

Exploring The Essence And Sustainability Of Community Extension Programs In Philippine HEIs: A Grounded Theory Approach

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Abstract

This study examines the implementation of community extension programs in selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bukidnon, Philippines. Using a qualitative-descriptive design, the research integrates Interpretative Phenomenology and Grounded Theory to explore the lived experiences of six key informants—extension program heads, coordinators, and designated personnel—selected through data saturation. Grounded Theory procedures, including open, axial, and selective coding, guided the analysis of transcribed interview data. The study identified five major themes: the purpose of community extension, challenges in implementation, strategies for overcoming these challenges, best practices, and the essence of participants' experiences. Findings emphasize the importance of extension programs in advancing public service, fostering academic-community partnerships, supporting sustainable development, and enhancing educational engagement. The research also highlights the interconnected roles of policymakers, educators, and communities in ensuring program effectiveness. A key outcome of the study is the development of an Extension Sustainability Theory, which reflects the influence of social, economic, and political factors on the continuity and impact of community extension initiatives. This framework contributes to the ongoing discourse on education-driven community development and offers practical insights for institutions aiming to strengthen their extension practices.

Keywords: *Essence and Sustainability, Community Extension Programs, Higher Education Institutions, Grounded Theory Approach, Philippines*

1] INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education is expected to meet the growing demand for high-quality instruction that enables individuals to become economically productive, socially responsible, and capable of contributing to sustainable development. The global vision for education emphasizes not only cognitive and technical skills but also the social and emotional competencies necessary for peaceful and democratic societies, individual well-being, and inclusive economic growth. In the Philippines, higher education institutions (HEIs) play a pivotal role in achieving these goals through the tri-fold mandate of instruction, research, and extension, as mandated by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) [7]. To address local development needs, community extension programs have emerged as a vital component of higher education. These programs are implemented by state universities and colleges (SUCs) and private HEIs, often rooted in context-specific experiences, challenges, and best practices. In provinces like Bukidnon—a predominantly rural and geographically isolated area in Mindanao—community extension initiatives have become instrumental in bridging service gaps in livelihood, education, and social welfare. The incorporation of these programs into academic frameworks reflects CHED's commitment to mobilizing higher education for community development, as highlighted in CHED Memorandum Order No. 52, s. 2016 [3].

Republic Act 7722, also known as the Higher Education Act of 1994, institutionalized CHED's authority to guide HEIs in supporting national development goals through education and public service [1]. Within this context, extension services have been structured around four pillars: strengthened partnerships, programmed activities, community empowerment, and social responsibility. These pillars support outcomes such as self-employment, supplemental family income, enhanced living standards, and increased social awareness among faculty and students. In Bukidnon, many communities lack adequate access to essential services and livelihood opportunities. While some have benefited from public programs, the reach remains limited. The need for targeted interventions—especially in education, job training, and entrepreneurship—remains urgent. Stakeholder collaboration among academic institutions,

government agencies, and the private sector is essential to address this disparity. Extension programs can thus serve as tools for social transformation, particularly in marginalized communities where development remains uneven.

Moreover, community extension efforts are aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), notably those addressing poverty eradication, quality education, decent work and economic growth, and partnerships for development. These global goals call for integrated, grassroots interventions that promote empowerment and capacity-building. Through collaborative extension projects, HEIs can contribute meaningfully to the SDGs by facilitating inclusive development, knowledge transfer, and self-sufficiency at the community level. Historical records show that extension services in the Philippines date back to the Spanish colonial period, with formal national structuring beginning in 1952 [2]. Effective extension programming focuses on the needs of target communities, aims to foster behavioral and learning outcomes, and involves continuous monitoring and evaluation. In recent years, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has also emerged as a complementary approach, wherein private enterprises contribute to community development through outreach initiatives. CSR not only enhances brand reputation but also expands opportunities for shared value creation, especially in rural municipalities.

