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Recommended Citation

Caffarella, Rosemary S.; Muhamad, Mazanah; and Suhami, Norhasmilia (2011). "Sustainable Program Development in Cancer Education: A Case Study," *Adult Education Research Conference*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2011/roundtables/3>

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Sustainable Program Development in Cancer Education: A Case Study

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Keywords: Sustainability, Program Planning, Cultural Differences

Abstract: The purpose of this session is to first discuss a study in progress on the factors and elements that either assist or impede the planning and implementation of a breast cancer education program in a middle-income country in Southeast Asia. Second, participants will be asked to share similar studies they are aware of or have been involved with, and practical experiences they have had with programs of this nature.

One of the frustrating things about initiating new programs focused on education and social change in low- and middle-income countries is the high failure rate of those programs with an average life expectancy of two to three years. In other words, although most of these programs start out with good intentions, the people involved are not able to sustain what they have initiated, even when they appear to be making good inroads into addressing important problems, such as literacy, health, and rural development. The purpose of the study to be discussed, which is still in progress, is to explore the concept of sustainability in the development, implementation, and on-going evaluation of a cancer education program in a middle-income and multicultural country in Southeast Asia. The major objectives are: (1) to identify those factors and elements that are critical in moving toward a sustainable program, and (2) to ascertain those factors and elements that act as impediments to building a sustainable program.

For the purpose of this study, sustainability is defined as a program that is addressing important issues and problems, is stable, has an appropriate organizational home, and structures in place that will carry the program activities into the future regardless of a change in program leadership. In addition, the program must have continuing and adequate funding for staffing, facilities, travel, and needed materials and supplies (Ellais and Schateph, 2009; Seya, 2005; Viezzer, 2006). A conceptual framework was constructed prior to initiating the study through an in-depth review of the literature, which is grounded in a number of fields (for example, adult education, agriculture, community development and health education), to gain a sense of what elements and factors have been previously identified (Caffarella, 2009; Cervero and Wilson, 2006; Data, 2002; Forester, 1989, 1999; Friedman, 2008, Regan, 2005; Vaux and Lund, 2003). The majority of this work consists of theoretical and conceptual writings, versus data based research.

This literature, on program planning and sustainability related to social programs suggests that the way in which many new programs are currently planned and implemented does not necessarily take into account the cultural differences in middle- and low-income settings, nor the background and experiences of the people with whom they are planning (Caffarella, 2009). Questions have been raised about the short term nature of funding, and the expectations of the funders that complex changes can be made within these funding cycles (Rodgers, 2003). There is also a tendency to introduce quick solutions in response to these time frames, and find a fast acting magic bullet that will solve the problems being addressed (Paul, 2010).

The program being studied provides education and support services to cancer patients and their families, awareness programs for the general public, materials in the language of the country, and training for volunteers and health care professionals. In addition there is a active reserach program related to cancer education. The study is qualitative in nature. Three major sources being used in the data collection for this study include: document analysis, semi-structured individual interviews, and group interviews. Four types of key informants are being interviewed: a) staff and volunteers who have worked with the program since its inception in 2003 or have played key roles at times during the program; b) representatives of funding organizations; c) administrators not actively involved with the program, but who had or have decision-making authority over the program; and d) health care providers. To date, 21 individual interviews and three group interviews have been completed, for a total of 30 participants. These interviews are in the process of being transcribed.

A very preliminary review of the data has been completed, using the nine transcriptions that have been completed, including initial coding, and notes related to possible categories and themes. Two ideas have been consistent throughout these interviews. The first is the importance of building relationships as foundational to ensuring a sustainable program. As one respondent observed: "I think relationships are the most important, the building of relationships...The objectives will be achieved much easier when you have the relationships in place". Second, taking into account cultural differences also seemed key. As highlighted by another respondent: "I think the first thing that people should note is that this is a multicultural country...People have different religious backgrounds and also different racial backgrounds...In the rural area, the people are very sensitive about their religion and we should be careful not to offend what they do."

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