselves.

That does not mean sustainability as commonly understood is morally neutral. Sustainability movements generally pursue desirable futures and beneficial outcomes.

**But persistence itself is morally neutral.
Something's ability to continue tells us
nothing, by itself, about whether it should
continue.**

That distinction raises a deceptively simple question:

**Before asking how to make something
sustainable, should we first ask what makes
it persist?**

What If We Are Sustaining the Wrong Thing?

Imagine a community program that has existed for thirty years. It has a board. It has employees. It raises money. It produces annual reports. It serves thousands of people. Its funding is stable.

By many conventional measures, it is wonderfully sustainable.

But suppose the underlying condition it was created to address has become worse.

What exactly have we sustained?

The organization? The activity? The funding? The services? The need? Or the outcome we originally hoped to achieve?

These questions are not criticisms of nonprofits, governments, churches, schools, businesses, philanthropy, or the people working within them. Most community work is undertaken by people sincerely trying to make life better for others.

The questions are directed at something larger: the systems in which all of us participate.

Sometimes a system can reward activity without revealing whether the underlying trajectory has changed.

WE COUNT

**meals • appointments • students
volunteers • dollars • services**

Those numbers matter. But there is another question: What happened because of them?

Sustainability Has a Directional Problem

Suppose we separate two questions.

TWO DIFFERENT QUESTIONS

**Can it continue?
Where is it taking us?**

Those are not the same question.

A beneficial condition may be fragile and difficult to sustain. A harmful condition may be remarkably persistent and self-reinforcing.

A successful intervention may gradually strengthen people and relationships. Another intervention, despite good intentions, may unintentionally increase dependency, exhaust volunteers, consume community capacity, or leave the underlying condition unchanged.

That means sustainability cannot be understood completely by looking only at duration. We must also examine consequence.

What is happening? To whom? Why? What happens next? And what happens when the cycle repeats?

Look at the Individual

Community problems are often discussed in categories: the homeless, the poor, at-risk youth, donors, volunteers, service providers, clients.

But human beings do not live their lives as categories.

A person can need help today and help someone else tomorrow. In fact, a person can Need and Serve at exactly the same time.

Someone experiencing homelessness may need transportation while offering encouragement to another person. A wealthy executive may provide employment and philanthropy while desperately needing relationship, purpose, reconciliation, or belonging.

A volunteer may serve others while needing community themselves. A nonprofit may serve hundreds of families while needing volunteers, funding, expertise, partnerships, technology, and trust.

Perhaps Need and Serve are not different kinds of people at all. Perhaps they are roles we continually move between.

That possibility complicates sustainability - but it may also make it more human.

From Transaction to Trajectory

Consider what happens when we stop looking only at an intervention and begin looking at a person's trajectory.

A person has a Need. Someone has the capacity to Serve. They connect. Something happens.

THEN ASK

**What changed?
What happened next?
What happened to capacity?**

Was the immediate Need addressed? Did another Need emerge? Was capacity consumed, preserved, transferred, unlocked, or created? Did relationships develop? Did circumstances improve? Did the person who Needed discover an opportunity to Serve?

And what happens six months later? A year later? Five years later?

Sustainability begins to look very different when viewed across a human life rather than an annual reporting period.

A Simple Cycle

Perhaps we can begin with something very simple:



And then something important happens. The cycle begins again. But it does not necessarily begin in the same place.

**After time passes, there is a new state:
NEED' <-> SERVE'**

Need may have increased. Need may have decreased. Need may have changed. Serve capacity may have increased. Serve capacity may have been exhausted.

A person may now possess resources, relationships, experience, confidence, knowledge, or opportunity that did not exist before. Or the original condition may have become even more entrenched.

The important thing is that there has been a trajectory.

Maybe Sustainability Is Something We Need to See Differently

None of this requires abandoning conventional sustainability. Environmental stewardship matters. Financial viability matters. Strong organizations matter. Economic stability matters. Social cohesion matters. Institutions matter. Resources matter.

But perhaps sustainability has many faces, and examining only one of them can hide what is happening elsewhere.

An organization can become more sustainable while its employees become less sustainable. A service can become more efficient while relationships become weaker. A funding model can become stronger while community dependency increases.

A program can disappear while the capacity it created continues producing beneficial outcomes for decades. And something considered unsuccessful by one measure may have quietly changed the trajectory of a human life.

What is persisting, for whom, through what relationships, producing what consequences, consuming or generating what capacity, and moving in what direction over time?

That is not a definition of sustainability. It is an invitation to look again.

Food for Thought

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- What if some of the conditions we desperately want to change have become highly effective at sustaining themselves?
- What if some of our solutions address the visible event while missing the conditions that continually reproduce it?
- What if we have mistaken the sustainability of organizations and programs for the sustainability of beneficial outcomes?
- What if the person we identify by their Need already possesses the capacity to Serve?
- What if success is not simply the disappearance of Need, but the emergence of greater capacity, relationship, agency, contribution, and opportunity?
- What if communities already possess enormous Serve capacity that remains unused simply because it is disconnected from Need?
- What if some of our greatest community challenges are not simply problems we have failed to solve - but conditions we have unknowingly become very good at sustaining?

There are no simple answers to these questions. That is why they are worth asking.

Perhaps before we talk about making our communities, organizations, programs, and institutions more sustainable, we should spend some time understanding the multidimensional reality of sustainability itself.

Because the first question may not be: How do we sustain it? It may be: What are we sustaining?

This is Food for Thought.

Challenge the premise. Add your experience. Identify what is missing. Consider your own family, organization, neighborhood, institution, or community.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- What do you see being sustained?
- What should become stronger?
- What needs to change?
- What might we discover if we looked at sustainability differently?

NEXT EPISODE

Episode 2 - Sustainability Has Many Faces

**We began by asking what we are sustaining.
But sustainability does not look the same
from every perspective. What strengthens
one participant can weaken another.**

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Source note: World Commission on Environment and Development, Our Common Future (1987).