Community extension initiatives are not only about service delivery—they are also platforms for capacity-building and entrepreneurship. Many programs introduce green economic concepts and promote environmentally sustainable enterprises. These efforts align with the growing recognition of CSR within business administration, emphasizing that corporations must act as socially responsible actors within the communities they operate. When implemented effectively, extension programs can evolve into Strategic Business Units (SBUs) that reinforce local economies while fulfilling social mandates. However, the development and sustainability of these programs often face resource constraints. Effective implementation requires collaborative efforts among HEIs, communities, local government units (LGUs), and industry partners. The success of these initiatives is contingent upon active engagement from all stakeholders and the availability of adequate financial and logistical support.

This study emerges from the researcher's first-hand observations and professional experiences in Bukidnon, where various extension programs have demonstrated both promise and limitation. Drawing from industry practice and academic involvement, the researcher aims to explore the lived experiences, challenges, strategies, and best practices of selected SUCs and private HEIs in implementing community extension programs. This inquiry seeks to identify key determinants of success and failure in these initiatives and contribute to the generation of an emergent theory grounded in local realities. Ultimately, this research endeavors to provide empirical insights that inform policy and practice in community engagement. It aspires to enhance the role of school extension administrators and HEIs as agents of inclusive development. By documenting context-specific strategies and institutional approaches, the study seeks to promote evidence-based models for community extension that can be replicated or adapted across other underserved regions in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

2] METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design that integrated Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Grounded Theory (GT) to examine the implementation of community extension programs in selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bukidnon, Philippines. IPA was adopted to explore the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of key informants, while GT was employed to generate a theoretical framework based on patterns and themes emerging from the data. This methodological combination provided a comprehensive approach to both understanding individual perspectives and constructing grounded theoretical insights.

The research was conducted in Bukidnon, a mountainous and culturally diverse province in Northern Mindanao. Despite the presence of numerous HEIs—including 15 of 33 SUCs, 2 of 11 Local Universities and Colleges (LUCs), and 15 of 65 private HEIs in Region X—many communities still lack access to extension services, particularly marginalized Indigenous Peoples (IPs). The study purposively selected six HEIs—two SUCs, one state college, and three private HEIs. LUCs were excluded due to their lack of extension program implementation. From each institution, one key informant directly involved in extension programs, such as a school president, vice president for research and extension, or program coordinator, was selected. Inclusion was based on institutional engagement in extension activities and the informant's leadership role. Informed consent was secured from all participants.

Data was gathered and analyzed as shown in **Figure 1. Design of the Study**. Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting 20 to 30 minutes, using an interview guide with open-ended questions to encourage in-depth responses. A rapporteur assisted with audio recording and note-taking to ensure accurate documentation. The study received technical, content, and ethical clearance and formal permission from participating institutions. Coordination with informants was conducted via various communication channels. Ethical standards were strictly followed, including confidentiality assurances, voluntary participation, and secure data storage. Informed consent forms were signed, and participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw. Data were anonymized during transcription and permanently disposed of after analysis.

For data analysis, **Figure 2. Grounded Theory Building Process** were followed. Open coding was conducted to identify initial concepts from the transcripts, which were grouped into sub-themes. Axial coding then analyzed relationships between these sub-themes to form broader themes. Selective coding was used to identify a core category that connected all major themes, culminating in the development of a grounded theory that encapsulates the lived experiences, challenges, and strategies associated with implementing community extension programs.

3] RESULTS

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data collected through face-to-face interviews, audio recordings, and transcription. Thematic analysis, informed by Interpretative Phenomenology and Grounded Theory, was employed to generate five key themes: (1) The Purpose of Community Extension, (2) Challenges in Implementation, (3) Addressing Implementation Challenges, (4) Best Practices, and (5) The Essence of Experiences, referred in **Table 1. Summary of Themes and Subthemes**. These themes reflect the lived experiences and institutional practices of selected SUCs and private HEIs in Bukidnon.

