

**National New Communities Program Sustainability Study:
Sustainability Factors and Partnerships**

Lydia I. Marek, Ph.D. and Jay A. Mancini, Ph.D.
Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
Blacksburg, VA 24061

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INTRODUCTION

When collaboration succeeds, new networks and norms for civic engagements are established and the primary focus of work shifts from parochial interests to the broader concerns of the community. Collaboration... not only achieves results in addressing... substantive issues... it also builds...[civic community]" (Chrislip & Larson, 1994, p. 13).

Our specific interest in sustainability is in the understanding of its components and how it is achieved, maintained, and enhanced. We began our sustainability research in 1996 with data collected from 92 community-based programs funded by CSREES/USDA through the annual congressional appropriation for the National Children, Youth and Families at Risk (CYFAR) Initiative. This funding was distributed to Land Grant University Cooperative Extension services over a period of five years with the purpose of developing community-based programs to serve at risk children, youth, and families. Qualitative and quantitative data on sustainability were collected at two years, four years, and six years post CYFAR/USDA funding. From this data we developed and refined a conceptual sustainability framework (Mancini & Marek, 2004) that was further informed by the existing literature on sustainability, a nationwide organizational change survey of 6,000 program professionals (Betts, Peterson, Marczak, & Richmond, 2002) and a quantitative survey of 250 program professionals (Marek, Mancini, Earthman, & Brock, 2002). The result of this research program is the following seven-factor conceptual framework (Mancini & Marek, 2004):

- 1. Leadership Competence:** Leaders are committed to the program, communicate a clear mission, and are able to develop, early in the program life-cycle, a realistic program plan with multiple strategies for sustainability.
- 2. Effective Collaboration:** Collaborators include key community stakeholders that share a common vision for the program and understand that their responsibilities include providing resources, program development and implementation, and program evaluation.
- 3. Understanding the Community:** Program developers know community needs and assets through regular assessments and develop programs in which the community is involved in and supportive of.
- 4. Demonstrating and Disseminating Program Impact:** Evaluation plans are developed early and used to demonstrate program effectiveness, inform program modification, and disseminate program successes to key stakeholders and potential funders.
- 5. Strategic Funding:** Funding is sufficient for program operations and there are plans in place for obtaining additional long-term funding.
- 6. Staff Involvement and Integration:** Staff is committed to the program, is involved at all levels of program operation, is flexible and creative in their approaches, and are well qualified and trained to work on the program.

7. Program Responsiveness: Programs are responsive to changing community needs and resources.

It is this most current rendition of the sustainability framework that we implemented with community-based programs funded by CSREES/USDA through the CYFAR-USDA New Communities Program Initiative. Similar to the original CYFAR Youth at Risk and State Strengthening Initiative, funding was distributed through Land Grant University Cooperative Extension services for a period of five years with the purpose of developing community-based programs for at risk children and their families.

In addition to examining the sustainability of the 14 New Communities Programs one (nine states) and two (five states) years after their initial five years of funding ended, partnerships and community collaborations are also explored to better understand who community partners are, what their involvement in programs is, and how they contribute to the success of the sustained NCP projects. Partnerships and collaboration has been a key ingredient in USDA-CSREES funded projects for at risk youth and families and warrant special consideration. Therefore, this report addresses the following questions:

- I. To what degree are NCP projects sustaining community based programs for at-risk children, youth, and families?
- II. What are the factors favoring sustainability of community based programs?
- III. What is the particular role of community based and faith based program partnerships in sustaining CYFAR community projects?
- IV. What is Cooperative Extension's role in the sustainability of these programs?

METHODS

Procedures

In September of 2000 and 2001, 14 states completed their five years of USDA/CSREES New Communities Funding. A point of contact for each of the 14 states was identified via their program closeout reports and then confirmed with CSREES/USDA. All points of contact were e-mailed a survey and asked to complete it. Follow-up e-mails were sent to non-respondents. Ultimately, all states responded and completed surveys except for the state of Michigan. For one state, three program contacts responded and for two states, two program contacts responded. These quantitative responses were averaged and reported. [For the purposes of this report, we are making the assumption that Michigan is no longer active since no response was received although at least three attempts were made to gather this information.] This provided a program response for 13 projects or 93% response rate. Results reported are based on 13 projects except for the percentage of sustained projects which is reported for all 14 projects.

Instrument

The Sustainability Survey was constructed based on information obtained from qualitative and quantitative data collected for the Youth at Risk Sustainability Study (Mancini & Marek, 1998; Marek, Mancini, & Brock, 1999; Marek, Mancini, Earthman, & Brock, 2002). It includes items pertaining to program status, goals, programs, number of sites and participants, Cooperative Extension involvement, partnerships, and facilitators and obstacles to sustainability.

