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WHAT UNIQUE SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES DO NONPROFIT LEADERS UTILIZE TO  
PROMOTE SUSTAINABILITY?

by

Mary Edwards Harris

A Dissertation

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Department of Social Work

The University of Memphis

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## Acknowledgements

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."  
(Jeremiah 29:11)

Giving Glory to God, I thank you for being my refuge and source of strength as I finished my doctorate. Without you, I would never have made it.

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, the late Eddie & Mary Edwards, who is watching over us from heaven, and to my amazing siblings, Julian, Eddie, Larry, Francine, Dwain, and the late Jasper and Vera Edwards. This accomplishment is an expression of you all.

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**God Had This Blessing With My Name On It!!**

## Abstract

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) have been deemed important to communities. They are designed to fill gaps in community societal requirements by supplying resources, goods, and services that other companies in public sectors and neighborhoods do not offer. According to the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the country reportedly has 1.5 million nonprofit organizations (NPOs). There are many NPOs in the United States, but statistical projections indicate that over half will fail, with 30% failing within a few years of their creation. Researchers have shown that NPOs collapse yearly due to various factors, including a lack of money and resources. All these organizations are operating in an unsettling environment, making it critical to focus on building sustainable structures. This descriptive qualitative multi-case study explores how NPO leaders define and practice sustainability and discovers gaps between research and practice. The conceptual frameworks for this study were the Resource dependency theory and sustainable supply change management/critical success factors. Through Purposeful sampling, five leaders of nonprofit organizations were selected who met the “Extreme Case” criteria, an idea based on Seawright and Gerring (2008). The criteria included adult leaders (male or female) over 18 years old, holding primary leadership roles such as founder, president, manager, director, CEO/CFO, in operation for at least three years, has a commitment to a specific social purpose (education, health, art, religion), maintained their mission and objectives long-term, serves a unique population of people, and the organization is recognized for their community work. A semi-structured interview question guide was used to gather qualitative data, and content analysis was used to link the data to propositions. As a result, six distinct themes (True to Mission, Financial Health, Strategic Planning, Partnership, People, and Effectiveness of Services) that connected sustainable practices to the determinants of sustainability emerged, which were shown to

incorporate the three pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, and economics. The discoveries herein are expected to contribute to the limited existing literature on what sustainability practices govern individual nonprofit leaders to build sustainable organizations.

Key Words: nonprofit organizations, sustainability, strategic planning,

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## **Chapter 1: Background and Significance**

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) are community organizations that serve social needs, promote social change, and function to shape public policy (Hatton, 2017; Ott & Dicke, 2016). Over the last era, producing operable, sustainable, and influential organizations has become more challenging (Hatton, 2017). The nonprofit sector and NPO leaders' sustainability practices have been under-studied in the literature historically (McMurray et al., 2010). There are differences in the knowledge of sustainability and strategic planning, yet the research gap involving NPO leaders' sustainability practices persists (Sontag-Padilla, & Morganti, 2012). Nonprofit organizations are essential to fill gaps in services that governmental organizations have failed to provide. NPO leaders work to keep their organizations viable to carry out their mission.

Thirty percent of nonprofit organizations will inevitably collapse within the first few years of operation (NCCS, 2020). Researchers have shown that nonprofit organizations fail yearly for various reasons, including poor financing, poor neighborhoods, poor performance, inefficient leadership, and many others (Arbogust, 2020). Because nonprofit leaders worldwide are under increasing pressure to maintain sustainable organizations (Benjamin, 2008), the failure rate of NPOs poses a sustainability concern. Future research strives to learn more about leaders' "sustainable development" (UNGA, 2013). These arguments complement study findings from the nonprofit publication Candid (2013), which notes that empirical data and existing literature provide limited research on the obstacles to nonprofit organizations' survival and failure. For more than thirty years, the nonprofit sector has focused heavily on the success and failure of nonprofit organizations (NPOs). Again, the research field is still divided since there is no consensus on what causes NPO leaders' practices to succeed or fail (Helmig et al., 2014).

The nonprofit sector is under-studied in the literature as it relates to understanding how individual nonprofit leaders define and measure sustainability (McMurray et al., 2010; Cullom & Cullom, 2011). Precisely how nonprofit leaders define, measure, and maintain sustainable organizations is not clear from the literature (Moldavanova & Wright, 2020). Whereas there are studies exploring sustainability from economic, environmental, and organizational perspectives, the research field is still fragmented regarding nonprofit leaders' performance styles and best practices for maintaining a sustainable organization (Yin, 2018). Likewise, others indicated that little is known about what organizational and managerial characteristics contribute to nonprofit leaders' sustainability practices (Wright & Reames, 2020).

The aforementioned information emphasizes the significance of this research study in examining how nonprofit executives define and practice sustainability and address the discrepancies between theory and practice. This study aims to address factors impacting organizational survivorship, raise awareness of organizational leadership, management, and strategic focus, and uncover helpful strategic planning techniques to guide nonprofit leaders' sustainability practices. Sustainability is a concept that major companies, businesses, organizations, and people search for and strive to obtain and maintain (Kassem et al., 2021; Sontag-Padilla & Morganti, 2012).

This literature review provides an overview of how nonprofit organization leaders (NPO) measure and define sustainability and their unique economic strategies to measure and promote a sustainable organization. The synthesized subgroup of literature review studies highlights gaps between what is known and what is lacking related to the definitions of sustainability and sustainability practices, characteristics that negatively and positively impact sustainability.

Nonprofit (NPO) and Not-For-Profit (NFPO) are the two common types of organization under the IRS 501(c)3 code in the United States (Foundation LIST, 2020). Some of the collective features of both organizations are that they are private, structured, do not distribute for profit, are independent, and operate primarily by volunteers; most can be classified by their mission, interest, service delivery, and the population they serve.

Although there are many different types of charities, foundations, governmental, 501(c)3, and 501(c)4 organizations, they are different from the legal form of internal revenue coded NPOs (Anheier, 2014), Scribe (2021) and Hallman (2014) specified that NPOs could also be defined or classified by their sizes and salary: micro (salary range is less than \$500,000 yearly), small (salary range – \$500,000 - \$10 million yearly), medium (salary range from - \$10 -\$50 million/yearly), large (salary range from - \$50 -\$100 million/yearly, and mega – (salaries more significant than \$100 million/yearly) (Scribe, 2021; Hallman, 2014).

### **Brief History of Nonprofit Organizations in the United States**

The idea of being helpful, thoughtful, and charitable to others can be traced back to biblical times, but the history of nonprofit development has a shorter timeframe. Every era seems to bring about new developments and practices that impact how nonprofit organizations perform. For example, the late 1800s to the 1900s marked the progressive era of social activism and political reform (Muslic, 2017). During this time, policies such as child labor laws, women's suffrage, and prohibitions culminated. However, it was also the era when people wanted to give back and provide services to others (Muslic, 2017).

According to Muslic (2017), the history of nonprofit sectors addresses six momentous periods: In 1867, the Peabody Education Fund was the first independent foundation that connected several funders who combined their monies to support different charitable activities (Muslic,

2017). This era is known as the first donation drive that supported intellectual and educational events, such as building schools, training teachers, and offering scholarships. This foundation was later called the Southern Educational Fund (Muslic, 2017). In 1914 – The Cleveland Welfare Council, known as the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce, was developed. This was the first federated funding that joined other charitable and welfare organizations to reduce the rivalry between charities and build a cohesive structure to merge charitable donations (Muslic, 2017). In 1917, The Revenue Act brought about the passing of income tax laws, which was the creation of Section 501 (c) 3. This tax law allowed charitable organizations to claim up to 15% of their income tax payments. This part of the law was ratified to provide monetary support during World War 1 and private philanthropy (Muslic, 2017). Finally, in 1949 – The Council on Foundation, a grant-making foundation started by Edward L. Ryerson, was established. This foundation was funded by several community foundations to provide grant assistance to community charitable organizations (Muslic, 2017). In addition, the foundation comprises representatives from social services organizations like community trust and the YMCA (Muslic, 2017).

In 1973, the Rockefeller family and other private donors founded the Filer Commission to organize private philanthropy and public needs. The Filer Commission created third-sector organizations that were not connected to government or business. It provided private funding to a multiplicity of organizations and institutions (Muslic, 2017). The Independent Sector was established during the 1980s. This sector merged the relationship and networking of many philanthropic leaders and professionals who offered leadership and advisement to other charitable sectors (Muslic, 2017). It was the beginning of the partnership of nonprofits and foundations to offer leadership training to charitable sectors to be more informed about serving

their communities Muslic, 2017). In addition, the Independent Sector provided ethical standards for NPOs to govern best practices and accountability (Muslic, 2017).

### **Nonprofits in the Modern Era**

The move from the late 1980's transitioned nonprofit sectors into the new age phases of charitable organizations. From the 1990s to the present, the next era of NPOs' history was birthed, shifting the world into a new millennium of the world wide web of internet and social media, which presented creative platforms for charitable organizations and foundations to host fundraising activities and receive donations (Muslic, 2017). History clearly shows how nonprofit groups have existed since the United States' establishment, transforming, and creating positive change in community organizations (Medley et al., 2008). What has changed or been added to the nonprofit sector in the twenty-first century after more than two decades and 1.4 million organizations that are registered with the IRS is that nonprofit organizations are now highly professionalized and employ 12.3 million people (Foss, 2014). Additionally, the industry is growing and diversifying the types of organizations it supports (Foss, 2014). The history of NPOs shows how they were formed and shaped into what nonprofits are currently in America. People are becoming more conscious of the value of nonprofits and their impact on quality of life in the United States, which helps to enhance many lives through all the programs and services provided by nonprofit organizations in communities around the world (Medley et al., 2008).

### **Importance of Nonprofit Organizations**

A nonprofit (NPO) is a conglomerate of businesses that have been given tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and does not seek to profit from their acts of kindness (Foundation LIST, 2020; NCCS, 2020; Salamon, 1999). Nonprofit organizations are essential. According to Hatton (2017), NPOs exist for various reasons such as: eliminating societal

necessities or needs within a community and providing goods, services, and resources not delivered by other businesses within public sectors and neighborhoods. Additionally, nonprofits assist individuals and groups with medical, educational, financial, and social services. Finally, NPOs support societies across multiple diverse communities and are service providers that develop opportunities (Ott & Dicke, 2016) and address communal issues (Anheier, 2014).

Nonprofits exist worldwide. The term nonprofit and Not-For-Profit (NFPO) are sometimes used interchangeably (Kenton, 2020). On the global arena, nonprofits are called Non-Governmental Organizations, or NGOs. According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS, 2020), more than 1.5 million nonprofit organizations are registered with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS, 2016). They are shown to exist in the United States. In Tennessee alone, there are 27,623 NPOs (Independent Sector, 2016; Momentum Nonprofit Partners, 2020). A snapshot of Memphis, Tennessee indicates that there are 5,196 nonprofits (outside of churches) in the Mid-South area. This includes 267 private foundations. More than 1,000 nonprofits are in the Metropolitan area of Shelby County (AFNE, 2014).

To this point, there have been detailed discussions on the importance of nonprofit organizations NPOs. For example, Hatton (2017) outlined various reasons why NPOs are essential to the cross-sectional governmental, community, and societal population of individuals who benefit from nonprofits' goods, services, and resources (Ott & Dicke, 2016 & Anheier, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite NPOs importance and the basic functions they accomplish in the United States, it is projected that over half of NPOs will fail, and predictably 30% will fail within a few years of being established (NCCS, 2020). Researchers have discovered that NPOs fail every year due to lack of resources, funding, poverty-stricken neighborhoods, performance, ineffective leadership,

and a multiplicity of other reasons (Arbogust, 2020; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Iwu et al., 2015). Whether a large, medium, or small nonprofit, a 501c3, grassroots, or charitable nonprofit organization, they all operate in a progressively unstable environment where constructing sustainable organizations is increasingly difficult (Weerawardena et al., 2010). According to Analou and Karami (2002), many nonprofits have failed due to not operating by their mission. They concluded that developing a viable mission statement is a crucial factor in the formulation of sustainable organizations. Other studies have explored organizational failure from the same perspective, such as Alavi and Karami (2009) discovered that a clear mission statement, along with effective leadership enhanced the sustainability of many organizations. However, Lu and Zhao (2019) established a general deficiency of scientific understanding as to why some nonprofit organizations continue to operate and remain economically sustainable year after year while others dissolve. These viewpoints support findings in the Candid (2013) nonprofit publication, which specifies that, simply put, empirical data and existing literature offer limited research on the survivorship and failure challenges of nonprofit organizations.

The above failure rate of NPOs presents a sustainability problem. Why are so many NPOs projected to meet their demise? Kramer et al (2015) addressed this question by expressing that the top organizational problem for charities in the United States is succession planning. They indicated that when NPO leaders fail to accurately plan and generate goals that will yield short and long- term organizational sustainability, they will fail. Hatton (2017) believes that among and within NPOs, sustainability is not usually a part of the planning process. Therefore, executive leaders and board members must know how much it costs to deliver program services and strive to raise enough money to cover costs (Brown & Nixon, 2021).