Theme 1: The Purpose of Community Extension

Community extension programs are primarily driven by a shared institutional commitment to social responsibility, with a focus on marginalized sectors, including Indigenous Peoples in Bukidnon. Aligned with the CHED mandate, the programs serve not only as academic requirements but also as avenues for public service, community upliftment, and institutional accountability. Subtheme 1.1: Addressing Needs through Assessment. Programs are guided by needs assessment results, which ensure alignment with community priorities. One informant noted, "As a corporate social responsibility, we are giving back to the community..." emphasizing the institution's accountability to the public (Sermona et al., 2020). Subtheme 1.2: HEI Mandated Functions. The implementation of community extension reflects compliance with the CHED's tri-fold function: instruction, research, and extension (CMO No. 46, s. 2012). Institutions must demonstrate this engagement to pass evaluations and secure continued accreditation. Subtheme 1.3: Community-Centered Programming. Programs must cater to the diverse cultural and socio-economic conditions of target communities. Informants highlighted the importance of tailoring interventions to meet local needs, especially when working with Indigenous tribes [12].

Theme 2: Challenges in Implementation

Institutions face several barriers in executing extension programs, primarily due to logistical, financial, and human resource limitations. Subtheme 2.1: Initial Difficulties and Cultural Acceptance. Launching programs is hindered by cultural heterogeneity and initial resistance from local communities. Acceptance varies among tribal groups, complicating the implementation process. Subtheme 2.2: Budgetary Constraints. Financial support for extension activities is often limited or delayed, particularly in private HEIs or institutions with constrained government funding (Sermona et al., 2020). Subtheme 2.3: Limited Staff Competence. A shortage of trained personnel impedes implementation. Informants reported that their staff lacked the necessary training and expertise to manage community projects effectively.

Theme 3: Addressing Implementation Challenges

Despite constraints, institutions developed strategic responses to overcome these barriers. Subtheme 3.1: Benchmarking. Learning from other institutions through benchmarking allowed for the adoption of proven methods and increased program relevance [4]. Subtheme 3.2: Strategic Partnerships. Collaborations with LGUs, alumni, students, and NGOs strengthened program viability. LGUs often provided financial counterparts and logistical support, making programs more sustainable (Mores et al., 2019). Subtheme 3.3: Capacity Building for Staff. Training initiatives empowered staff with the skills necessary for effective implementation. Continuous professional development was seen as vital for success in extension work [7].

Theme 4: Best Practices in Community Extension

The study identified innovative and effective practices that contributed to the success of extension programs. Subtheme 4.1: Public Information Dissemination. Institutions used social media, university newsletters, and campus radio stations to inform stakeholders and promote transparency [7]. Subtheme 4.2: Livelihood and Economic Development. Livelihood projects such as coffee growing empowered communities to generate income and achieve self-sufficiency [11], [12]. Subtheme 4.3: Campus Expansion and Accessibility. Establishing satellite campuses improved access to education in remote areas, reflecting the institution's commitment to inclusive development [9].

Theme 5: The Essence of Experience

Extension work deeply influenced the professional and personal lives of implementers, fostering commitment, empathy, and cultural appreciation. Subtheme 5.1: Sense of Fulfilment. Participants found personal meaning in serving disadvantaged communities. Helping others reinforced their sense of purpose and professional identity [6]. Subtheme 5.2: Compassion and Commitment. Service rooted in compassion motivated extensionists to persevere through challenges. Their dedication was often driven by a profound desire to uplift others. Subtheme 5.3: Cultural Immersion. Engagement with the seven IP groups in Bukidnon enriched implementers' understanding of local culture and guided culturally sensitive programming [8].

Emergent Theory: Extension Sustainability Theory

From the themes above, the Extension Sustainability Theory was developed, shown in **Figure 3. Extension Sustainability Theory**. It proposes that sustaining effective community extension programs requires a dynamic interaction among: Social Factors – cultural values, local norms, and community engagement levels; Economic Factors – funding availability, livelihood generation, and institutional resources; Political Factors – government policies, institutional mandates, and regulatory compliance. This theory underscores that successful and sustainable extension work depends on the alignment of these factors, enhancing both institutional goals and community development.