Current program functioning as well as changes since the program completed its funding one to two years prior (at the end of its original funding) is assessed. In addition, respondents were also asked to complete the Program Sustainability Index (PSI). The PSI is a 53 item measure of the seven Sustainability Factors (Mancini & Marek, 2004).

Data Analysis

Data were entered in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) and frequencies are reported for all items. Qualitative data was thematically analyzed and are reported in the appropriate sections throughout this report to provide more descriptive responses to the quantitative questions.

NCP Program Description

The majority of these NCP programs (65%) are located in relatively small communities with populations between 2,501 and 50,000 whereas larger urban areas account for 18% of these programs (see Table 1).

Table 1: Community size where New Communities Programs were located

Population Of Community	Percent
Less than 2500	15%
Between 2501 and 50,000	77%
Between 50,001 and 250,000	8%

Respondents were asked which of the following types of youth oriented programming was offered through their projects and are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Aspects of current NCP programming

Encouraging youth to form friendships with peers and to be part of a supportive community where collaborative learning is encouraged. Youth also bond with one or more caring adults who encourage and help them grow in positive ways.	92%
Providing many opportunities for project work, evaluation and feedback. Youth develop skills using hands-on learning approaches and learn how to transfer these skills to other life situations.	77%
Encouraging members to use their skills to improve others' lives by mentoring younger members, identifying community needs and participation in community service projects.	77%
Providing youth with many decision-making and leadership experiences including serving as a club officer, mentor, teacher, teen ambassador, and teen leader, among others.	62%

RESULTS

I. To what degree are NCP projects sustaining community based programs for at-risk children, youth, and families?

The resounding response to this question is “fully.” In determining the current status of these programs, three aspects of sustainability were measured: 1) perceived sustainability, 2) program activity, and 3) the ability of the program to meet the needs of at risk youth and their

families. These variables reflect, to a degree, our definition of sustainability involving competency, capacity, and continuity over time. Frequencies for these items are reported below.

1. Program Activity:

Almost all (n=13/14 or 93%) programs continue to be active one, or two, years post CYFAR/USDA funding (with the assumption that the status of Michigan’s program is inactive). Of the 13 active programs:

- Thirty-one (31%) percent (n=4) reported expanded activities.
- Forty-one (39%) percent (n=5) reported that activity levels were maintained.
- Thirty-one (31%) percent (n=4) reported reduced activities.

One project that reported reduced activities went on to state:

“They have semi-sustained the ... program with some grant funding to some degree. The one dedicated staffer during CYFAR funding period is part-time now instead of full-time. Overall, they are really back to where they were before CYFAR funding regarding programming for at-risk youth.”

2. Perceived Sustainability:

More than two-thirds (69%) of the active projects reported that their program was “Mostly” (46% or n=6) to “Completely” (23% or n=3) sustained and 31% (n=4) reported it was “partially” sustained.

3. Ability of the Program to Meet the Needs of At Risk Youth and their Families:

Sixty-nine (69%) percent of active projects reported that their program was “Mostly” (46% or n=6) to “Fully” (23% or n=3) meeting the needs of at risk children, youth, and/or families while 31% (n=4) reported “Somewhat” meeting their needs.

Overall, these programs continue to operate and to retain their original goal of serving at risk children, youth, and families. However, when respondents were asked whether they experienced obstacles in sustaining their programs, 69% (n=9) reported that there were obstacles to sustaining their projects while 31% (n=4) reported no obstacles. Of those that did report obstacles, 71% reported them as “somewhat” and 29% reported them as “very much” of a problem for project continuity. However, only 9% reported that their projects were not actively working to resolve these obstacles. Moreover, 92% (n=12) of respondents are “Somewhat” (46%) or “Very Much” (46%) confident that their program will be active five years from now.

When asked when their project began actively planning for project survival, more than half reported planning during the initial project proposal or during the first year. An additional one-third began planning during the second or third year of funding and only one project began planning during their fourth year of funding.

II. What are the factors favoring sustainability of community based programs?

The purpose behind the development of the Sustainability Framework was to identify what contributes to and detracts from program sustainability. Thus, for this study, the first level of sustainability assessment involved identifying the presence of the framework factors within

current program functioning. These factors include: Leadership Competence, Understanding the Community, Effective Collaborations, Demonstrating and Disseminating Program Impact, Strategic Funding, Staff Involvement and Integration, and Program Responsiveness.