Researchers need to address this essential topic of learning more about why some organizations flourish. In contrast, others fail, and understanding why this happens in the high percentile it does, (Salamon, 2016) is the primary motivation for this research.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this research study is to explore how NPO leaders define sustainability and examine factors that impact nonprofit NPOs' sustainability. The specific research questions are identified below.

### **Research Questions**

The two research questions of this study are:

1. How do nonprofit leaders define or measure sustainability?
2. What unique supportive strategies do nonprofit leaders utilize to promote sustainability?

### **Sustainability**

#### **Defining Sustainability**

In its simplest form, sustainability simply means to keep up and prolong, to provide sustenance or nourishment (Maude, 2014). Sustainability is the ability to sustain. Basically, the ability to remain or to continue. Sustainability as it applies to NPOs has been defined in multiple ways. In 2017, the National Council of Nonprofits (NCON) outlined that *sustainability* commonly means identifying and applying monetary resources to avoid or prevent depletion of funds in an ecological context. Nevertheless, sustainability in a NPO generally describes a company that can always retain funds to accomplish its mission. It sustains the organization (Kassem et al., 2021) and the power of executives to sustain an organization long-term (Sontag-Padilla, & Morganti, 2012). Thus, a practical description for *nonprofit sustainability* can be



defined by nonprofit board members and staff knowing exactly what they want to accomplish and utilizing the needed funds to implement an organizational program and service delivery by cleverly and strategically planning and following a sound business model to reach organizational goals (Edgington, 2017; Candid, 2013).

To fully comprehend sustainability, Kotob (2011) conducted an in-depth exploration of the term sustainability and its affiliates with business practice. He began with the base word sustain, which means capable of being sustained and is a process of collecting or using a resource so that the resource is not reduced or permanently damaged. Although sustainability is a concept that is still very new, it has roots in social justice, conservationism, internationalism, and other well-established movements. Many of these concepts have come together since the end of the twentieth century to push for "sustainable development" (UNGA, 2013). However, a holistic approach of sustainability considers ecological, social, and economic dimensions, broadly defined as meeting the needs of the present without bargaining against future generations (UNGA, 2005; WCED,1987). Comparatively, Sphera (2020) addresses sustainability from a business perspective and defines it as a process that aligns with societal and environmental goals by implementing a business strategy for continuous growth that aligns with people and the planet. This concept of sustainability encompasses environmental, social, and economic, the three pillars of corporate sustainability.

### **The Three Pillars of Sustainability**

Grant (2020) defines sustainability as maintaining workable levels in everything done by ensuring that basic needs are met without bargaining against or sacrificing other needs. Based on the definitions of sustainability, Beattie (2021) stated that an inclusive standard definition of sustainability is most often defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising

the ability of future generations to meet theirs. As stated earlier, sustainability has three main pillars: social, economic, and environmental. These three pillars are informally referred to as people, planet, and profits” (p.1). Just like the world is big, the definition of sustainability is diverse and broad. It is the process of physical, natural, and social resources needed for humans and organizations to thrive. Yet again, sustainability comprises three pillars: economy, society, and environment are terms informally used as profit, people, and planet (UNGA, 2013).

### **Social Sustainability**

The components of sustainability that concern people are referred to as social sustainability (Beattie, 2021). Social sustainability aims to ensure that communities and societies may survive and develop healthily, stable, and equal. It emphasizes raising people's quality of life, forming close bonds, and ensuring everyone can reach their full potential (Fischhoff et al., 2021). In nonprofit organizations, social sustainability refers to individuals, families, groups, communities, board members, volunteers, and other persons involved (Anheier, 2014). From a corporate standpoint, social sustainability is recognizing and controlling company effects on people, both positive and negative (UNGA, 2005). In summary, social sustainability is ensuring that people have what they require today and, in the future (Fischhoff et al., 2021).

### **Sustainability and Partnership**

Over the decades, nonprofit leaders have been concerned with their community and maintaining sustainability. Several community-based nongovernmental organizations and nonprofit community-based organization (CBO) leaders have formulated partnerships to combat local economic development to prevent growing communities suffering from resource deprivation by embarking on community sustainability projects (Agyeman, 2005; Portney & Berry, 2010; Portney & Cuttler, 2010). Expectations have changed from sizeable bureaucratic

government agencies setting sustainability practices to community-based organizations (CBOs) maintaining community sustainability by working together to plan market strategies to assist their local towns with providing public goods and addressing community needs. (Smith & Lipsky, 2009; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). Sustainability practices described by Wright and Reames (2020) are from the viewpoints of local non-governmental organizations (NGO) leaders. Additionally, they admitted that they need to know more about the management and organizational NPO leaders' performance traits that contribute to community sustainability. Because they approached sustainability from a strategic management viewpoint, which links management practice with its consequences on the community environment, their study sought to fill this void in the literature.

The research of Wright & Reames (2020) is like Hatton's (2017) study, in which he discussed the significance of NPOs for cross-sectional societal, community, and governmental populations. According to Hatton (2017), nonprofit executives build collaborating coalitions to carefully plan to continue supplying people who benefit from charities' goods, services, and resources. As a result, NPOs in diverse cities and communities are sustainable (Ott & Dicke, 2016 & Anheier, 2014). Overall, the results revealed that associated themes of sustainable practices include community partnership, strategic planning, effective leadership, and revenue diversification, which aligns with Wright & Reames' (2020) hypothesis. The topics are consistent with the three pillars of business sustainability, which include economic, societal, and environmental objectives (Kassem et al., 2021; Shumate et al., 2018).

### **Economic Sustainability**

Economic sustainability refers to the sustainability factors concerned with profit (Beattie, 2021). Economic sustainability describes actions that promote long-term economic growth

without harming the community's social, environmental, and cultural elements (Spangenberg, 2005). According to Ott and Dicke (2016), "economic sustainability" in nonprofit organizations refers to money, resources, wealth, assets, and investments. In addition, the economic pillar includes maintaining honest and open accounting practices and regulatory compliance (Beattie, 2021).

### **Financial Sustainability**

The power of executives to sustain an organization long-term is paramount for nonprofit leaders (Sontag-Padilla, & Morganti, 2012). Therefore, financial sustainability is another key determinant for an organization to be financially equipped to meet organizational goals. In addition, nonprofits provide goods, services, and resources within public sectors' communities and neighborhoods (Hatton, 2017) and are service providers that develop opportunities (Ott & Dicke, 2016) and address communal issues (Anheier, 2014). The challenges of maintaining financial capacity and financial sustainability are essential to nonprofit organizational function because they serve needy communities. They require reliable and continuous services. (Bowman, 2011). The literature consistently highlights the importance of financial sustainability for nonprofit organizations. Dadić & Ribarić's (2021) study emphasizes that funding is one of the most significant problems nonprofit leaders' encounters. The lack of adequate financial resources could lead to organizational failure. To practice financial sustainability, Sontag-Padilla et al. (2012) provided the following advice to NPO leaders: be realistic, participate in numerous fundraisers, create a budget, be aware of program costs, diversify income sources, practice your mission, look for volunteers, and strategically plan.

## **Environmental Sustainability**

While the phrase sustainability has been comprehensively discussed, it will ultimately be used to drive an ideas-based argument for this research to explore gaps and trends in how nonprofit leaders define and practice sustainability while concurrently identifying, uncovering, and recognizing some standard traits or variables that negatively and positively impact sustainable NPOs. Therefore, as the term “*sustainability*” is mentioned in this research, it will be referring specifically to the critical factors that holistically meet the needs of sustainable development by implementing a strategy toward continuous growth (Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Grant, 2020; Hatton, 2017; Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014). Sustainability is identifying and applying monetary resources to avoid or prevent the depletion of funds. Nevertheless, *sustainability* is generally used to describe a NPO that can always retain funds to accomplish its mission and sustain the organization.

## **Sustainability Practices**

Nonprofit scholars, philanthropists, researchers, practitioners, policy planners, businesses, financial investors, and educators have studied and defined sustainability from multiple perspectives, such as determinants of sustainability; strategic planning for organizational sustainability; community, corporate, financial, leadership/management, and cross-sector partnerships for sustainability (Ceptureanu et al., 2018; Grant, 2020; Iwu et al., 2015; Kassem., et al. 2021; Linnenluecke & Griffith, 2010; Moldavanovan & Wright, 2020; Weerawardena et al., 2010). However, researchers still indicate that many nonprofit executives, board members, stakeholders, and other professionals ponder how to reach and maintain sustainability, again suggesting that literature and research regarding specifics about the nonprofit sector and sustainability is under-studied (Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Hatton, 2017;

McMurray, 2010; & Weerawardena et al., 2010). Given the variety of viewpoints from which scholars have investigated and defined sustainability, this next section concentrates on sustainability practices by examining the term's determinants, which range from organizational effectiveness to financial and ethical norms. This section discusses several nonprofit leaders' sustainable strategies, including financial management, strategic planning, connections with other community organizations, and sustainability's connection to mission and performance.

### **Determinants of Sustainability**

Determinants are causes or factors that could negatively or positively influence sustainability (Ceptureanu et al, 2018). *Sustainability* is a phenomenon that integrates into or overlaps effectiveness and ties to financial and non-financial factors (Iwu et al, 2015).

Researchers have studied determinants of sustainability in nonprofits from the effectiveness of leadership practices to financial criteria that build sustainable organizations. For example, Iwu et al. (2015) examined how environmental elements addressed the criteria for organizational performance and the factors impacting sustainability in nonprofit organizations. Their study concluded that a competent leader and sufficient financial resources are required for a nonprofit to be financially sustainable. Subsequently, Gomis et al. (2011) examined the theory of sustainability and the need to rethink its concept by determining what elements make a sustainable organization. Interestingly, the study revealed the same thoughts as Sphera (2020) and UNGA (2013) that determinants of sustainability incorporate the three pillars: environmental, social, and economic factors. Instead of viewing sustainability as an "engineering, environmental, or management idea, it was viewed as an ethical concept that may and should guide conduct." Therefore, Gomis et al. (2011) interprets the three pillars as overlapping circles that give sustainability its reputation. They concluded that whenever leaders'

ethical views are not considered, it could result in counterproductive debates and decision-making discussions that questions leaders' ethical thoughts when producing a sustainability strategy (Gomis et al., 2011, p. 172). Additionally, it has been delineated how researchers have studied sustainability practices among NPO leaders from a corporate, financial, leadership, and management viewpoint (Sphera, 2020; Grant, 2020; Linnenluecke & Griffith, 2010; Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014; Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Hatton, 2017; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Huong, 2014). These different study perspectives describe determinants of sustainability and how researchers link the practices or causes of sustainability with leaders having effective management and leadership skills, engage in strategic planning, and financial security (Osorio et al., 2005; Nafiu et al., 2019).

To further survey the determinants of sustainability of NPO leaders' sustainability practices, Weerawardena et al. (2010) used multiple case studies to empirically investigate the relationship between sustainable practices and leadership and management. They noted that a sustainable organization involves being able to survive so that it can continue to serve its community. The broad research question guiding their study was, how does the need for building a sustainable enterprise impact the strategy focus of nonprofit organizations? Their findings concluded: (1) the strategic focus among NPO leaders is understudied, (2) they found that only three out of the ten NPO leaders' study participants engaged in a structured strategic planning and decision-making process, and (3) even though several of the NPO leaders viewed sustainability differently, agreeably funding dictated their practice model. The above findings align with current literature revealing that the issues of sustainability in past literature is fragmentedly discussed and primarily viewed as operational, management, and financial challenges (Yunus & Weber, 2008). This study's conclusion shows significant gaps in

sustainability practices between research literature, and actual practice techniques (Raut et al., 2017; Wright & Reames, 2020; Weerawardena et al., 2010). Research suggests that team-building initiatives, strategic planning, decision-making, and leadership effectiveness are key determinants of sustainability, according to UNGA (2013). However, according to a study by Weerawardena et al. (2010), some NPO executives may have differing views on sustainable practices that are inconsistent with the sustainability pillars. Therefore, the disconnects between sustainable practices and leadership and management are at the root of the causes of sustainability gaps.

### **Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning is another critical element of sustainability. It was found that researchers have linked sustainability to strategic planning (Osorio et al., 2005; Nafiu et al., 2019). For example, Wright & Reames (2020) identified sustainability as strategies that include community members in the decision-making and strategic planning process. This definition integrates a component of engaging in strategic planning as a strategy for continuous growth (Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Grant, 2020; Hatton, 2017 & Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014). This concept applies to nonprofit board members and staff knowing exactly what they want to accomplish by strategic planning and following a sound business model to reach organizational goals (Edgington, 2017; Candid, 2013).