The results of this study revealed a comprehensive view of how community extension programs are carried out in selected SUCs and private HEIs in Bukidnon, highlighting five key themes: purpose, challenges, strategies, best practices, and personal experiences of implementers. These programs are rooted in a strong institutional commitment to social responsibility and the CHED mandate, particularly targeting marginalized groups such as Indigenous Peoples. Despite facing logistical, financial, and cultural barriers, institutions addressed these through benchmarking, strategic partnerships, and staff capacity-building. Best practices included the use of communication platforms, livelihood initiatives, and campus expansions to broaden impact. Importantly, implementers reported personal growth, cultural awareness, and fulfillment through their involvement. The study culminated in the development of the Extension Sustainability Theory, which emphasizes that successful and lasting community extension depends on the interplay of social, economic, and political factors.

4] DISCUSSIONS

The results of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of how community extension programs are conceptualized, implemented, and sustained within selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bukidnon. Using thematic analysis grounded in Interpretative Phenomenology and Grounded Theory, five key themes emerged that offer both empirical insights and theoretical foundations for understanding the sustainability of these initiatives. The first theme, Interpreting the Purpose of Community Extension, reveals that these programs are deeply aligned with the CHED mandate and the transformative mission of HEIs. Rather than functioning solely as compliance measures, they are viewed as moral and civic responsibilities aimed at uplifting marginalized communities, particularly Indigenous Peoples. Needs assessments play a crucial role in ensuring that programs are relevant to the local context, while CHED's tri-fold mandate—covering instruction, research, and extension—provides institutional legitimacy.

The second theme, Interpreting Challenges in Implementation, uncovers several barriers that hinder effective program delivery. Cultural diversity among tribal groups often affects the level of community acceptance and complicates stakeholder engagement. In addition, financial constraints and limited staffing, especially in private HEIs, create further challenges in maintaining and expanding these efforts. The third theme, Interpreting Institutional Strategies for Overcoming Barriers, highlights how HEIs respond to these challenges with resilience and innovation. Institutions have engaged in benchmarking

to adopt best practices, partnered with local government units and stakeholders for additional support, and invested in training programs to strengthen staff capacity and improve service delivery.

The fourth theme, Interpreting Best Practices and Innovation, emphasizes the strategic use of communication technologies, including social media, university publications, and radio stations, to enhance transparency and community involvement. Furthermore, initiatives such as livelihood projects and campus expansions demonstrate the tangible socio-economic benefits that can result from well-managed extension efforts. The final theme, Interpreting the Essence of Experience, illustrates the personal and professional transformation experienced by those involved in extension work. Implementers reported feelings of fulfilment, compassion, and cultural enrichment, which serve as powerful intrinsic motivators for sustained engagement. These findings underscore that community extension is not only a form of public service but also a deeply developmental process for the individuals involved.

Implications of the Study

For SUCs and HEIs: Extension programs reinforce the public service mission of SUCs and enhance the reputation and community relevance of private HEIs. These programs foster leadership, academic-community collaboration, and social accountability; For Economic Development: By equipping individuals with entrepreneurial skills and increasing local capacity, these programs contribute to regional economic vitality and resilience; For Community-Society Linkages: Programs build bridges between institutions and communities, fostering shared development goals, industry linkages, and localized solutions to societal challenges; For Policymaking: Insights from grassroots implementation inform evidence-based policy, support civic participation, and encourage inclusive governance frameworks; For CSR and Private Sector Engagement. Community extension serves as a model for CSR, allowing institutions and businesses to support inclusive growth and environmental sustainability; In Support of the SDGs: Community extension aligns with multiple Sustainable Development Goals—most notably, No Poverty (SDG 1), Quality Education (SDG 4), and Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8)—by localizing development strategies that empower beneficiaries; For Community Impact: Ultimately, community extension initiatives improve health, education, livelihood, and cultural appreciation in adopted communities, yielding lasting transformations in socio-economic well-being.

