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Effective Approaches for Community Engagement and Behaviour Change

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Summary

Community-based behaviour change is widely considered as a key component of progressing sustainability. Increasingly, educational engagement programs are being delivered to build the capacity of community members to adopt more sustainable behaviours. But just how successful is this approach in achieving long term change?

To try and answer this question, the National Centre for Sustainability (NCS) at Swinburne University of Technology conducted a longitudinal evaluation of the City of Whitehorse's Sustainable Ambassadors program. For the last two years, this innovative program has trained community members to become 'change agents' within the context of their peer network of friends, neighbours, or workplace. Participation in the program requires each community member to learn about behaviour change theory and practice and then design and deliver community-based behaviour change projects.

The evaluation process included a survey of twenty five Sustainable Ambassador participants (56% response rate).

Key research findings indicated:

- 72% of participants self-reported their project as successful in achieving 'change'
- Targeting diverse community groups is an effective approach for integrating sustainable behaviour through the community
- Individuals who are organised in a group of like-minded people are more likely to remain committed to ongoing sustainability activities
- The majority of participants continued sustainability projects after their participation in the program
- Networking opportunities are important in supporting ongoing change after program completion

Objectives and methodology

Evaluation objectives

The key objectives of the evaluation research were to:

- Examine the effectiveness of participants' projects
- Find out which parts of the program worked well and why and what needs improvement
- Determine if participants engage in further behaviour change or sustainability activities (or projects) beyond the duration of the program

Methodology and data limitations

Research data and information was collected through a series of structured telephone interviews. As this analysis is based on the self-reporting of interview participants, the methodology relies on cooperation and honesty. Self-reporting bias can occur and influence the viability of the generated data.

An overview of the Sustainable Ambassadors Program

The Sustainable Ambassadors program equips community members with the knowledge and skills to affect community change within their neighbourhood or social setting. By merging knowledge about their local community with knowledge from sustainability professionals, Sustainable Ambassadors can effectively target the leverage points of their community. The program includes workshops from professionals of different sustainability fields (including transport, waste reduction, green cleaning, sustainable consumption, energy efficiency) and workshops on behaviour change. Each participant is asked to design, conduct and evaluate their own small behaviour change project.

The Sustainable Ambassadors Program was delivered three times (2009–10) with approximately 15 participants per program. While the first two programs were open to all community members, the third phase focussed on members of the Chinese-speaking community. While some participants of the third program were English speaking, translators were provided for non English speakers.

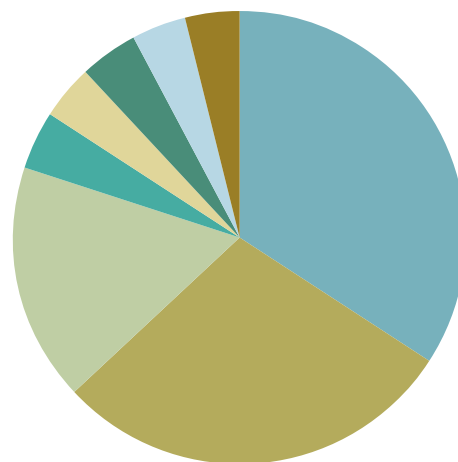
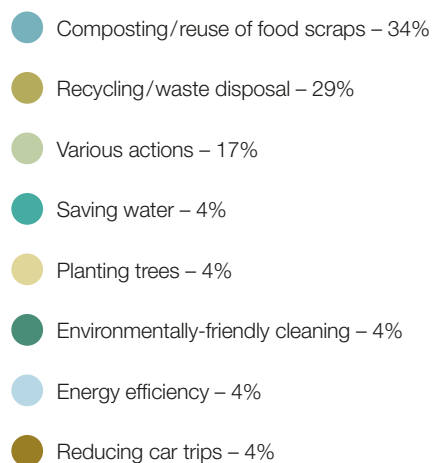
The first three phases of the program were funded through the Victorian Government Sustainability Fund in partnership with the City of Whitehorse.