According to Allison and Kaye (2005), a well-devised strategic plan can assist any nonprofit and for-profit organizations, businesses, and enterprises to establish goals, and obtain and distribute the resources needed to achieve their mission. Furthermore, they indicated that for nonprofit organizations of every size and budget, strategic planning had been the primary tool for managers to guide their practices. Golensky and Hager (2020) dissected strategic planning from



a leadership and management perspective using a theory and practice approach. They suggested that nonprofit organizations require skilled, informed, and sincere strategic planning from their executives. According to the same approach, Allison and Kaye (2005) show that putting together a well-developed strategic plan calls for knowledgeable leaders. Golensky and Hager (2020) also stated that nonprofit leaders, boards, and executive management, must have several qualities: including drive, ethical decision-making abilities, policy knowledge, community-orientedness, the ability to manage change, the ability to establish programs, the ability to foster an innovative and active board of directors, the ability to diversify revenues, and the ability to cultivate devoted staff and volunteers who will engage in strategic planning effectively.

Thus far, research regarding nonprofit sustainability and strategic planning implies that sustainability is linked to strategic planning (Wright & Reames, 2020; Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Grant, 2020; Allison & Kaye, 2005). The cited perspectives of sustainability practices illustrate how nonprofit leaders view and practice sustainability, which exhibits that for organizational leaders to be influential strategic planners, they must be knowledgeable and possess specific attributes (Golensky & Hager, 2020). Likewise, Nafiu, Yalo, and Saliu (2019) agree that the success of strategic planning depends on organizational leaders' knowledge to merge environmental factors. Hence, their study explored the strategic planning of small and medium-sized nonprofits by focusing on the cause-effect performance analysis of leaders. Nafiu et al. (2019) suggested that small to medium size organizations must adopt a competitive strategic position to achieve their strategic planning goals, in what Weerawardena et al (2010) identified as this turbulent business environment. Nafiu et al. (2019) indicated that small to medium-sized organizations should develop a competitive strategy to build a sustainable competitive lead over the larger organizations. They looked at the cause-and-effect relationships at the performance

level of the leaders' capacity to create a strategic plan. The findings produced the following outcomes: Strategic planning was viewed as a time-consuming activity by 32.8% of respondents, many of whom were traditional thinkers (non-innovative), reluctant to change their established ways of doing things, and unaware of finance/funding diversification. The overall interpretation of the findings points to a moderate risk that these small to medium-sized companies would not be sustainable over the long term due to tradition-based thinking, a lack of knowledge, skills, and time to build a robust strategic plan. The results of this study can be applied to any small- to medium-sized nonprofit executives who possess the characteristics of a non-innovative strategic planner (Allison & Kaye, 2005; Golensky & Hager, 2020). For small to medium-sized businesses to compete successfully in the market for sustainable organizations and financial performance in the business environment, strategic planning is essential (Nafiu et al., 2019).

Strategic planning (planning for the end from the beginning) is said to be paramount in creating a sustainable organization, so Hatton (2017) supports Hargraves' and Fink's (2003) methods of leadership sustainability, which focuses on a leadership model for managers and executives that creates and preserves long learning, secures timely success, develops ecological diversity, and environment engagement. Hatton's (2017) sustainability tools include: creating the vision, mission, objectives, strategies, and action plans (VMOSA). He feels that if NPO executives, board members, and leaders use the leadership model along with VMOSA, their organization will experience long-term sustainability. The VMOSA, coupled with good leadership skills, helps NPOs' tier leadership to create and sustain organizational values/culture, outline community resource mapping, provides organizational alignment by hiring employees, and selecting volunteers and board members who share the same mission, vision, and goals of the nonprofit organization.

KO and Liu (2021) and Trivedi & Stokols (n.d.) have conducted extensive studies on NPOs and the concept of sustainability. Their observation is that all nonprofit executives, from micro to mega organizations, must move away from the appearance of the traditional nonprofit viewpoint and transform their organization into *social enterprises*, which means seeing their organization as entrepreneurship and incorporating a business model into their strategic plan. Furthermore, operating as a *social enterprise* will afford traditional NPOs more opportunities to increase monetary stability (KO & Liu, 2021). Buckwell (2016) supports the same concept. He concluded that sustainability is not a destination but a journey that organizations, companies, and businesses must strategically plan daily to build sustainable establishments.

In 2015, Lawrimore illustrated his sustainability perspective and methods of measuring effective leadership and service delivery for businesses and organizations. He concluded that nonprofit leaders could build sustainable organizations and measure effectiveness by practicing the *five keys to a success plan*: strategic focus (address leadership, management, and planning), People - addresses (personnel, staff, learning, and development, Operations – addresses (processes and work), Marketing – addresses (customer relations, sales, and responsiveness), and Finances - address (assets, facilities, and equipment).

The above plan assesses and addresses methods and strategies for nonprofit leaders to define, measure effectively, and achieve organizational sustainability. NCON (2021) sanctioned the five keys to a success plan and urged all nonprofit executives to implement the *success* principles to guide their organizations' decision-making strategies. These values are included in a code of ethics for nonprofits to provide board members, employees, and volunteers with principles for making ethical decisions and guaranteeing accountability. Ultimately, applying the nonprofits' code of ethics will enhance best practices and add to the organizational strategic

sustainability plan by fostering trust from donors and other partnering stakeholders (Bell et al., 2010; Lawrimore, 2015; Shumate et al., 2018; Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012). In addition, the leaders of NPOs need strict management guidance and skills to achieve their sustainability goals and objectives (Pyanov et al., 2021).

Given the importance of nonprofit organizations, leaders have verbalized that the underlying concern is the need to construct sustainable organizations that can continue following the organization's mission and provide quality social and community resources, while other criteria support executives in building sustainable organizations (Schneider, 2003; Edgington, 2017; Jaskyte, 2012). This strategic planning research implies that NPO leaders must create a plan to conform to their dynamic and changing internal and external environments. Putting into action a sound strategic and decision-making plan aids them in adapting the organization to its current environment, defining client needs, setting priorities to accomplish their mission better, and developing the capacity to grow and sustain their programs over the long term (Allison & Kaye, 2011).

### **Sustainability Relationship to Mission**

The cited research depicts sustainability practices from different perspectives, and other studies focus on organizational sustainability from a larger conglomerate administrative and structural view, believing that the hard work to build sustainable organizations is becoming a balancing act between the organizational mission and money (Chetkovich & Frumkin, 2003; Krug & Weinberg, 2004). This focus of sustainability being a balancing act between mission and money also reflects the viewpoint of small to medium-size nonprofit leaders, according to Duygulu et al. (2016). Their study also focused on the relationship between mission and performance, concluding that in small to medium-size nonprofits, their performance level is a

primary component in the sustainable strategy when associated with three identified mission components: endurance, image, and values. According to Taghi and Karami (2009), the relationship between a nonprofit's mission and performance is vital when measuring organizational sustainability in small to medium-size enterprises. However, their study conflicted with Duygulu et al. (2016) study, in which the finding concluded that the existence of financial goals in a nonprofit's mission statements was negatively related to performance. However, Analou & Karami (2002) indicated that some leaders in small to medium-size nonprofits concentrate on operating according to the organization's mission, performance, and finances to work towards building a sustainable organization because developing a sound mission statement is a vital influence in the formulation of sustainable businesses.

### **Characteristics That Negatively Impact Sustainability**

The previous section highlighted sustainability approaches based on studies and detailed the many sustainability strategies that nonprofit executives use to increase sustainable organizations. However, research has also included characteristics that affect an organization's survival. It is projected that most nonprofits encounter sustainability challenges, particularly smaller nonprofits, due to financial issues (Lu et al., 2020), which is a contributing factor towards organizational failure (Ebarb, 2019), but according to Helmig et al (2014), research on nonprofit failure is fragmented, making it difficult to understand it. Failure is simply defined as a lack of success, and for nonprofits organizations, defining organizational success and failure is a challenging issue (Helmig, Ingerfurth, & Pinz, 2014). For a nonprofit organization, failure refers to the "three-failure sector" theories: market failure, government failure, and voluntary failure (Salamon, 2016, p.1; Ebarb, 2019; Ott & Dicke, 2016). The market and government sectors are defined as predicting to fail in supplying public goods and meeting the different demands of

communities; therefore, the three-failure theories concentrate on the economic effectiveness of nonprofit organizations (Ott & Dicke, 2016). Nonprofit organizations now have the chance to take on new responsibilities. When voluntary failure occurs, the market and government sectors step in to provide services and address the needs of the public (Powell & Steinberg, 2006). Others have indicated that when an organization overlooks internal and external requirements, it affects the duration of the organization's survival (Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989).

According to Brown and Nixon (2021), some common characteristics that have a negative impact on the sustainability of NPOs include but are not limited to: the organization's inability to meet the needs outlined in its mission statement, its constant need to catch up financially, its deteriorating infrastructure caused by self-funding, and its inability to raise or generate enough money to cover its operating expenses. When NPOs encounter these challenges, they are said to be experiencing a nonprofit "starvation cycle" (NCON, 2021, p.3). When nonprofit leaders fail to accurately plan and generate goals that will yield short and long-term sustainability, it will produce a deficit. Hatton (2017) believes that among NPOs, sustainability is not usually a part of the planning process. Therefore, executive leaders and board members must know how much it costs to deliver program services and strive to raise enough money to cover costs (Brown & Nixon, 2021). Consistent literature reveals that most struggling NPO executives encounter the same core challenges that hinder them from building sustainable organizations, such as; failure to formulate a business model, limited funding and budget issues, do not engage in strategic solution planning, do not operate according to their program mission, no means of diversifying funding, and cannot keep up with changing community demographics that lead to evolving and declining communities (Helmig et al., 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2020). Even though the mentioned core challenges are prevalent traits that negatively impact

organizational sustainability, in 2017, Lee examined sustainability from a neighborhood context. He studied the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and organizational sustainability of Nonprofit Human Service Organizations. According to Lee, essential sustainability factors include executive operating experience, organizational age, size, organizational change, strategy, prior failure, and population density. These features reinforce those already listed that harm the long-term survival of nonprofit organizations.

Several other researchers comprehensively studied similar variables of internal and environmental determinants of the success and failure of nonprofit organizations and found financial performance, marketing activities, governance characteristics, leadership, and market structure to impact organizational sustainability (Ecer et al., 2017; Garrow, 2015; Helmig et al., 2014; Lu et al., 2020). The mentioned studies relate to Weerawardena et al. (2010) concept that many researchers in the nonprofit domain have believed that the lack of funding, poor management, and indistinct organizational mission are significant determinants that affect running a sustainable nonprofit organization. Further, Ebarb (2019) concluded that nonprofit organizations fail because leaders fear asking their investors for the exact amount of money needed to fund their organizational programs. Consequently, this confines their mind to stay in what Ebarb (2019) called the "Tin Cup" (p.1) mentality, having an empty, non-optimistic effect that creates poor organizational values. Moreover, the literature indicates that some nonprofit leaders do not embrace technology and are not innovative (Schneider, (2003), their organizational mission is unclear, the leaders fail to collect data to guide planning, and their priorities are misplaced (Iwu et al, 2015; Ebarb, 2019). Consequently, when a nonprofit leader must invest in its infrastructure due to never having enough resources to cover its costs, NCON

(2017) labeled this deficit as "the nonprofit starvation cycle" (p.3). It is during this cycle that nonprofit organizations are at risk of failure.

Thus far, all the researchers mentioned have examined sustainability from some economic, cultural, and general viewpoints. Earlier, it was mentioned that Iwu et al. (2015) case study took a different spin by investigating how organizational effectiveness criteria fit within NPOs' sustainability elements and concluded that there are no standardized method nonprofit leaders utilize to evaluate program effectiveness. Researchers have found that financial and non-financial criteria affect organizational effectiveness and sustainability (Bowman, 2022; Chetkovich & Frumkin, (2003; Ebag, (2019; Krug & Weinberg (2004; Sontag-Padilla et al., (2012). Commonly, resources found on NPOs, and sustainability is quick to attribute organizational failure to funding. In contrast, according to Flynn and Tian (2015), nonprofit deaths have not been scientifically studied and peer-reviewed to link funding or financial revenues as the primary source of nonprofits' sustainability challenges.

This study aims to explore gaps in the literature between research and practice and determine how nonprofit leaders promote sustainable organizations.

The research questions to guide this research are:

1. How do nonprofit leaders define sustainability?
2. What unique supportive strategies do nonprofit leaders utilize to promote sustainable organizations?

## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter summarizes the literature by defining sustainability, outlining sustainability practices, and examining sustainability factors. Partnerships, finances, strategic planning, diverse funding, and mission and vision comprise sustainability factors. To present the literature



knowledge about sustainability and the various perspectives researchers have explored and examined regarding the sustainability of nonprofit organizations, such as effective leadership and management, measuring sustainability, and influential executive board members and stakeholders, sustainability has been diligently explored, identified, and illustrated. Chapter 2 will discuss the conceptual framework that underpins this research and how the frameworks operationalize.

## Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

### Introduction

The supporting theoretical foundations for this research investigation will be covered in this chapter. The theories that underpin the theoretical framework presented herein are *Resource Dependency Theory* and *Sustainable Supply Chain Management*. Sustainability requires resources, that is, it is resource-dependent, and the Supply Chain Management theory explains the types of resources that are necessary and how they are organized. These two theories are integrated into the research framework utilizing in this research.