5] CONCLUSIONS

This study provided a comprehensive exploration of the lived experiences, practices, and institutional strategies surrounding the implementation of community extension programs among selected State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Bukidnon, Philippines. Through thematic analysis grounded in Interpretative Phenomenology and Grounded Theory, five key themes emerged: the purpose of community extension, challenges in implementation, strategies to address these challenges, best practices, and the essence of experience among implementers. The findings underscore that community extension programs are not merely institutional obligations but serve as powerful instruments for societal transformation—particularly for marginalized communities such as Indigenous Peoples. These initiatives reflect an alignment with CHED's tri-fold mandate and are strengthened by contextual relevance through needs assessments and culturally responsive programming. Despite significant barriers such as limited funding, cultural resistance, and staff capacity constraints, institutions have demonstrated innovation and adaptability. Benchmarking, inter-sectoral partnerships, and staff development emerged as effective mechanisms to overcome implementation hurdles. Best practices—ranging from public communication strategies to livelihood initiatives and satellite campus development—demonstrated scalable and impactful models of community engagement. Crucially, the study revealed the personal and professional transformations experienced by implementers, highlighting how fulfilment, compassion, and cultural immersion serve as intrinsic motivators for long-term engagement in extension work. These human-centered insights provide depth and authenticity to the institutional perspective on extension.

The development of the Extension Sustainability Theory serves as a theoretical contribution of this study. It posits that sustainable community extension is enabled by the interaction of three key factors: social (community norms and engagement), economic (resource availability and livelihood impact), and political (institutional mandates and governance support). This framework provides a multidimensional lens for designing, evaluating, and scaling extension programs. The significance of these findings lies in their implications for institutional practice, public policy, and sustainable development. Community extension initiatives reinforce the mission of HEIs, contribute to inclusive economic growth, strengthen societal linkages, and align with global goals such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Ultimately,

when strategically implemented and socially grounded, these programs hold the potential to transform both communities and the institutions that serve them.

6] RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that higher education institutions (HEIs) strengthen their commitment to community extension by formally integrating it into institutional policies and development plans. A structured, cyclical framework, as shown in **Figure 4. The Community Extension Flow Chart** should guide implementation—from needs assessment and planning to execution, monitoring, and evaluation—to ensure sustainability and responsiveness to community needs. Addressing barriers such as funding, logistics, and staff training is essential to improve program efficiency. Multi-stakeholder collaboration with local government units, alumni, faculty, and other partners must be institutionalized through formal agreements. HEIs should actively document and share best practices through various platforms to promote learning and innovation. Recognizing the contributions and impact of extension implementers can further enhance engagement, while fostering a participatory culture ensures that community service becomes a shared institutional value. Collectively, these measures position HEIs as key agents in advancing inclusive and sustainable development. In conclusion, by establishing strategic frameworks, investing in partnerships, and institutionalizing best practices, HEIs can significantly amplify the reach, relevance, and sustainability of their community extension programs. These recommendations support not only the institutional mission but also national and global development goals, positioning HEIs as vital contributors to inclusive and equitable community advancement.

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9] **Data Availability:** The data that support the findings of this study are available from sources used in the manuscript.

10] **Conflict of interest:** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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11] Miscellaneous:

Figures, tables, supplements, appendices, or annexes used in the body of the manuscript.

Table 1. Summary of Themes and Subthemes

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
The Purpose of Community Extension	Extending Help to the Community Based on the Needs Assessment Results
	The Functions of the Higher Education
	Meeting the Needs of the Community
Challenges in the Implementation	Difficulty to Start
	Limited School Budget Allocation
	Limited Skills of Staffs
Addressing Challenges in the Implementation	Benchmarking with Other Schools
	Partnership with LGU, Students, Non-Teaching Personnel, Linkages and Alumni
	Provide Staffs Skills Training & Development
Best Practices	Disseminate Information to Public
	Livelihood and Income Generation
	Campus Expansions
The Essence of the Experiences	A Sense of Fulfillment
	Compassion for the Community
	Experience New Culture