1. LEADERSHIP COMPETENCE

The most commonly reported sources of leadership for these programs were Cooperative Extension (77%), schools (46%), community coalitions (39%), community agencies (31%), and religious or faith-based organizations (15%). When asked about their current leadership's effectiveness, 100% reported that their leader established the project's mission and vision, planned within the first two years for project sustainability and continued planning, developed and followed a realistic project plan, and have identified alternative strategies for project survival. As project informants stated with regard to their sustainability:

“The plan for a well thought out community development project with fiscal and program sustainability institutionalized from the proposal stage. This project was based on ... first SACC (school age child care) projects funded in 1991. They are still fully sustained.”

“Planning was done from the time of proposal writing to the end of the project funding.”

“Shared leadership with program participants.”

2. EFFECTIVE COLLABORATION

Projects reported patterns of effective collaboration. When asked a series of questions about their collaboration, all reported the presence of a number of critical factors for effective collaboration. More specifically, the following items were responded to as “very much” occurring in their projects: local decision makers are project collaborators (77%); community service agencies are project collaborators (92%); collaborators are involved in program design (62%), collaborators are involved in program implementation (69%); collaborators are involved in program evaluation (67%); Collaborators share responsibility for providing program resources (77%); collaborators share credit for project successes (83%); collaborators have clearly defined roles and responsibilities (54%); and that there is a shared vision among collaborators (69%). Only one project reported that collaborators are not at all involved in program design, implementation, and evaluation. As project informants stated in regards to their sustainability:

“While there are “bumpy times” in general, each agency brings its best resources to the table to do what each agency could not do individually. We work together on a shared vision, even if our expertise and methodologies might be different.”

“We work together to reach similar goals and to prevent reinventing of the wheel or toe-stepping communicating plans. We write grants together to ensure continued funding for our programs.”

“The projects we were involved in were for the most part autonomous entities with whom we collaborated. The factor that has and will contribute to the continuation of the project is the capacity building that occurred during the project.”

3. UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY

Community needs are regularly assessed by 12 of the 13 active projects and all projects either “somewhat” or “very much” assess community resources/assets regularly. In addition, all projects either “somewhat” or “very much” reported that their project addresses key community needs, are effectively utilizing community resources, match community needs and resources, and account for diversity in their community. Only one active project does not have community members involved at all in program design or implementation while nine projects report having strong local governmental support. As project informants stated with regard to their sustainability:

“We have sustained because of the commitment of the agencies that provided the program site to continue programming of this nature in their local community.”

We have sustained because “of dedicated community members who have taken what they have learned and have leveraged that information to continue their community efforts.”

“Sustainability will continue as long as the community needs out of school time childcare and enrichment for our 5-13 year olds. The community collaboration is designed to continue to meet this need.”

4. DEMONSTRATING AND DISSEMINATING PROGRAM IMPACT

The majority (12 of the 13) of projects reported developing evaluation plans prior to implementing programs and nine projects “very much” demonstrate project effectiveness through evaluations. All but one project conducted evaluations on a regular basis and all but two projects use evaluation results to modify programming. As project informants stated with regard to their sustainability:

“... NCP evaluation gave ... program legitimate successful standing in academic circles as well.”

“Proven to be effective.”

“Emphasis on evaluating youth outcomes.”

“Keep a flow of participants and share in promotion and divulging program information and activities.”

“Relationships and telling our story. We have to keep talking about the needs, the process and the outcomes. People get excited about these kinds of issues, but we have to make them known.

5. STRATEGIC FUNDING

Long-term funding support was found to be more stable than for past CYFAR projects. Nine projects reported that their funding is sufficient for current project operations decreasing to six projects for two years and four projects for three and four more years. Nine projects also reported sufficient funds for hiring and retaining quality staff. Project informants reported that they receive the majority of project monetary support from Grants (33%),

Cooperative Extension (25%), Contracts (17%), User fees (8%), and Schools (8%) although they receive some level of monetary support from most of their collaborators [Religious or faith-based organizations – 17%; local businesses – 17%; United Way – 8%; Private donations – 25%; Fundraising – 33%]. As project informants stated with regard to explaining their sustainability:

“Grants will continue to be important in specific programming.”

“Seeking and writing other grants that ‘fit’ the program goals and community needs quite well.”

6. STAFF INVOLVEMENT AND INTEGRATION

Projects appeared to have effective staffing patterns, with all projects reporting that project staff were either “somewhat” or “very much” committed to the project mission, vision, and goals, are qualified to work on the project, and are involved in program design and program decision making. More than one-third (39%) of project respondents indicated that there was enough staff “all of the time” with an additional 39% reporting there was enough staff “sometimes.” Only 23% reported that there was “rarely” or “never” enough staff to support to program. It appears harder to have enough volunteers to support their programs with 39% reporting “rarely” or “never” having enough volunteers to support their programs. Additionally, 54% of respondents reported a decrease in paid staff and 23% reported a decrease in volunteers since CYFAR-NCP funding ended. However, 46% reported the same or an increase in paid staff and 77% reported the same or an increase in volunteers. As project informants stated with regard to their sustainability:

“... High quality, well-educated, dedicated staff.”