### Theoretical Frameworks Supportive of the Research Study

McMurray et al. (2010) emphasized that NPOs, comparable to other public sector and international organizations, are encountering a global decrease in government funding and are expected to produce more with fewer funds. Therefore, research indicates that sustainability challenges affect NPOs globally. Furthermore, literature has revealed that the element of sustainability is surmountable in how it is defined and has been studied. Researchers have processed the three main pillars of sustainability to examine it from a social, economic, and environmental perspective, which comprise the global ecological systems, human and financial (Bagheri & Hjorth, 2007), and the corporate/business perception (Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014).

The importance of the word sustains, or sustainability, should be apparent based on the definitions. However, to further define the relevance of the concept of sustainability, Raut et al. (2017) considered it a fundamental organizational philosophy impacting the three main pillars of sustainability, the ecological, social, and economic domains (UNGA, 2005; Sphera, 2020; Beattie, 2021) leading into the concept of sustainable supply chain management (SSCM). When

viewing the three pillars or SSCM independently, the concept defines the critical success factors (CSFs) for organizational sustainability. Definitively, sustainability means the ability to maintain or support a process continuously over time (Mollenkamp, 2021), and in business and policy, to sustain the perspectives of sustainability means to avoid the reduction of any kinds of resources so that they can be accessible over an indefinite time frame (Grant, 2020). According to Wright & Reames (2020), the success of nonprofit sustainability is defined in the community sustainability literature as (1) capital from a variety of sources, (2) capacity of human resources; (3) collaboration and networking; (4) funding from governmental resources; and (5) engagement strategies that include community members in the decision-making process. This definition integrates components from strategic management theory and environmental sustainability management theory, in which community sustainability effectiveness is clarified by examining organizational and management factors.

This study will focus on identifying, uncovering, and recognizing standard barriers that impact nonprofit organizations (NPOs) sustainability while simultaneously securing the unique supportive strategies NPO leaders utilize to support building sustainable organizations. The conceptual framework applied to this study is the sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) and the role of the critical success factor (CSF) model in sustainability (Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014). The resource dependence theory in connection with the SSCM is the platform in which Panjehfouladgaran and Bahiraie explain the critical successful variables in organizational sustainability and are the foundations of the CSF/SSCM model.

The perspective of KO and Liu (2021) and Hatton's (2017) tools of sustainability aligns with Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie's (2014) *Critical Success Factors in Sustainability* (CSF). As mentioned earlier, the CSF research introduces that sustainability has three components they are

social, economic, and environmental, which are not just customary to business disciplines but also in manufacturing and operations. Furthermore, the conceptual framework of the CSF applied sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) from various corporate business management angles to help managers reach their company goals (Raut et al., 2017). Therefore, it is conceivable how the CSF model could be operationalized in nonprofits' strategic sustainability plans.

### **Resource Dependence Theory**

Brown et al. (2009) and Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) operationalized the resource dependence theory (RDT), basically proposing that organizations need resources to survive. Those resources could be obtained if nonprofit leaders connect, align, and form linkages with outside resources. Leaders and directors who have the skills to accumulate resources and build many external linkages are resourceful and known to operate quality organizations. Pfeffer and Salancik's seminal work on resource dependence theory (RDT) has largely been utilized across research to describe how organizations decrease environmental insecurities (Hillman et al, 2009). Through relating the RDT concept, an organization's dependence on resources to maintain sustainability is critical for organizations to have availability of assets (social, economic, and environmental) to distribute to families, communities, and other constituents (Abouassi & Tschirhart, 2017).

As mentioned earlier, resource dependence is when one organization must rely on another organization for a resource. Therefore, the organization with ample resources is given power, which RDT defines as influence and power over the organization without the resource. Still, RDT suggests that if nonprofit leaders connect, align, and form linkages with outside resources, they become more equipped and empowered as they build external connections

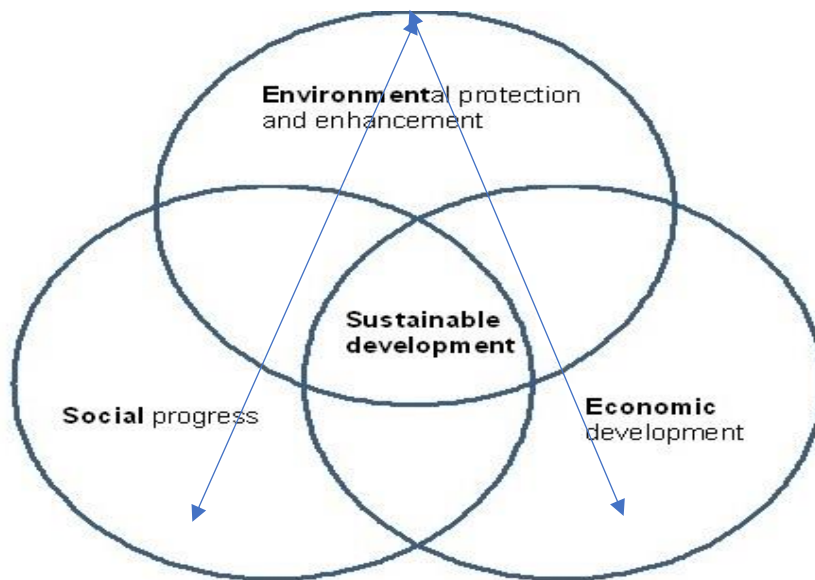
through community partnership to promote sustainable quality organizations (Pfeffer et al, 2003). This concept is associated with Malatesta & Smith (2014) RDT strategies for leaders to obtain resources by partnering, contracting, co-opting, and merging with other community organizations. In summary, the RDT describes how dependence on resources outside the organization interacts with nonprofit leaders' organizational actions, network exchanges, and sustainability outcomes (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Emerson, 1962; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Nonprofit leaders must embrace new and innovative strategic planning to achieve organizational sustainability (Anheier, 2014). Figure 1 represents the interconnecting overlapping circles of the three pillars of sustainability.

**Fig. 1 SSCM Triple Bottom Line**

**SUSTANABILITY**

Critical Success  
Sustainability -

Factors in



Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014

In figure 1, the triple bottom line illustrates how social, environmental, and economic factors interact. There is a link between social and environmental activities as cross section 1,

and an interlocking link between relationships of all three pillars, social, economic, and environmental as cross section 2 and 3.

### **Sustainable Supply Chain Management and Critical Success Factor**

Sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) and sustainable development are two ideas that emerged independently over the past ten years (Krause et al., 2009). Sustainability is the combination of social, environmental, and economic obligations. As a result, it has started to be discussed in literature across business disciplines, including manufacturing and nonprofit operations (Carter & Rogers, 2008). Additionally, SSCM demands that business operations be integrated, coordinated, and aligned across the supply chain, generating sustainable supply chain management and the critical success factor (Green Jr et al., 2012; Linton et al., 2007).

Panjehfouladgaran and Bahiraie (2014) Critical Success Factor (CSF) research presents three pillars of sustainability as having a social, economic, and environmental sustainability component, informally used as people, profit, and planet (UNGA, 2013; Sphera, 2020) which has been discussed throughout this literature review. Understanding the connection and interaction among the three pillars of sustainability is the driving force of SSCM and CSF. The SSCM was established to determine how environmental operations and policy, strategy, finance, product design, supplier relations, and post-consumer product management might work together in a positive way (Linton et al., 2007). CSFs are commonly used in organizational management, operational management, and SSCM contexts, as well as in project management studies (Zhou et al., 2011). Failure in organizational performance or business achievement is likely if CSFs are not specified (Glenn Richey Jr et al., 2009). SSCM mainly uses the critical success factors idea to "ensure effective competitive performance for the organization" (Alvarez et al., 2013; Dinter, 2013; Elkhoully et al., 2011; Kim & Rhee, 2012; Koh et al., 2011; Trkman, 2010; Zhou et al.,

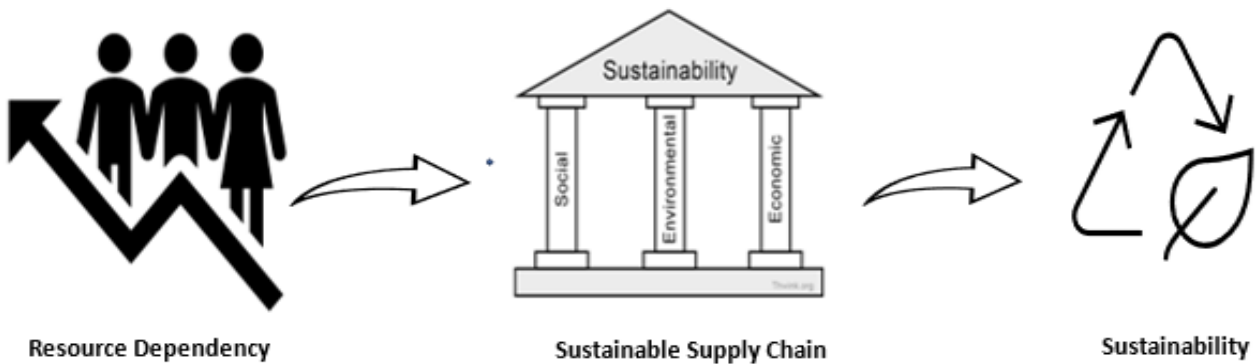
2011; Zou et al., 2014). The triple line bottom in Figure 1 (See figure 1 in appendix) illustrates how social, environmental, and economic factors interact. This image shows the link between social and environmental activities as cross section 1. Economic, environmental, and social relationships are specifically 2 and 3. The process interaction between CSFs and Triple Line Bottom must be covered by these three aspects. As a result, organizations and managers can order CSFs according to importance.

### **Integrated Theoretical Framework**

The conceptual framework models comprise of social, economic, and environmental sustainability pillars, typically characterized as people, profit, and the planet. Understanding the connection and interaction among the three pillars of sustainability is the driving force of SSCM and CSF (UNGA, 2013; Sphera, 2020); Panjehfouladgaran and Bahiraie (2014). The SSCM was established to determine how environmental operations and policy, strategy, finance, product design, supplier relations, and post-consumer product management might work together in a positive way (Linton et al., 2007). Critical Success Factors (CSFs) are commonly used in organizational management, operational management, and SSCM contexts, as well as in project management studies (Zhou et al., 2011). Focus on the future strategically; people, operations, and money are five critical success factors (Alvarez et al., 2013; Dinter, 2013). A critical success factor must be accomplished for a project, business, or organization to succeed (Zou et al., 2014). Failure in organizational performance or business achievement is likely if CSFs are not specified (Glenn Richey Jr et al., 2009). SSCM mainly uses the critical success factors idea to "ensure effective competitive performance for the organization" (Alvarez et al., 2013; Dinter, 2013; Elkhoully et al., 2011; Kim & Rhee, 2012; Koh et al., 2011; Trkman, 2010; Zhou et al., 2011; Zou et al., 2014).

The theory that Panjehfouladgaran and Bahiraie develops, the SSCM and CSF concept to direct nonprofit leaders to sustainability instruments is the resource dependency theory. To assist managers in achieving the company's objectives, the conceptual framework used sustainable supply chain management (SSCM) from various corporate business management aspects. Leaders of nonprofit organizations can use this model to carefully create their sustainability plan (Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014; Beattie, 2021; Zou et al., 2014). The conceptual constructs combined provide a model that is used to direct NPO leaders in creating strategic plans that will result in sustainable organizations. However, the models must be viewed and operationalized collaboratively to produce the best results. A theory alone has limited influence and may have considerable limits, but when ideas are integrated with other strategies, they can be significantly reinforced (Anheier, 2014). Figure 2 represents the integrated framework of how the two theoretical Frameworks are interconnected and operationalized.

**Fig. 2 RDT – SSCM/CSF**



**Organizations require resources for survival; NPO leaders must form partnerships to maintain a steady flow = fostering an endless supply.**





## **Chapter Summary**

This chapter brings together the Sustainable Supply Change Management/Critical Success Factors, and Resource Dependency Theory to demonstrate the continuous flow of resources for nonprofit organizations. Resources are necessary for organizations to survive. The idea is that NPO leaders must band together and form partnerships to sustain a steady flow of resources. The theoretical frameworks offer concepts that assist NPO leaders in creating strategic plans that will result in organizations with an extended life span.

### **Chapter 3: Methods**

The methods used to examine NPO leaders' practices to keep their organizations sustainable were qualitative multi-case studies. The purpose of a multiple case study approach is to explore or compare practices in various settings, such as business environments or educational institutions (Rashid et al.; Yin, 2014). The sustainability practices of the NPO leaders are examined using a descriptive qualitative multi-case study method. This kind of case study is utilized in circumstances where the intervention being assessed has no distinct, singular set of outcomes (Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003) case studies are a more comprehensible and adaptable qualitative research approach because they can be descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory. Without concentrating on "why" a specific phenomenon occurs, the descriptive case study primarily focuses on characterizing phenomena. In other words, it "describes" the research's subject without explaining "why" it occurs (Gerring, 2004). Since this research study aims to understand what unique supportive strategies nonprofit leaders utilize to promote sustainability, a descriptive multi-case study method is the most appropriate approach.