Figure 1. Design of the Study

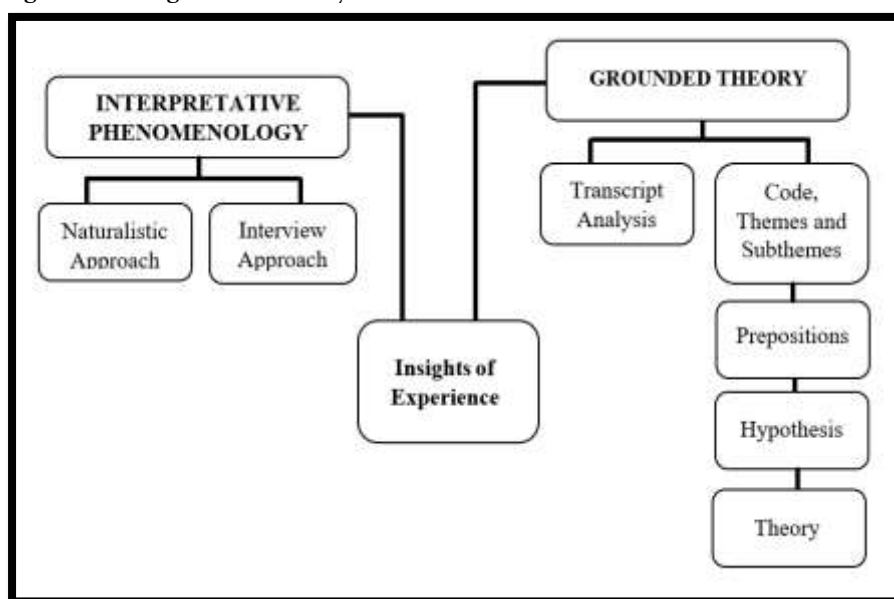


Figure 2. Grounded Theory Building Process

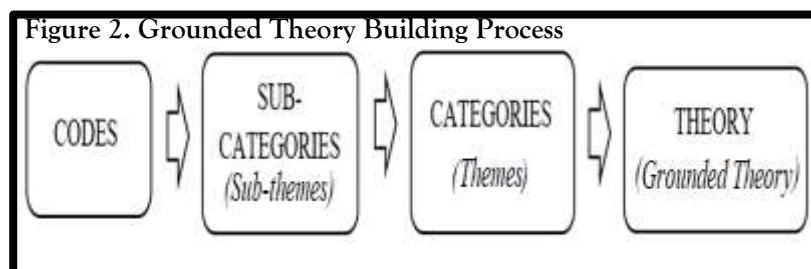


Figure 3. Extension Sustainability Theory

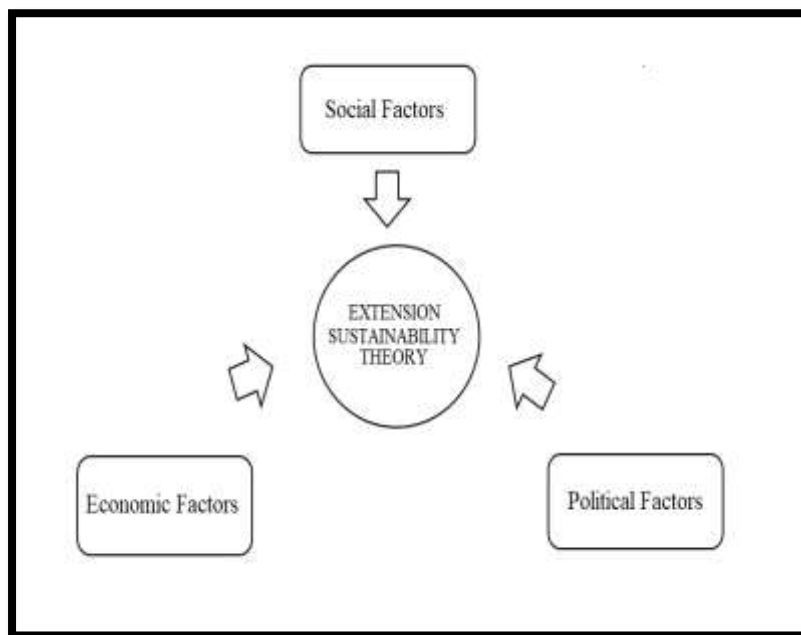


Figure 4. The Community Extension Flow Chart