“Competent staff who are housed in the community are critical to sustainability.”

“Staff commitment and continuity.”

7. PROGRAM RESPONSIVENESS

All active projects have gone through some changes since CYFAR-NCP funding ended. Typical changes include: 1) changing program goals (77%), 2) program expansion (69%) or reduction (54%) in programming, and 3) increasing the number of sites (31%) or participants (46%) or decreasing the number of sites (39%) or participants (46%). These adaptations were primarily made in response to meet changing community needs, to expand their participant base, to meet participant needs, because new sites or communities were added, or because of a reduction in funding. Five programs (42%) reported having to eliminate some programs since the end of their NCP funding. As project informants stated with regard to their sustainability:

“Both [the program]... and CES have both “grown” and flexed in order to make this program work.”

III. What is the role of community based and faith based program partnerships in sustaining CYFAR community projects?

“The partnerships established through NCP created a strong foundation for programs to be self-sustaining. The entities within the communities used the lessons learned/evaluation information from the NCP to obtain other funding to sustain the program. Some have changed form due to staffing, funding, or other factors, but have succeeded in maintaining a place in the community and a connection with the University.”

Respondents reported that they collaborate with a variety of organizations for the maintenance and/or expansion of their programs. See Table 3 for agencies/organizations that are currently involved with the NCP programs on an on-going basis.

Table 3: Current Collaborators/Partners

Partner	%	#
CES (local or state)	100%	13
4-H Programs	93%	12
Schools	77%	10
Land Grant Universities	77%	10
Other community service organizations	62%	8
Government Agencies	54%	7
Local Businesses	39%	5
Local Colleges	39%	5
Religious-Faith Based Institutions	31%	4
Civic Organizations	15%	2
YMCA/YWCA	15%	2
Other	12%	1
Boys and Girls Club	0%	0

Furthermore, since the ending of CYFAR-NCP funding, four projects reported increases in the number of collaborators while four reported decreases. However, the intensity of the involvement of the collaborators in their projects was either maintained by seven projects or increased by four projects while only two projects reported collaborators decreasing the intensity of their involvement.

The type of activities that are being provided by these collaborators/partners are more fully described in Table 4 and are divided into three categories of partners: Cooperative Extension, Community-based organizations, and Religious/Faith-based organizations. The first number in each column are the number of projects who view those partners as “Very Much” involved in that particular activity while the second number is the number of projects who view those partners as “Somewhat” involved in that activity. [One active project did not complete this section and two projects did not complete it on community-based or religious based organizations.]

Table 4: Involvement of Partners in NCP Projects activities – “Very Much”/”Somewhat”

PROJECT ACTIVITIES	COOPERATIVE EXTENSION (based on 12 projects)	COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (based on 11 projects)	RELIGIOUS-FAITH BASED ORGANIZATIONS (based on 11 projects)
Training and/or workshops for project personnel	8 / 3	2 / 7	0 / 2
Grant proposal writing	6 / 4	3 / 3	0
Evaluation of Programs	8 / 1	3 / 4	0 / 1
Provision of Space	2 / 3	7 / 3	0 / 2
Curriculum development	6 / 5	1 / 6	0 / 1
Provision of program materials-equipment	4 / 6	3 / 6	0 / 1
Involved in a formal coalition for project	6 / 5	5 / 4	3 / 0
Advisory Board member	3 / 4	5 / 1	1 / 1
Fiscal management	6 / 3	2 / 6	0
Direct funding support (cash)	2 / 2	3 / 4	1 / 1
In-kind support (non-monetary)	6 / 4	6 / 3	2 / 2
Supervision of staff and volunteers	6 / 4	3 / 5	0 / 1
Provision of personnel	6 / 5	4 / 6	0 / 2
Program implementation	8 / 3	5 / 4	0 / 2
Program leadership	7 / 2	4 / 4	0 / 2
Volunteer activities	5 / 4	2 / 6	0 / 4
Recruitment of program participants	5 / 4	5 / 4	0 / 4

From this table, one can see that Cooperative Extension is involved in all activities for at least three-quarters of projects except for: Provision of Space, Advisory Board Member, Curriculum development, and Direct Funding. Community-based organizations are involved in all activities for at least half the projects and Religious/Faith based organizations are at least “Somewhat” involved in all the activities but Grant Proposal Writing and Fiscal Management. When specifically asked what partnerships are contributing to program success, informants responded:

“A key to success of ... is the trust and partnerships in the community which have helped make programs available in Spanish and made marketing community wide.”