#### **Study Design**

A qualitative case study is the most appropriate approach to address the specific research questions of this study. The case study is descriptive using qualitative methodology. Case studies are one of the widely used methodologies in qualitative research (Yazan, 2015) used in academia by researchers interested in the field (Baskarada, 2014), where a real-time phenomenon is investigated within its naturally occurring context with the understanding that context will make a difference (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; Busetto et al., 2020). It also explores the phenomenon from several angles to show its many sides (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case studies tackle qualitative research more comprehensively.

This multiple and exploratory case study enables the researcher to examine both inside and across settings, describe an intervention or phenomenon, and characterize the actual environment in which it occurred (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). Several situations in a multiple case study to identify commonalities and differences are viewed. Multiple case studies can be utilized to "(a) forecast comparable outcomes (a literal replication) or (b) predict different results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)," according to Yin (2003). (p. 47). The researcher binds the case by establishing boundaries once the research questions and strategy were determined to help prevent frequent case study errors, including broad research questions and having too many objectives for one study (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Therefore, the concentration of NPOs for this study is selected from West Tennessee's urban and rural areas, identified (according to operational budget) as an extra small to large organization, approved 501c3 nonprofit firm, grassroots and nongovernmental (NGOs).

A nonprofit is defined as an organization that does not operate primarily for financial gain. Instead, it is a company aiming to further a social cause, a common objective, or a purpose (Iwu et al., 2015; Foundation, 2020). This study delves into NPO leaders' sustainability practices. A comprehensive view of sustainability considers its ecological, social, and economic components. Sustainability is often understood to mean serving the demands of the present without jeopardizing those of future generations (UNGA, 2005; WCED, 1987). Effectiveness and sustainability are two concepts that interact or overlap, and they have connections to both financial and non-financial aspects (Iwu et al, 2015). Researchers indicate that contributing factors to sustainability practices are effective management and leadership skills, strategic planning, and financial security (Osorio et al., 2005; Nafiu et al., 2019). These determinants of sustainability incorporate the three pillars: environmental, social, and economic factors. Sphera

(2020) and UNGA (2013). Additional associated themes of sustainable practices include community partnership, strategic planning, effective leadership, and revenue diversification (Wright & Reames, 2020). Each of the propositions mentioned serve to focus the data collection, determine direction and scope of the study and together the propositions form the foundation for a conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). In conclusion, a descriptive qualitative multiple case study is the type of research approach that will aid in discovering nonprofit leaders' unique strategies and sustainability practices.

### **Participants and sampling**

The study participants (n=5) and sampling are limited to adults (male or female) over the age of 18 who are serving in a primary leadership role. The nonprofit organization must be a 501c3 nonprofit, as recognized by the IRS, and have been operating for three years or more. The leaders need to understand the operational processes of their organization and be able to speak to their sustainability strategies and plan. Therefore, the study population comprises of five NPO executives and leaders chosen from a list of nonprofit organizations located in urban and rural West Tennessee. These leaders are the CEO, president, or another top executive of their organization. A large NPO that supports the Mid-South nonprofit sector, provided the list based on the NPOs' size (operating budget), 501c3 status (IRS criteria), location (rural and urban areas of West Tennessee), and the number of years the organization has been in existence. Purposive sampling techniques are viable when the number of selected cases is small (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The selection of the five NPO leaders and their organizations used in this multi-case study was based on the ideas of Seawright and Gerring (2008), who suggest that there are six (6) methods of case selection; one of them, which was used in this study, is the use of an "extreme case." The extreme case is defined as unusual and more strongly depicts the concept of

interest. The extreme five cases for this study were chosen because each organization has a high regard for success, they are community-based (CBOs), registered as 501c3 organizations, and they have all maintained their mission and objectives for five years or more. The five organizations were chosen for their commitment to a particular social purpose, such as education, health, the arts, and religion. Each group serves a unique population of people and has received recognition for their work in the community. These requirements for study inclusion will align with the primary research question: What unique supportive strategies do leaders of nonprofits use to promote a sustainable organization? The research strategy and question will also align with the chosen individuals who fit the criteria (Dasgupta, 2015; Yin, 2018).

The nonprofit leaders were identified via purposive sampling. *Purposive sampling* is a method that enables the researcher to find and choose individuals who are likely to have specific traits or experiences and are eager to provide rich data. This enables researchers to concentrate on a small sample and pick the relevant people or individuals who can ultimately contribute knowledge to their research. (Patton, 2002). For instance, this study aims to learn about the methods nonprofit executives use to create long-lasting organizations. Individual participants or cases that will provide rich information about the research subject and drive its organization's sustainability and strategic planning process justify purposeful case sampling to be appropriate (Link, 2018). Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to identify and select people with a wealth of relevant material (Palinkas et al., 2015). Choosing a small number of samples from a particular region is also a good use of purposeful sampling (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2016).

A large NPO that assists the Mid-South nonprofit sector provided a list of NPOs with locations in (rural and urban) areas of West Tennessee as part of the recruitment process. The

NPOs were classified based on the following standards: NPO size (operating budget), 501c3 status (IRS requirements), and NPO leaders with a track record of effectively leading sustainable organizations for at least eight years. Emails asking seven NPO leaders (CEO, President, Director, CFO, Founder) to participate in the study were issued after carefully reviewing the list of NPOs and selecting the chosen organizations. As a result, five leaders (18 years or older) responded to the email, achieving the objective of securing at least five contributors to participate in this multi-case study. In addition, the leaders' answers to the prescreening inquiries confirmed that they matched the inclusion standards listed in Table 1 for leaders. Before scheduling the interview, informed consent papers (Appendix 4) were emailed to each participant for an electronic signature. A ten-day flexible schedule with dates, hours, and the Zoom link was emailed to each participant after they had completed the prescreening questionnaire and signed the informed consent. The schedule allowed participants to choose the time and date of their desired interview. This process went smoothly. The interviews were scheduled without difficulties. Zoom videoconferencing was used for all interviews conducted over a two-week period. Each participant received an email reminder the night before and the morning of their scheduled interview, along with a link to Zoom.

Table 1 details the study participants' organizational structure and leadership abilities. The participants (n=5) are over 18, and the IRS has recognized their organization as a 501c3 NPO. In addition, 60% (n=3) of the organizations have been in operation between five and ten years, and 40% (n=2) have been in existence from 18 to thirty years. When the geographic locations, budgetary sizes, and leadership roles of the NPOs were examined, it was found that 40% (n=2) of the organizations are in urban and rural areas of West Tennessee, classified as medium-sized organizations, and have CEOs/founders as their leaders; 40% (n=2) are in urban

areas of West Tennessee, classify as large organizations, and have directors as their leaders; and 20% (n=1), a small organization with the president/founder as the leader, is located in a rural area of West Tennessee. Additionally, all five NPO participants (n=5) testified that they could speak to their organization's operational procedures, sustainability, and strategic plans.

Table 1

Prescreening Questions

Nonprofit Leaders (NPO) on Sustainability	INPO1	BNPO2	HMNPO3	KNPO4	ANPO5
Are you over the age of 18?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Is your organization a 501c3 NPO as recognized by the IRS?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Has your organization been operating for five years or more?	9 Years	30 Years	7 Years	18 Years	8 Years
Is your organization located in urban or rural West TN?	Urban/ Rural	Urban/ Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban
Is your organization, according to budget, considered micro, small, medium, or large?	Small	Medium	Large	Large	Medium
Are you in a primary leadership position within the NPO (ex., ED, Founder, CEO, CFO, COO, CIO, Chairperson, President, Director, General Manager)?	CEO/ Founder	Director	Director	President Founder	CEO/ Founder
As the leader of the NPO, can you speak to the organization's operational processes and be able to speak to the sustainability strategies and plan?	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES

**Study Participants (n=5) are adults (male or female) over the age of 18 who are serving in a primary leadership role.**

**Instrumentation**

To identify and capture detailed experiences from participants, they were asked open-ended questions from a semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix A). The final interview guide includes 16 open-ended questions to produce more open information and exclusive insight

for the researcher. The participants may view this approach as less threatening than scaled questions (Patton, 2004), and it provides direct quotations, which are a fundamental source of raw data in qualitative research. Additionally, open-ended questions allow interviewees to clarify if they do not understand the question or have questions (Patton, 2002) so the researcher can identify assessments and explore the insights and principles of the participants (Padgett, 2004). A variety of methods can be used in qualitative research that includes interviews, observations, transcripts, and field notes to construct individual case study designs that can be utilized to address complex, realistic phenomena established on an intense study of a single person, company, or outcomes (Tetnowski, 2015). This researcher incorporated the methods mentioned above to address the research questions. Appendix 1 contains the semi-structured interview question guide for the study.

### **Data collection and procedure**

An application was twice filed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Memphis for review and clearance to start collecting data. Both applications produced the same results, stating that the IRB has determined that the activity does not meet the Office of Human Subjects Research Protections definition of human subjects' research and 45 CFR part 46 does not apply based on the information provided in the determination review request regarding the research focus question "What unique methods do nonprofit organization leaders utilize to support and promote a sustainable organization? As a result, no IRB permission nor review is necessary for this project. The participants in the study were asked open-ended interview questions, such that their specific experiences can be identified. The interview questions were directed to the participant's experiences and practices.



This researcher served as the primary data-gathering tool by conducting interviews to gather information. In qualitative research, the researcher is the main instrument for data collection and analysis, and interviews are one of the six sources of evidence for case studies, (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) Yin, 2018). Therefore, addressing the main and supporting issues in the study and adhering to the framework of descriptive case studies using "how" and "what" questions are consistent with qualitative research (Noor, 2008; Yazan, 2015; Yin 2003). Field notes were gathered, interviews were performed, and the participants' behaviors were heavily observed. Because participants' replies are the primary source of data, this method of data collecting is necessary for investigating a phenomenon (Tellis, 1997). The data for case studies must be triangulated (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The interviews took place over Zoom in a private office so that each nonprofit executive could choose a setting that was convenient and familiar to them (Patton, 2002). Moreover, a quick reminder of the informed consent they signed was reviewed, and it was reaffirmed that they might end the interview and skip any questions that made them uncomfortable. Finally, any remaining concerns were clarified, and participants were informed that the interview would be video recorded. Most of the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, although one went for one hour and 45 minutes. A lively discussion was held. Every participant was open to information sharing; as a result, questions frequently flowed naturally into one another. To record nonverbal cues and specific behavior that would be helpful to the study's conclusions, the researcher gathered many field notes.

To preserve the trustworthiness of data, Triangulation was used (Farquhar et al., 2020). Triangulation was implemented via interviews, reviewing the nonprofit's strategic plan, brochure, budget plan, or whatever the leader shared, and or explored the nonprofit social media page. Triangulation ensures that results from various approaches or several observers of the same

occurrence are consistent (Farquhar et al., 2020; Patton, 1999). As a result, outcomes may be verified, and any data flaws can be made up for by the strengths of other data (Farquhar et al., 2020).

Participants were thanked and informed that a verbatim transcript would be created after the interviews. The mp4 ZOOM recording was uploaded to Otter.ai (software) for more accurate verbatim transcription of the interview conversation. The data was extracted from the transcripts, and after highlighting the key propositions or themes, the participants were contacted by phone or email and thanked once again for their participation. The created transcripts of the conversation and the emergent themes were then shared and discussed with the participants. This gave participants the chance to make modifications or add new ideas. Marshall and Rossman (2016) point out that member checking improves credibility. Participants received all consent documents and prescreening paperwork through secure email. The participant's name was only present on the informed consent form. The encrypted emails were carefully watched. Once each participant signed and returned the consent form, it was immediately removed from the email and moved into a password secured folder located in OneDrive.

### **Data Analysis Supportive of the Research Questions**

The data gathering and analysis processes happen simultaneously, like in any other qualitative study. Depending on the kind of case study, a particular form of analysis will be conducted. Yin (2003) provides a brief overview of five analytical techniques, one of which was used in this study. The data from this qualitative case study research was analyzed using content analysis. This technique links data to propositions, enables focused analysis, explains a phenomenon, and boosts confidence in the findings as propositions are addressed and accepted or rejected (Yin, 2003). Qualitative researchers develop case studies and write in-depth

descriptions of virtual environments using naturalistic inquiry. The qualitative research's output, patterns, and themes are linked to propositions and produced by an inductive analysis of examples (Maindonald, 2011; Yin, 2014). The output, patterns, and themes from qualitative research are created via a content approach of cases (Maindonald, 2011; Yin, 2014).

