It Takes a Village in Practice

Growing Communities During a Pandemic

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**Abstract – What does it take to ensure open-source software (OSS) programs serving cultural and scientific heritage are sustainable and enduring? In 2017, the It Takes a Village (ITAV) project produced a Guidebook that serves as a reference source to help OSS programs plan for long-term sustainability. In 2020, the Institute of Museum and Library Services in the United States funded a new phase of It Takes a Village work, *ITAV in Practice*, to create and pilot an adaptable set of tools for practical use in planning and managing sustainability for OSS initiatives. It Takes a Village in Practice was proposed pre-COVID, but work did not begin until after pandemic-related restrictions had spread across our participating programs and organizations. This paper shares the challenges, successes, and lessons learned as the project team worked to grow and build the ITAV community and resource during the pandemic.**

**Keywords – open source, community engagement, sustainability**

**Conference Topics – Community; Resilience**

# Introduction

The It Takes a Village (ITAV) project [1], funded in 2017 by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) in the United States, was designed to bring together open-source programs serving cultural and scientific heritage to develop shared sustainability strategies, and to provide our communities with the information needed to assess and contribute to the sustainability of the programs they depend on.

A growing body of open-source software (OSS) supports cultural and scientific heritage organizations, and while some initiatives have been successful at creating sustainable programs, others have struggled to determine what strategies will work once grant funding ends or other major pivots are required.

This paper describes the work that went into turning the ITAV Guidebook, published in 2018, into a practical toolkit that could be used by OSS programs to plan and manage for sustainability. We also discuss the challenges, successes, and lessons learned when a project predicated on extensive community participation and feedback was planned, proposed, and funded pre-COVID, and then forced to pivot to an all-virtual undertaking.

# Project History

The ITAV team assumed that while there is no single approach to sustainability, there might be common threads among programs that would lead to mutual needs and strategies for meeting those needs. In collaboration with the ITAV Advisory Group - Rob Cartolano, Columbia University; Tom Cramer, Stanford University; Michele Kimpton, LYRASIS; Katherine Skinner, Educopia Institute, and Ann Baird Whiteside, Harvard University Graduate School of Design – we developed a survey and conducted a [two-day forum](https://www.lyrasis.org/programs/Pages/IMLS-OSS-National-Forum.aspx) in Baltimore in the fall of 2017 to test this idea. During the Forum, representatives of 27 OSS programs discussed project lifecycles, governance, financing, resources, community building, outreach, and bumps in the road. Several digital preservation or related platforms were among the 27 programs represented, including DSpace, Archivematica, BitCurator, Fedora, and LOCKSS.

In looking at their own OSS programs, Forum participants articulated that sustainability is not a linear process with specific starting and end points. Instead, they defined OSS sustainability as an iterative process evolving across facets and phases. The four facets describe the different, but intertwined components of OSS sustainability: governance, technology, resources, and community engagement. The three phases speak to a program’s place within a facet: Getting Started, Growing, or Assessing and Evolving. Each facet is equally critical but may be in a different phase and have different timelines and needs.

These findings were combined with other resources and shaped into a Guidebook [2] freely shared with the larger community in 2018. The Guidebook serves as a practical reference source to help plan for long term sustainability, ensuring that commitment and resources are available at levels sufficient for a program to remain viable and effective as long as it is needed, by: 1) creating a framework for evaluating sustainability – using a combination of lifecycle phases and sustainability facets; 2) identifying goals, characteristics and common roadblocks for each phase in each facet; 3) providing guidance for moving programs to the next phase; 4) highlighting case studies and additional resources to help programs; and 5) including the full survey results as a reference source and benchmark.

In 2020, IMLS funded a second phase of *It Takes a Village* work, It Takes a Village in Practice (ITAViP) [3], in which we are working to create and pilot an adaptable set of tools (e.g. templates, checklists, discussion and process guides, etc.) for practical use based on the framework laid out in the ITAV Guidebook. The results of the project will strengthen the ability of libraries, archives, and museums to sustain community supported OSS programs, which are critical to managing and growing local and national digital infrastructures. *ITAV in Practice* will enable all stakeholders in an OSS program to participate in an assessment of each facet of sustainability at current phases, develop balanced strategies to advance sustainability goals, and integrate sustainability plans into other organizational planning efforts.

Now in its second year, the ITAViP program team has collaborated with stakeholders from a wide range of different types and sizes of OSS programs through a series of four workshops to address each of the four facets of sustainability. Several OSS programs, including Quire, ePADD, Folio, and VuFind, have beta tested the tools for each facet to identify gaps, challenges, and unaddressed needs. In the summer of 2022, *ITAV in Practice* as a whole will be piloted with two additional OSS programs: Samvera and Mukurtu [4].

# Challenges

We have faced several challenges during the ITAViP project. Chief among them was the need to pivot from a series of in-person information gathering and tool development events to a set of virtual meetings due to COVID-19. The planning and agenda development process needed to be completely re-thought; for example, we intended that the workshop attendees would do a good bit of brainstorming around identifying and developing new tools for each facet. It became clear as we planned the virtual events that instead, creating a set of strawman tools for workshop attendees to critique would gather more effective feedback. This change shifted the burden on to the ITAViP project team to identify, and in many cases create, tools for workshop attendees to evaluate in advance of each meeting.

We also have several silver linings from the pivot to virtual events. First, was our ability to increase the number of participants, as budgets for travel and accommodations were no longer a concern. We were also able to engage participants who may have a hard time traveling or attending in-person events, including primary caregivers, international attendees, and people with disabilities. In our follow-up surveys after each workshop, some attendees lamented the loss of the serendipitous conversations that spring up at in-person gatherings, while others noted that it was easier for them to say yes to virtual events.

Early in the grant period, we sent out a call for interested programs to volunteer to beta test or pilot the toolkit. We had an excellent response rate, with many programs volunteering to beta test multiple facets. As with our in-person workshops, the realities of living and working with COVID struck in the eighteen months between programs’ expressing interest and then being asked to test. During that time, program leadership and priorities shifted, leading to several of our beta testers having to withdraw from testing. The ITAViP program team also counted on programs beta testing more of the toolkit than they were eventually able to, leaving many tools untested at the end of our beta period. Of course, changes in leadership, priorities, funding streams, etc., are events that should lead to a renewed focus on sustainability planning. It can be very difficult, however, to advocate for long-range planning when the short-term feels as though it is in crisis.

# Lessons Learned

Despite these challenges and setbacks, the ITAV Toolkit is on track to launch successfully later in 2022. The core lessons we have learned about building, testing, and sharing community-developed resources during this difficult time include:

* Pivoting to virtual does not mean just holding the same planned in-person event online. The ITAViP team worked to assess and select virtual collaboration tools; create an agenda that gave all participants equal opportunity for participation and engagement while also accommodating shorter online attention spans; and provide advance readings, Q&A sessions, and tools to ensure that time spent during the meeting was not spent getting everyone up to speed on the agenda and process.
* A pivot to virtual does not have to mean an event is less than; rather, it may open participation to new audiences, including staff that are unable to travel, junior staff without travel funding, and others.
* It is easy to overestimate what the conversion rate from interested parties to participating stakeholders will be, especially over long-time spans. Continual engagement, low barriers to participation, and support from the program team can all help mitigate attrition rates.

Through ITAV in Practice, we expect that libraries, archives, museums, and academic institutions will be able to take a long-term view of the OSS they use, so software is created not just to fix a problem, but rather to endure and provide functionality for as long as it is needed.

# REFERENCES

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