“The partnership is key to the success of this community development project and the continued support of the after school enrichment program. The partnership is responsible for all program fiscal, and board development implementation.”

“Having diverse partners. Each may not have the means to contribute at a sustainable level but collectively the partners may be able to maintain the program.”

IV. What is Cooperative Extension's role in the sustainability of these programs?

“Extension is seen as an “expert” in this field in our community because of what we know, do, and contribute. Maintaining that reputation is hard but ensures that we get the work done.”

To explain the high level of continuing sustainability and high confidence in future sustainability for all projects that were funded through CYFAR (YAR, State Strengthening, New Communities Projects), we continue to suggest an “eighth” Sustainability Factor unique to these programs—the contributions and commitment of Cooperative Extension.

Commitment to Sustainability and to Serving At risk Populations

In addition to continuing to provide resources to these programs, Cooperative Extension is committed to serving at risk audiences and developing sustainable community-based programs. Almost all (n=12) respondents in the sample “strongly agreed” (62%) or “agreed” (31%) that working on this project was a part of their ongoing work plan. Additionally, 11 projects “strongly agreed” (n=8) or “agreed” (n=3) that serving at risk audiences is an expectation of their organization or agency.

Integration within the Cooperative Extension System

Cooperative Extension was instrumental in sustaining many of these programs through integration into the Cooperative Extension system. Findings on integration revealed that:

- Nine out of 13 projects reported that their program had been “Somewhat” (n=1) or “To a great extent” (n=8) integrated within their state’s Cooperative Extension System.
- Eleven out of 13 projects reported that youth in their program had been “Somewhat” (n=8) or “To a great extent” (n=3) integrated into ongoing 4-H programs.
- Ten out of 13 projects reported that NCP programs are “Somewhat” (n=4) or “To a great extent” (n=6) supported by County Cooperative Extension Agents.
- Cooperative Extension provides leadership to five projects, shares leadership with collaborators for three projects, serves in an advisory/resource role to four projects and has no present involvement in only one project.

4-H Clubs

In addition, 10 of 13 projects reported that a 4-H club is part of their program and for those who do not have a 4-H club, nine projects have participants participate in a 4-H club. In response to questions regarding the extent that youth in their programs have been integrated into on-going 4-H programs, 11 project informants responded that they have “somewhat” or “to a great extent.”

Program Intensity

When asked if their programs offer high context and/or low context youth development, results demonstrated that 12 project informants “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they offer high context youth development while eight projects “disagreed” or “strongly disagreed” that they offered low context youth development.

CONCLUSIONS

Consistent with our earlier research, it was found that the sustainability of almost all CYFAR-USDA funded programs continue one and two years post funding. It appears that only one state did not sustain their efforts. The majority of active projects continued to maintain or expand their programs; more than 2/3 report that their project was mostly or completely sustained and more than 2/3 reported that their program was mostly to fully meeting the needs of at risk children, youth or families. In addition, respondents are confident that their projects will still be active five years into the future. Findings on Cooperative Extension involvement revealed a strong ongoing commitment to serving at risk youth and families post NCP funding. This commitment is further supported by actions such as the vast provision of resources to support, conduct, and direct these programs as well as the partial to complete integration of the majority of these programs within the Cooperative Extension system and within the community. It is suggested that the presence of Cooperative Extension and the community partnerships that were developed prior to and during the NCP funding is largely responsible for providing these high levels of sustainability and confidence.

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About the Authors

Lydia I. Marek, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist in Human Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). She received her doctoral degree from Virginia Tech in Marriage and Family Therapy. Her research has been published in *Journal of Community Practice*, *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, *Journal of Extension*, *Family Therapy*, and in *Looking Back, Looking Forward: Lifecourse Unfolding of Parenthood*. Dr. Marek is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and a Certified Family Life Educator (National Council on Family Relations). In addition to program sustainability, her current research focuses on prevention program evaluation, community needs and resources assessment, and community collaboration assessment. (lmarek@vt.edu)

Jay A. Mancini, Ph.D., is Professor of Human Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech). He received his doctoral degree from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. His research has been published in many social and behavioral science periodicals including *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *Family Relations: Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *Journal of Community Practice*, *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, and *Human Relations*. In addition to program sustainability, his current research focuses on community capacity and civic engagement. Dr. Mancini is a Fellow of the National Council on Family Relations. (mancini@vt.edu)