Content analysis is used to find specific words, themes, or concepts in each set of qualitative data. Researchers can measure and analyze the presence, meanings, and connections of specific words, themes, or concepts by using content analysis (Berelson, 1952). As an example, to close the gap between study and practice, this researcher could assess how NPO executives define sustainability. In qualitative research, the processes of data gathering, data analysis, information development, and recommendation verification are intuitively connected (Saunders et al., 2016). Therefore, the best approach is to create a general analytic strategy before beginning a case study investigation (Clark & Veale, 2018). The analytical approach links the contextual analysis and offers suggestions on how to proceed with the data analysis (Houghton et al., 2013). It is crucial to evaluate several sorts of analysis as a beginning researcher and identify the preferred method (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

According to Hsieh and Shannon (2016), content analysis is one of the most common analytic approaches used in qualitative research. The text was coded and divided into easily analyzed code groups to be subjected to content analysis. Briefly stated, the fundamental steps in the content analysis process are to prepare, define, and analyze the data from the transcript, identify propositions (creating categories and a coding system), code all the text, evaluate consistency in coding, draw conclusions from the coded data, and present findings. For example, the text can be coded into code categories, and the codes can be further divided into "code categories" to condense the data further (Hsieh & Shannon, 2016).

The researcher is interested in nonprofit organizations (NPOs), mainly in investigating what sustainability looks like, how nonprofit managers define sustainability, and what strategies help establish sustainable organizations while also considering barriers affecting NPOs' survival. The choice of content analysis for identifying, examining, classifying, and reporting themes revealed in the gathered data was made based on its versatility and usefulness. A second reviewer read the transcripts after the first reviewer had reviewed each interview twice. Furthermore, valuable discussions took place as the transcript data and developing themes or subjects were explored and verified using interrater reliability testing by using a second reviewer to review the transcripts and spot the emerging themes. An acceptable rating for the consistency of the detected themes is 83% (5/6) themes identified. Sufficient time was allotted to analyze the transcripts and choose the most impactful quotes to support the themes.

The Microsoft spreadsheet served as a valuable tool for operationalizing the content analysis process by using excel to sort, organize, and clean collected data. The materials previously mentioned made it easier to find recurrent patterns in sustainable organizations that would deal with the main study questions (Yin, 2018). Decoding is analyzing a portion of text to discover its meaning, while coding goes from data collection to data analysis (Saunders et al., 2016). An example of a Microsoft spreadsheet that was created using the participant transcripts' information shows the organization's code name, the theme, quotes, page numbers of the transcript, and related research literature. Shown in Table 2.

Table 2.

Coding/Quotes Spreadsheet

Proposition/Theme	NPO Leader	Quote	Page #	Linked Research
<b>Sustainability</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Mission</b></li> </ul>	INPO1	“Sustainability – means are we able to still provide the services that we offer currently, and do we have the capacity to add more services and stay true to our mission.”	2	Analou and Karami (2002 pg 6
	BNPO2	“Sustainability is primarily focused on our mission which is really to reclaim the community.”	4	Alavi and Karami (2009)pg. 6

The output, patterns, and themes from qualitative research. Content analysis is used to find specific words, themes, or concepts in this qualitative study.

**Use of Data**

A code name and number were assigned given to each participant as a means of preserving the unity of the data while protecting the identity and privacy of participants. Zoom was used for the interviews, which took place at the participants' homes, workplaces, or other desired locations where each respondent felt comfortable disclosing personal information. Data coding was utilized during the data analysis process to record ideas or themes, pertinent subjects, and other important information from interviews. The data were organized into groups using Microsoft spreadsheet tools to facilitate qualitative analysis. When using this program to access and analyze data, the researcher used encryption. The Microsoft Office AES-256 encryption system protects the Excel files and locks them with a password so no one else can open them. The de-identified data was saved as encrypted files in that software's specific format. Data will be retained on an external hard drive for at least twelve months after the study is finished. This drive is encrypted, free of any network connections, and kept in a locked drawer of the researcher's secured office. The study's participants learned of any new information as it becomes available, they read over the consent form, and signed it. The researcher encouraged each participant to raise any issues during the information session and at any other time. In the

interview session the participants were reminded that the study was entirely voluntary and that they are always free to withdraw their consent and decide not to participate at any time.

### **Trustworthiness**

Guba, (1981). Lincoln & Guba, 1985, among others) have developed many frameworks to evaluate the rigor or trustworthiness of qualitative data. Likewise, numerous strategies for establishing credibility have also been extensively discussed across the fields (e.g., Krefting, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993). Although this kind of research can be very time- and money-consuming, the data it produces is generally regarded as solid and trustworthy. Using numerous data sources, a defining characteristic of case study research also improves the credibility of the data (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Using a database improves management of the case study by enabling the researcher to keep track of and arrange data sources, such as notes, essential documents, tabular materials, narratives, photos, audio files, and improves the systematic storage of the case study (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

A few fundamental critical components to the study design can be incorporated while developing and executing a case study project to improve the overall research quality. First, researchers should take the following steps to ensure that sufficient information is presented so that readers may evaluate the accuracy or trustworthiness of the work: Make sure the research question for the case study is written correctly, the case study design is appropriate for the question, purposeful sampling procedures have been used, data are collected and managed systematically, and the data are correctly assessed (Russell et al., 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

All phases of the study process should include ethical concerns and implementing protocols to maintain ethical principles centered on participant protection. For example, one

fundamental ethical research principle is informed consent, which gives participants unbiased information about the predictable advantages and dangers of participating in the research and allows them to decide whether to participate without being forced to (Brear, 2018). To obtain the participant's trust, the researcher explained the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits to them in understandable and non-technical language (Sil & Das, 2017; Yin, 2018).

Before participating in the research study, each participant had to complete an informed consent form. They were informed of their freedom to withdraw from the study whenever they wanted without suffering any consequences.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter three outlined and illustrated the identified method for this research study. The qualitative approach was defined and presented by explaining the research study design, discussing the participants and the sample inclusion criteria, how data was collected and used, and the analytical procedures. Last, ethical concerns regarding the study process and trustworthiness were discussed, In Chapter four, the study's results and findings are highlighted.

## **Chapter 4: Results and Findings**

This chapter reports the outcomes and conclusions from in-depth interviews with nonprofit executives and leaders. Throughout each interview, the participants discussed their definitions of sustainability and strategies to support their sustainable organizations. The key takeaways are:

1. Staying True to Mission
2. Financial Health
3. People: Employees, Volunteers, Board, Service Users, and Community Stakeholders
4. Strategic Planning
5. Partnership
6. Effectiveness of Services
7. COVID-19

### **Participants and Responses**

Five NPO leaders from five independent nonprofit organizations that operate in both urban and rural areas of West Tennessee were interviewed to explore how they measure or define sustainability, and what unique strategies or techniques they utilize to promote a sustainable organization. Table 1, in the Method section, under participants and sampling details the study participants' organizational structure and leadership abilities. Table 1 shows the study participants' organizational structure and leadership abilities. All five are over 18 and recognized as 501c3 NPOs by the IRS. Three of the organizations have been in operation for five to ten years, while two have existed for 18 to thirty years. Most NPOs are in urban and rural areas, with



CEOs/founders as leaders. All participants can speak about their organization's operational procedures, sustainability, and strategic plans.

INPO1 was created to meet the needs of men and women with convictions by providing education, social support, and mental health services. BNPO2 serves as a private mission school operating from a small church and offers a complete educational program (Kindergarten–12th grade). In addition, this organization provides year-round camps, social services, and food security programs for children and families in different neighborhoods and zip code areas. HMNPO3 is a nonprofit organization that supports professionals working with children between zero and six. They offer social and emotional mental health therapies to assist kids in regulating their emotions and developing the ability to interact with their caregivers healthily. KNPO4 supports children from birth to age seventeen and offers a structured, safe environment with a high-quality educational curriculum. In addition, this organization provides quality childcare services, before- and after-school care, and scholarship program opportunities for a diverse family population of children. Lastly, ANPO5 is a Mid-South mental health organization committed to increasing awareness and promoting mental well-being to strengthen the quality of life for individuals and families.

During the first iteration of coding, the researchers obtained 100% interrater reliability. Additional coding resulted in 83% interrater reliability. Full consensus was again reached at the third round of coding. Full consensus (100% agreement) was reached by the second reviewer consistently identifying the six themes.

### **Emerging Propositions or Themes**

In total, six distinct themes emerged from the analysis. The key propositions or themes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data were *staying true to mission*, *financial*

health, people, strategic planning, partnership, service effectiveness. Although COVID-19 is not a theme, it is pertinent since participants mentioned how the pandemic affected sustainability. The propositions or themes, as well as any related characteristics, are provided below. Table 3 illustrates the emerging propositions or themes from the dataset, the numbers of participants' responses and linking quotes.

Table 3

*Participants' Responses Related to Propositions/Themes/Quotes (n=5)*

<b>Propositions/Themes</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Responses/Quotes</b>
1. Staying True to Mission	5	50
2. Financial Health	5	12
3. People (employees, community Stakeholders, Board, service users, volunteers)	5	8
4. Strategic Planning	5	14
5. Partnership	4	8
6. Effectiveness Service	5	12
7. Covid-19	5	12
<b>Total</b>		<b>116</b>

*Note. Table depicts the Number of leaders interviewed whose responses linked to the propositions or themes. The total Number of responses linked to the quotes.*

The emerging themes from this study are described in detail below.

**Staying True to Mission**

All participants mentioned how important the mission was, and they all expressed that one important factor in their staying power was their staying true to their mission. BNPO2 says, "The mission means remaining pure to God, who keeps us operating", clearly attributing its organization's success and sustainability to the mission guiding their practice strategies. In addition, according to BNPO2, "Sustainability is primarily focusing on our mission, which is really to reclaim the community by serving Christ, who is the mission, and driving the mission promotes sustainability." BNPO2 compassionately talked about its organization practicing the mission, adding, "another piece and aspect of

it is just really kind of tying everything we do into the mission, so we're able to stay pure to our mission.” Summarizing by saying, “I think the uniqueness of what we do is the “why,” it's staying pure to the mission, and not deviating from that.”

The other participants talked about their mission statement and how sustainability relates to it. For instance, INPO1 made a point by stating, "sustainability - are we still able to provide the services that we currently offer, and do we have the capacity to add more services while remaining true to our mission?" HMNPO3 defined its organization's sustainability as, “Sustainability, I believe is being able to successfully achieve your mission and the vision of the organization, and to do that long term.” KNOP4 stated, “We’ve been serving the community for eighteen years and most of our clientele is from word of mouth. Our customers support us because we remain true to our mission”, and ANPO5 summed up the balancing act between sustainability and the organizational mission by emphasizing, “As we grow, our mission statement is adjusted to remain focused on our purpose.” INPO1 emphasizes, “Whoever your staff is, again, whether they’re interns, volunteers, things like that, you definitely have to make sure you have people who understand your mission, and they want to come and add value to that.”

### **Financial Health**

In an NPO or charitable nonprofits, the term sustainability is frequently used to describe a nonprofit that can raise money and maintain its financial stability over the long term, maintaining its capacity to fulfill its mission (NCON, 2017). The NPO participants (100%) defined or discussed what sustainability meant to them, so they may all agree that this concept is accurate. For instance, KNPO4 provided an example of sustainability in its remarks by highlighting how longevity and financial resources assist their sustainable organization by stating,

We've been in the community for 18 years and we've maintained financial capacity for over 18 years and our revenue sources, including private pay parents; state certificate parent, monthly USDA food program recipients, and we also receive grant money from private and government facility. One of the things that we do is monitor and try to make sure we have enough children in the facility by encouraging those parents to apply for the childcare certificate program. This aids our sustainability.

To be long-term and financially sustainable, ANPO5 stated,

Sustainability is ongoing hustling. It really is a hustle with seeking out grants and other funding opportunities. Sustainability is, you know, every month weighing the pros and cons of cost analysis benefits, sustainability even means staying in tune with everybody's equity and inclusion and staying abreast on what your staff needs and provide support. It means for ongoing professional development for your staff, having consultants come in to see where you are, and what the next three years are going to be, and what your goals are, then it means going back and evaluating that to see where we are. It's, oh, there's so much.

INPO1 made a statement regarding the connection between sustainability and finances by expressing,

So, in a nonprofit, it's almost as if your people are more important than the money part because if you can get those dedicated, loyal people to help work your program, the funding will come up because then the numbers will show it." So how do I know if we're sustainable, is really the people. Do I have the people to continue to offer the resources or, I mean, the services that we said we were going

to offer, whether it's today, this week, this month, or this year. So that's what I really look at and be able to know I am sustaining. Then, of course, making sure I can pay my program manager.

The adoption of numerous cutting-edge tactics to attain better revenue diversification sustainability in nonprofit organizations has been prompted by the necessity to create a sustainable organization (Weerawardena et al., 2010). Four out of five of the NPO leaders who participated in the interview said that diversifying funding is a proactive way to boost funding sources rather than relying solely on government support. For instance, ANPO5 argues,

"Diversifying funding is the only way for a nonprofit to succeed. You must have that diversified revenue because you never know what will happen, so you cannot put all your eggs in one basket. There must be a streaming funding source."

Similarly, INPO1 believes that nonprofits should,

Never put all your eggs in one basket. Do an individual fundraising event, make sure that everybody associated with your organization are really truly ambassadors for your organization, and organizations and people will donate. We incorporate different types of fundraisers, like bingo, we accept materialistic donations, and apply for both State and Federal grants. So definitely, the funding sources have to be diverse because if you rely just on one, yeah, you shoot yourself in the foot.