Findings

72% of participants self-reported their project as successful in achieving 'change'.

The majority of projects undertaken by Sustainable Ambassadors were described as successful or partly successful in achieving a lasting behaviour change. A number of participants reported that their project 'triggered' further behaviour change, e.g. from the recycling of food scraps to further recycling. More than half of the projects are still running.

Behaviours targeted by Ambassadors' projects

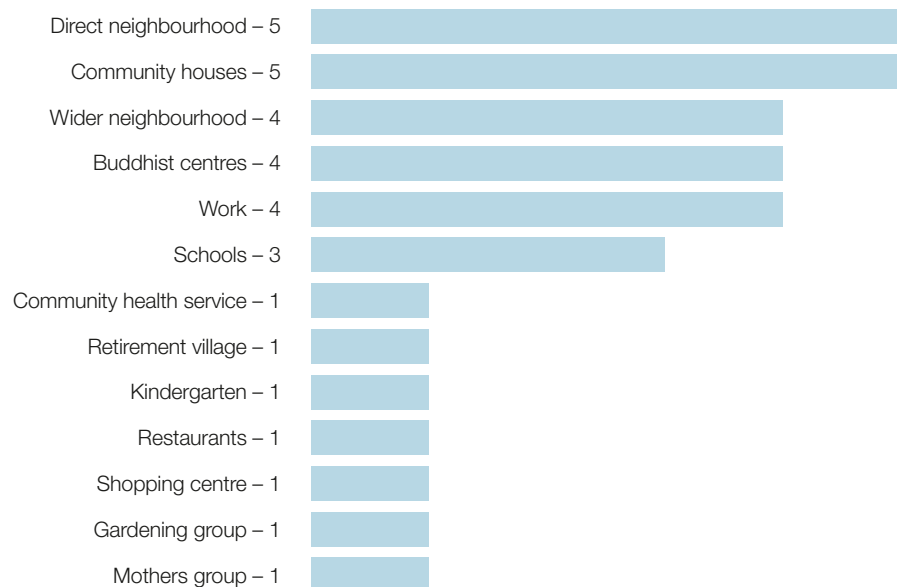


The 'empowering' nature of the program and its applied project work is significant in the case of Ambassador participants. Findings show that five Ambassadors were inspired by the program to change their vocation and are now working in the sustainability field (for example one Ambassador is now working as a Home Energy Assessor).

Targeting diverse community groups is an effective approach for integrating sustainable behaviour through the community.

Change projects can be effective in engaging with particular groups that may otherwise be hard to reach through more traditional 'top-down' engagement methods.

Ambassadors' projects: Target groups



Participants who have strong links in communities or social groups often generate innovative approaches to successfully communicate sustainability within their group or context. For example, a Chinese-speaking Ambassador highlighted the links between sustainability and Buddhist values as a means of reaching the members of a local Buddhist association.

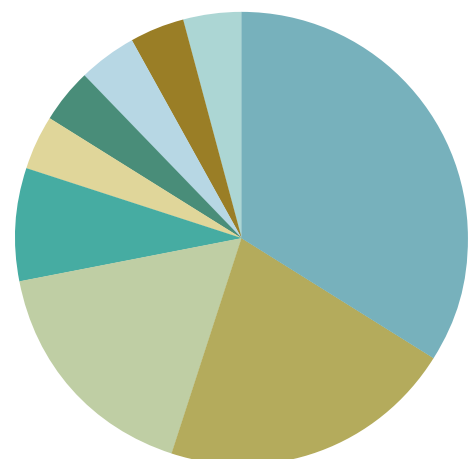
Individuals who are organised in a group of like-minded people are more likely to remain committed to ongoing sustainability projects.