HMNOP3 testified, "we can only be funded if we diversify our funding, so diversification is the key to us being sustainable." The KNPO4 reports that "our funding sources are very diverse, ranging from State and federal grants and certificate incentives to private pay." BNPO2 stressed, "We do not employ fundraising per se." Even though

80% of the study participants support diversifying funding, BNPO2 represents one in five (20%) study participants who emphasized not being dependent on government assistance, stating,

We actually do not receive any sort of grant. One hundred percent of our income comes from partnership fees. Occasionally, we may receive some donations, but those are typically from long-term supporters or teams who choose to give above and beyond what they've already paid.

Since government funding has typically been a more stable source of revenue diversification (Helmig et al., 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2020), the majority of NPO study participants indicated that they adopted a business approach to improving their financial resources for long-term sustainability by implementing diversification strategies.

## **People**

All participants mentioned how important it was to have good people, protect their people, communicate with people, and serve the people. The people include employees, volunteers, the board, service users, and community stakeholders. The NPO participants mentioned the importance of people to sustainability and to the organization. Employees and volunteers provide services and are crucial, as is the board which oversees finances and ensures that the organization stays true to its mission. For BNPO2, utilizing volunteers supports sustainability, “Our organization has been in existence for a little over thirty years, and we also utilize thousands of volunteers.” HMNPO3 indicated, “being supportive to my team to make sure they have clear communication of any changes, better communication with the board, and making sure we’re all raising

awareness about our services”, is a primary linking trait to sustainability. KNPO4, bragged about its board members, saying, “We actually have a very functional governing board here. So, you know that’s one of the requirements for nonprofits, like I’m the president and administrator.” People also include the people served and the stakeholders in the community. According to INPO1, tapping into social media aids sustainability by connecting and communicating with the service users and community stakeholders, explaining, “We have a Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, at some point we even used YouTube, I think it helps keep those who are already a part of the organization in the know.” Training employees is crucial to ANPO5's sustainability strategy since it ensures that "we reach clientele capacity, that our staff is equipped and trained, and that they continue professional development." INPO1 mentioned that they “send new employees, directors, boards members for fundraising, training, workshops or things like that”. It was also mentioned that "not allowing people to operate in their expertise, not communicating, not being transparent, having that skepticism of change, or that never change mentality" might harm sustainability. According to ANPO5, "There must be checks and balances in place to influence organizational sustainability." NPO leaders indicated that the mentioned characteristics support sustainability so they can fulfill changing consumer, manufacturing, and customer demands by integrating them into the organization's mission and the overall framework of the business.

### **Strategic Planning**

An additional essential component of sustainability is strategic planning, the process of identifying blueprint components that will assist organizations in achieving their objectives by establishing their goals and deciding how they will be achieved (Bryson, 2018). Researchers

have discovered a connection between sustainability and strategic planning (Osorio et al., 2005; Nafiu et al., 2019). This definition incorporates strategic planning to achieve ongoing progress (Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Grant, 2020; Hatton, 2017; Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014). This idea is relevant to nonprofit board members and personnel who are clear about their objectives and implement a good business plan to achieve them (Edgington, 2017; Candid, 2013). For example, HMNPO3's comprehensive strategic plan encompasses all the stakeholders. They get together to plan, evaluate, and develop the strategic plan for the company. They explain it as a means of "ensuring that your practices are in line and that you are continuing along the right road, you should have a succession plan in place, periodically update your strategic plans, and routinely audit your operations." Likewise, ANPO5 says, "walk in and ask, did this work? You should constantly review your strategy plan and evaluate where you are. What changes are possible? Make additions, subtractions, increases, and decreases to the strategic plan during the next two years. A tight strategic plan is required." KNPO4 stated,

We have a financial strategic plan. To me it's like a budget. We forecast revenue, projects, and projections. That's considered strategies, because we know the budget, we strategize by thinking about our organization's needs from year to year and based on the cost of living. we increased our funds.

"INPO1 took pride in discussing how they work with the board members to devise a strategic budget plan, stating, "set a budget list, we definitely set an annual budget every year. All the board members know, as well as the consulting committee members know what we must bring in." Additionally, INPO1 clarified,



Our strategic plan is outdated by three years, and that's because we've had the same board members, so they are familiar with the goals. They just continue operating. But we are planning to begin in June meeting weekly to update, strategize, budget planning, review the old plan, update, and set new goals.

The NPO leaders shared common data about how they strategically plan around their organizational goals. BNPO2 represents one in five (20%) of the study participants who said their organization is only sustainable because they operate by their mission, which directs their strategic practice plan. They added that there is currently "no written strategic plan, but we follow a structured process." To further support their viewpoint, BNPO2 stated,

We've used a written strategic plan in the past. We don't currently have an updated one, but I think that is definitely time to update. Even though the last strategic plan was probably ten or fifteen years ago, we're still operating.

According to Wright & Reames (2020), sustainable methods involve community people in decision-making and strategic planning. Sustainable Leaders always consider where the company is going and how it decides how to use resources to achieve its goals.

## **Partnership**

One of the main propositions and themes that arose as an approach utilized by nonprofit leaders and executives to promote sustainability was the building and maintenance of community partnerships. Four out of five participants engage in partnerships extensively, and a fifth mentioned that partnerships were important and something to think about in the future.

A *partnership* is defined as the formation of relationships between community-based nonprofit organizations and nonprofit community-based organizations' (CBO) leaders to address local

economic development and prevent resource scarcity in growing communities by launching community sustainability projects (Agyeman, 2005; Portney & Berry, 2010; Portney & Cuttler, 2010). According to research, developing and maintaining connections with community partners and stakeholders is a fundamentally innovative way to promote sustainability (Agyeman, 2005). The data analysis gleaned from the participants lends credence to this idea because (80%) of the participants discussed how creating partnerships was crucial to advancing their organization's sustainability. According to BNPO2, a sustainability plan is "empowering and allowing our partnering collaboratives to serve in the fullness of their capacities." For BNPO2, developing community partnerships is essential to its sustainability. They rely on community collaboratives because their organization serves a developing community. BNPO2 said, "We can make this work because we have similar missions and collaborate."

HMNPO3 stated, "being able to connect with certain amount of engaging with state partners are, or what's the word I'm looking for, organizations that do similar work, so we can have more of a collective impact." ANPO5 proposed that business executives could create new partnerships while maximizing existing ones saying, "we work in partnership with several community organizations to generate clientele, and by working with these collaboratives we can better meet the needs of the clientele population we serve." Although KNPO4 said that their group encourages community collaboration, it added that "collaborating with other childcare organizations has benefits and drawbacks, but we try to keep communication lines open when doing so because you never know when you might need to access those resources." According to these survey participants, partnerships are about addressing the demands of all stakeholders; they are not independent projects.

Building partnerships is consistent with the conceptual underpinnings of the Resource Dependency (RDT) and Change Management (CM) Theories for this study. It explains the NPOs' reliance on resources and the requirement to adopt a changing approach when establishing partnerships to achieve social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Relationships are essential, and the RDT confirms this by describing how an NPO acquires resources. Partners collaborate to create market strategies to help their local communities provide public goods and meet community needs (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Smith & Lipsky, 2009).

### **Effectiveness of Services**

While funding and financing is one of the factors that lead to NPOs failing annually, (Weerawardena & Sullivan Mort, 2001), other important factors include poor performance and ineffective service delivery, inefficient leadership, and many other reasons (Arbogust, 2020). For NPO leaders to fulfill their sustainability goals and objectives, effective service delivery and competent management supervision and expertise are required (Pyanov et al., 2021). All participants mentioned that a factor in their sustainability was the effectiveness of services, which means that they are having the impact they are supposed to have. According to the NPO leaders' definition, a capable leader can integrate and control the daily operational skills required to provide services that are effective and achieve their stated goals. There are several tactics and tools, such as technology, software, web documents, and investments in professional development services that NPOs use to track their services and assess their effectiveness. The leaders discussed their methods for providing services and for determining their effectiveness. For example, INPO1 stated.

At the start of the support sessions, we give out survey forms and ask what can or what would you like to see next? Or how can we improve our

sessions? And so, we just look at those results and get the numbers of how well our program is working. It's been a lot of technology pieces that have been the best use of our dollars to kind of keep catapulting us into a different space or to grow our programs.

The HMNPO3 organization uses several practical methods to achieve efficient service delivery, citing,

We use all the Microsoft Office Suite, Google, Google Slides, Google Documents, Google Sheets, and Excel, Outlook, and we also have a system called Base Camp which is a project management system where all our documents and everything is uploaded there so that anyone can find it. . . . .

KNPO4 has a pre/post report card to measure enrollment and performance progress from beginning to end, referring.

We have a software program called Bright-Wheel that is multifunctional allowing us to track payments, children's progress, communicate with parents, video/audio/camera recording system, and many other functionalities that promote service effectiveness. We have amazing technology and software such as, Bright-Wheel, QuickBooks, etc., to measure sustainability financially, structurally, materialistically, systemically, and operationally.

ANPO5 indicated that their organization measure effectiveness by utilizing multiple services provided through a large organizing NPO, claiming, "Connecting with X is a collaborative that we tapped into to provide trainings, and most of all it provided an avenue for us to network with other organizations." ANPO5 also stated they have, "QuickBooks system, this helps manage accountability, checks and balances. "According to BNPO2, "We offer surveys to our partners to

provide feedback on the services offered to them in order to gauge our service effectiveness, because sustainability is the ability to provide services."

Based on the participants' replies, their practice tactics to ensure adequate services align with Lawrimore's approaches. He presented his approach to sustainability in 2015, along with techniques for evaluating how sound enterprises and organizations are led and served. He concluded that by implementing the five keys to a successful plan, nonprofit leaders could create sustainable organizations and assess their efficacy. These five keys are: Strategic Focus (leadership and planning); People (personnel and staff); Operations (processes and work), Marketing (customer relations); and Finances; (assets and equipment).

## **COVID-19**

Lastly, because COVID-19 occurred over the last three years, the study's findings sparked lively discussions about the pandemic. Four out of five of the study's participants said COVID significantly impacted how they operated and provided services., for example. INPO1 indicated, "before the onset of COVID, all of our group therapy sessions were in person, we would feed the attendees, and it just seemed to be better, but when COVID happened, we went virtual." All public events and client networking, according to HMNPO3, had been suspended., "we could no longer host community events, so we had to really think through online awareness and promotion", but once they figured things out, she stated, "our engagement with professionals, because we weren't able to be in person, our conferences had to be virtual." KNPO4 COVID caused a brief shutdown, with the following statement being made: "initially, COVID-19 definitely affected our financial sustainability. We actually had to close for a couple of months, and if we're not open, we can't generate funds to maintain operation." INPO1 spoke about additional operational and service delivery adjustments, stating, "we also had clothes closet

where clients would come in person to get clothes, but during Covid, it was suspended. We're just now starting to rebuild our clothes closet.” Furthermore, INPO1 disclosed, “most of our sessions are still virtual because I think now people have just gotten used to it.” Likewise, HMINPO3 showed “we're still doing a hybrid model.”

COVID also made an impact on funding for four of the NPO leaders. INPO1 reported,

Indirectly, it hurt us financially, because we've lost the people, right. But, because the numbers didn't go down virtually, when it came for us to applying for grant funding. We couldn't report as many physical numbers, so. numbers do matter. KNPO4 directly affirmed, “COVID had a drastic effect on our organization’s financial sustainability.” HMNPO3 was glad to report zero loss of funding, “our fundraising had to be virtual, so yeah, we had to think of different ways to use the funding, but it was still being used. Equally, ANPO5 detailed, “of course, with COVID, we had to pivot the way we provided services, our funding, and just readjust our meeting space, etc.”

For one of the study participants, the delivery of services and the clientele rose after the onset of COVID. According to BNPO2,

With the onset of COVID, it did not affect our financial sustainability, and we really didn't have to do anything differently, we still managed, and we continued to host teams during COVID. With the closing of schools, we gained additional partnering organizations, food trucks were brought in to serve meals in the communities and delivered food to the kids at home. We fed hundreds of kids each day.”

HMNPO3 was happy to share, “COVID-19 did not affect us negatively on our clientele, funding, or service delivery, we increased during that time.” According to ANPO5, once COVID's adverse effects began to fade, “after we adjusted our service procedures and worked out all the pieces, everything worked out, and we actually thrived during COVID, because we provide essential/needed services.”

The main research question covered in Chapter 4 was what unique supportive strategies nonprofit leaders utilize to promote sustainability? Additionally, the data helped shape the six associated propositions or themes from the extensive dataset, how the nonprofit research participants defined sustainability, and how they measured or practiced it.

Participants in the study presented experiences that reflected the seven themes, along with citations from the literature review and supporting quotes. To illustrate the propositions/Themes table, a sample illustration is provided. The findings reported in Chapter 4 will be discussed in Chapter 5, along with the study's limitations, implications for policy and practice, implications for future research, and conclusion.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Chapter 5 will provide an overview of the study's main conclusions from Chapter 4. Finally, we will discuss the study's limitations, implications for policy and practice, implications for further research, and the conclusion.

### **Addressing Research Question 1**

To answer the question, “How do nonprofit leaders define or measure sustainability?” This study revealed some patterns in the definition, assessment, and application of sustainability among nonprofit leaders who participated in the study. For example, Grant's definition of sustainability (2020) is defined as maintaining workable levels in everything done by ensuring that long-term basic needs are met without bartering with or sacrificing other needs. A summary of a standard definition of sustainability by all participants is continuously retaining funds and resources to accomplish its mission and sustain the organization. Based on the study participants' standard definition of sustainability, they comprehend that sustainability is the implementation of a strategy toward continuous growth that holistically meets the needs of sustainable development (Cullom & Cullom, 2011; Grant, 2020; Hatton, 2017; Panjehfouladgaran & Bahiraie, 2014).

Social, economics, and environmental are the three primary pillars of sustainability, which are people, profit, and planet. These concepts emerged from the discussion on sustainability. The definition of sustainability is as varied and expansive as the globe itself. Physical, natural, and social resources are necessary for people and organizations to function effectively (UNGA, 2013). The basis for social (people), economic (profit/financial), and environmental sustainability (planet) are established and maintained interactions with stakeholders (Gazzola et al., 2017).



NPO leaders sparked a lively discussion on this topic. The leaders also mention strategic planning as a critical instrument for directing operations. According to KNPO4, HMNPO3, and INPO1, all board members and stakeholders are involved in developing the organization's overall financial and objective strategic plans. A well-designed strategic plan can help any nonprofit and for-profit organizations, businesses, and enterprises set goals and acquire and distribute the resources required to carry out their mission, according to Allison and Kaye (2005).

Except for BNPO2, a faith-based organization, the other leaders run public organizations. However, the remarkable thing about each leader's testimonies is that they received a vision from their higher being to start a nonprofit organization, and that it is a calling to help others. BNPO2 asserts, "We are blessed; we stay pure to our mission, our foundation was established on this" indicating that it operates explicitly by its organizational mission.

### **Addressing Research Question 2**

To answer the question, "What unique supporting techniques do leaders of nonprofits use to promote sustainability? Each NPO leader enthusiastically discussed their "own special practice techniques." They concluded that staying true to the organization's mission, partnering with collaborative community organizations, developing a solid strategic plan, and having good financial health, working with people, and providing effective services support organizational sustainability. BNPO2, the only study participant that has been operable for thirty years, do not have a current written strategic plan in place, but firmly asserted that its organization is sustainable because they uphold its mission. This concept aligns with Analou & Karami's (2002) assertion that defining and following a sound mission significantly impacts the construction of a sustainable organization.

In addition to the sustainability practices already listed, the participants emphasized other practices, such as training, communication, and transparency, that they employed in conjunction with the other techniques to help with sustainability. To make sure they can meet their financial obligations by having a variety of sources of income, most leaders reported that they diversify funding. Generally, government support has been a more reliable source of revenue diversification (Helmig et al., 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2020). Another method of sustainability, most nonprofit executives said their organizations form partnerships with other community organizations to merge their resources. The relationship that BNPO2 has with other organizations around the world is what keeps it running 99.99% of the time. Despite not actively working with any organization, KNPO4 claimed that its group welcomes community engagement.

The conceptual frameworks for this study, Resource Dependency Theory (RDT), and Sustainable Supply Change Management (SSCM), align with adopting a shift in how partnerships are formed. Each framework shows how NPOs depend on resources and how they must adopt a flexible strategy when establishing relationships to maintain a steady supply of natural and financial resources to achieve sustainability. In addition, any organization's strategic management must consider a leader's capacity for building partnerships (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Participants in the study, particularly BNPO2, support these ideas and methods.

The discussions that resulted from the data on the effectiveness of services topic was fascinating, with the main emphasis being on the many technologies or tools, spreadsheets, matrices, and software that the leaders use to support the organization's daily operational routines. In addition, the specific software that each leader utilized to manage their internal and external challenges, customers, financial resources, and operational data system was shared.

Training resources were mentioned by ANPO5 and HMNPO3. They expressed that effective training allows them to carry out their missions more effectively. According to HMNPO3, the company has purchased numerous programs from MNP for staff training, professional development (leadership/coaching), a fundraising platform, and various other helpful services. Like HMNPO3, ANPO5 stated that its organization uses MNP for the same resources. However, it particularly appreciates how MNP assists nonprofits with the difficulties and opportunities particular to each organization they serve by empowering them to address community needs effectively. In addition, the leaders are putting good ideas into practice that support long-lasting businesses. According to research, nonprofit leaders that fail to develop a business plan, have unclear missions, and fail to gather data to inform planning are some typical characteristics that have been proven to have a detrimental impact on the sustainability of organizations (Helmig et al., 2014; Weerawardena et al., 2010; Lu et al., 2020).

The other characteristic discussed that is not a proposition, but produced negative and positive impact on sustainable organizations was COVID-19. While two of the study participant's organizations saw an increase in services, research showed that COVID-19/Pandemic hurt service delivery and sustainability for many nonprofits, leading to funding issues, the inability to implement services, customer loss, and organizational failure (Kuenzi et al., 2021). For instance, INPO1, ANPO5, and HMNPO3 said they had to stop providing in-person mental health services and switch to virtual and telehealth. KNPO4 said that because its organization provides childcare services, it had to close when the educational system switched to virtual learning temporarily. Their organization struggled as a result.

Other NPOs saw an increase in services, just as Kuenzi et al. (2021) found. This is accurate, according to BNPO2, which claimed that the organization's customers and service

delivery have increased. Therefore, they merely altered their behavior by donning masks when providing services to their communities. Additionally, HMNPO3 claimed that COVID-19 had no detrimental effects on their funding sources and that their clientele had grown. In conclusion, all the NPO leaders said that after a few months of reorganizing their business practices, they could resume providing services as usual. The most incredible way to put it was by ANPO3, who stated, "After we adjusted our service procedures and worked out all the pieces, everything worked out, and we actually thrived during COVID because we provide essential services."

### **Limitations of the Study**

This researcher examined the qualitative multiple case studies method for a considerable length of time to ensure that it was the best course of action to address the research questions. Therefore, time constraints created a limitation to completing the study and limited the number of participants that could be included. Additional restrictions on this study include the fact that it involved NPO executives and leaders who operated small to large (based on the budget) organizations in Shelby County, West Tennessee, which limits the usability of this study to a very small area and population. Therefore, this study may not represent or be valid for those living in other parts of Tennessee or the United States. Because this was an exploratory multiple case study, no causal claims can be made in any form. This study is at best a first attempt at understanding an understudied phenomenon from the perspective of NPO leaders.

### **Implications for Policy**

One of the practice strategies that NPO leaders discovered to be valuable for sustainability is resource dependency theory. According to this notion, a policy ordinance regulation could help ensure that related NPOs in the same municipality cooperate. This law would assist in extending operations to cover a diverse mix of services and reducing the failure

rates of NPOs. Organizations require resources to survive (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978).

To connect, align, and create links with external resources, nonprofit executives must unite and build partnerships (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Additionally, there should be more policies focusing on the government providing more funding for struggling NPOs, policies that promote community engagement for social unity and economic growth, and policies establishing operating rules for NPOs to guide their people (employees, board members, stakeholders, service users, and volunteers). The operational policy should also contain a series of training courses to prepare leaders and their staff better to utilize various revenue sources (fundraising, looking for suitable grants), leading to financial stability.

### **Implications for Practice**

The practice implications are clear: respondents provided the six practices that contribute to a sustainable organization. The data revealed the strategies the study participants identified as necessary to support and build sustainable organizations. They are staying true to their mission, having sound financial health, partnership – connecting with collaborative organizations, having a solid strategic plan, providing effective services, and working with their people (employees, board, stakeholders, volunteers, service users). Participants in the study felt that if other NPO leaders adopted these practices, it might help them create long-lasting organizations.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Future researchers should conduct comparative investigations in other regions, given that the study concentrated on five NPO leaders or executives in West Tennessee. It has been stated there is limited empirical data and current literature on the challenges to the survival and failure of nonprofit organizations (Candid, 2013). Future studies should therefore aim to understand more about leaders' "sustainable practices" (UNGA, 2013). There are many studies on the

sustainability of organizations and social enterprises. However, the literature needs to be more cohesive about the sustainability practice strategies used by individual leaders. Researchers have argued that NPO leaders must adopt creative movements in their operations, adopt innovative practices, focus on outcomes targeted by government policy, and pursue innovative ways of delivering superior value to the target market (Weerawardena et al., 2006); Jaskyte, 2004; McDonald, 2007). Research implications for the future should also include continued investigations to advance knowledge, such as conducting surveys to determine how much sustainable practices are used by long-lasting NPOs. In addition to the leaders completing the surveys, it would be interesting to serve surveys the different people within the organization to hear their ideas or thoughts on what sustains organizations. Ongoing research is required to expand the body of knowledge and raise sustainability consciousness among nonprofit leaders who strive to build sustainable organizations.

Researching leadership's role in the sustainability of nonprofit organizations has been enlightening. The researcher extends employment prospects by advising nonprofit organizations, writing grants, and performing community needs assessments. The information gathered from this research is helpful as a result. The researcher's interest in this subject was sparked by a vital concern for the lack of community resources in underserved areas due to organizational failure. This researcher is affiliated with numerous faith-based organizations. Therefore, the function of faith-based organizations in local communities will be the sole subject of a future research project.

## Conclusion

This descriptive multiple-case research examined nonprofit leaders' sustainability strategies. How do nonprofit leaders define sustainability, and what unique supportive strategies do nonprofit leaders utilize to promote sustainable organizations are the study questions that underpin this research. Nonprofit organizations are essential. Hatton (2017) claims that NPOs are necessary for eradicating societal necessities or needs within a community and providing resources, goods, and services that other enterprises within public sectors and neighborhoods do not offer. Additionally, nonprofit organizations provide social, economic, educational, and medical services to individuals and communities (Anheier, 2014), services that create possibilities (Ott & Dicke, 2016) and address social challenges (Anheier, 2014) while supporting societies across diverse populations. Inevitably, 30% of nonprofit organizations are predicted to fail within the first five years of existence (NCCS, 2020). According to research, nonprofit organizations fail annually for various reasons, such as inadequate funding, unfavorable neighborhoods, subpar operations, ineffective leadership, and many others (Arbogust, 2020). The failure rate of NPOs raises sustainability issues since nonprofit leaders worldwide are under increasing pressure to maintain sustainable organizations (Benjamin, 2008).

According to the research participants, the dataset revealed several core propositions or themes that support sustainable organizations. They are staying true to the mission, strategic planning, financial health, partnership, effectiveness services, and people (employees, board, stakeholder, volunteers, service users). The leaders' basic concept of sustainability is implementing a strategy for continued development that considers social, economic, and environmental sustainability (people, profit, and planet) to meet the criteria of sustainable development. Buckwell (2016) supports the same concept. He concluded that sustainability is not

a destination but a journey that organizations, companies, and businesses must strategically plan daily to build sustainable establishments. In conclusion, it is anticipated that the study's findings will provide an opportunity to add to the body of research on NPO leaders' sustainability practices and to propose strategies for fostering sustainable organizations.



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## Appendix A

### Interview Protocol

A semi-structured interview procedure will be utilized to generate robust conversations.

The interview question guide include:

1. What is your position title/role?
2. Tell me about your organizations.
  - mission
  - goals
  - scope of services
  - population serves
  - how you generate clientele.
3. How long has your organization been in existence?
4. How many people do you employ? Do you utilize volunteers, if so, how many?
5. Talk about your organization's funding source(s)?
6. For your organization, how important are grants? Fundraising?
7. Explain how your organization measure effectiveness of service delivery?
8. How do you define sustainability?
  - a) Identify the contributing factors that support organizational sustainability?
  - b) Identify determining factors that would impact sustainability or could lead to the failure/demise of an organization?
  - c) What unique economic strategies/methods do you use to support and promote a sustainable organization?

- d) Does your organization utilize special equipment/instruments (spreadsheets, software tools/matrix to measure sustainability?
  - e) With the onset of COVID -19, how did it affect your organization's financial sustainability? Has the organization's financial strategy planning process change since 2020?
  - f) Tell me about any changes or types of innovations your organization experienced in the past 5 years to support and maintain financial sustainability?
9. Explain how your organization measures financial sustainability?
10. How important is revenue diversification to your organization?
- a. What types of strategies does your organization use to diversify funding?
11. Does your organization have a functioning board of directors/ governing board? Why or Why Not? If so, what role/responsibility do(es) the board serve?
12. What does long-term financial strategy planning look like for your organization? How does it benefit the organization?
13. Does your nonprofit tap into social media to enhance service delivery and program effectiveness? Why or why not?
14. What exclusive approaches are incorporated in your written strategic plan? How often is it updated or modified?
15. If you were granted one wish for your nonprofit organization, what would it be?
16. What else would you like to share about your organization regarding strategies/tips, unique practices, to support survivorship of your or any nonprofit organization?