Findings show that engaging with social groups is an effective means of maintaining commitment amongst participants beyond the duration of engagement programs. The evaluation found out that two thirds of participants are organised in social groups – half local groups and half in international groups (such as Friends of the Earth International). Social groups not only provide a means of exchanging ideas, but also provide a supportive environment to maintain the commitment and resolve of change agents in implementing projects.

Groups are also the most important way of staying connected with each other. It is of interest to program funders that participants remain committed and motivated after the end of the program. A key recommendation for program providers is to facilitate networking between participants from the onset of the program, in order to nurture a community of active change agents. To facilitate networking, it is suggested that regular alumni meetings are held and new participants are offered opportunities to exchange ideas with established change agents.

Groups to which Ambassadors belong

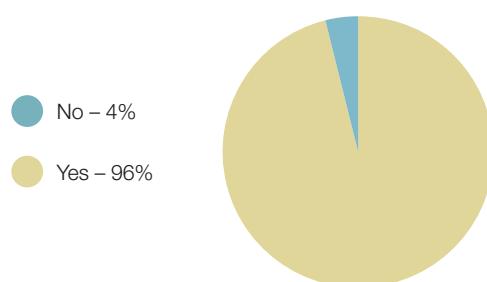
- No group – 34%
- Permaculture group – 21%
- Sustainability Street – 17%
- Tzu Chi – 8%
- Buddhist Light International – 4%
- Friends of the Earth – 4%
- Community House – 4%
- Local sustainability group – 4%
- Green Team at work – 4%



The majority of participants continued sustainability projects after their participation in the program.

The research shows that most of the Ambassador participants have been active in further sustainability projects since completing the Ambassador program. Of the 22 projects, 14 were still running and seven were completed. This is important as this ongoing work does not necessitate the ongoing financial support from funding bodies.

Did sustainability activities continue beyond participation in the Ambassador program?



In addition to the program's project work, Ambassador participants continue to be active in various fields: recycling, waste reduction, energy efficiency, sustainable homes, sustainable consumption, permaculture and various Sustainability Street projects. Seven Ambassadors are actively raising awareness about sustainability by giving talks at community houses. In effect, these people are acting as "multipliers".

Multiplier effect

Multiplier effect refers to a person who has knowledge of sustainable behaviours and communicates their knowledge to others in their social setting, thereby expanding the number of people who become aware and/or practice the desired behaviours. Ambassadors act as multipliers because they spread their knowledge in their social setting.

From the horse's mouth

"We did our project together as a family and retrofitted units at our Mother's retirement village. The impact of the open house and the subsequent retrofitting of 30 energy saving devices in 10 of the units, was so effective that, some months later, the owners of 57 of the 106 units in the village installed solar panels. The success of our project encouraged our son to change his profession and he is now working as a Home Energy Assessor."

Kathy's & Peter's story

"When people question how much contributions an individual can make, my standard response is that (as in anything in life), it all starts with one person making a difference. Achieve and influence, and most important of all – "lead by example".

My persistence touched many people at work and a number of them have started to support me by retrieving cans from general rubbish bins at work and approach staff who are not disposing cans in the recycling bins to do the right thing."

Bee Ling's story

"When I started to transfer my street to a Sustainability Street to contribute to the international Transition Town approach, some neighbours were not interested at first, but became [interested] after they heard that their other neighbours took part as well. This year I went to England and visited Totnes, the earliest Transition Town, and interviewed Rob Hopkins, the co-founder of Transition Towns. My vision is that the City of Whitehorse one day becomes a Transition Town as well."

Ben's story



The report was produced by:

The National Centre of Sustainability
Swinburne University of Technology

The National Centre for Sustainability (NCS) is a collaboration of six educational institutions across Australia. We provide educational leadership and work in partnership with industry, government and the community to undertake program delivery, resource development, project work and applied research to support the development of sustainable practices.

The NCS believes that behaviour change is the foundation for a sustainable community.

Partner with us!

We're interested in establishing new research partners to support knowledge and action to support sustainable behaviour change!

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