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A PROFILE OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS IN THE U.S. WEST

JESSE ABRAMS, AUTUMN ELLISON, EMILY JANE DAVIS, CASSANDRA MOSELEY, AND BRANDA NOWELL

Community-based organizations (CBOs) are non-profit organizations based in rural communities that work on both local economic development and natural resource stewardship. CBOs were established in many places across the U.S. West to help struggling rural communities build sustainable natural resource-based economies. They often serve communities that were greatly affected by changes to public land policy and changes in the timber industry or other natural resource industries since the late 1980s. These communities have typically experienced social conflict, unemployment, and other challenges related to environmental management. In 2016 we conducted a survey of CBOs across the West to better understand their organizational characteristics and activities.

Approach

In Spring 2016 we conducted a telephone survey of CBOs across the U.S. West, based on a list developed from various online databases. We used a series of screening questions at the beginning of each survey to ensure that the organization met our criteria as a CBO. In total, we reached 63 CBOs representing communities in the states of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. We were not able to successfully contact any CBOs in Utah or Nevada. The 63 CBOs surveyed represent an estimated response rate of 54 percent.

Results

Most CBOs are relatively young organizations. Seventy-six percent of surveyed CBOs gained their nonprofit status between 1993 and 2008. On average, CBOs had been registered nonprofits for 16 years at the time of the survey.

Most CBOs are small organizations. Surveyed CBOs had a median of one full-time staff member and two part-time staff. Seventy-five percent had two or fewer full-time staff, although some had up



to 29 full-time staff. Their median annual budget was \$280,000, with wide variability (ranging from \$1,000 to \$3.5 million).

CBOs serve a range of rural geographies. One third of CBOs worked at the watershed scale, 19 percent worked at the county scale, and 16 percent worked at the bioregional scale; the remaining 32 percent worked at other scales, including multiple communities and administrative districts. The populations within these geographies ranged from 100 to 1.2 million people.

Despite their small size, CBOs conduct a wide variety of activities. These activities include natural resource stewardship, economic development, and policy or institutional change activities:

Natural resource stewardship:

- Practically all surveyed CBOs were leaders of their local natural resource collaboration process, helping to build agreement regarding proper uses of land, water, and resources.
- A large majority (75%) went beyond collaborative decision-making to actually implement management activities.
- Sixty-eight percent reported having conducted the kinds of environmental analyses (including monitoring) that are normally carried out by government agencies. Performing these tasks is often central to achieving resource stewardship and economic development in places where government agency staff numbers have declined.

Economic development:

- Seventy-nine percent of surveyed CBOs had engaged in formal economic development planning.
- A minority of organizations had conducted workforce training (48%), individual business planning (41%), business incubation (34%), and direct investment in local infrastructure (23%).

Policy or institutional change:

- Over 90 percent of surveyed CBOs had piloted new approaches to resource management with the intent of sharing new models of practice.
- Over 80 percent had conducted site tours for elected officials to demonstrate the outcomes of innovative projects.
- Seventy-five percent were involved in some kind of policy networking at local, regional, state, or national scales.

CBOs directly assist local businesses. Although much of CBOs' work is aimed at changing the overall context within which economic development occurs, CBOs also work directly with many rural businesses. The most common types of businesses that CBOs directly assisted were restoration contractors and research or data collection contractors. Additionally, over half of surveyed CBOs had directly assisted small and large logging businesses and livestock producers.

Implications

CBOs represent a unique model of non-profit organizations in that they fill in critical gaps in many rural communities to catalyze both local economic development and sustainable natural resource management. Our survey reveals that these organizations tend to be relatively small and resource-limited, yet engage in a wide variety of activities. Most CBOs lead their local collaborative governance processes, and most perform additional activities that include implementing natural resource management, conducting environmental assessments, engaging in economic development planning, and working through various forums to influence the policy and institutional context for rural communities and landscapes. Their efforts are particularly valuable in communities that have struggled to adjust to economic and political changes while retaining a close connection to nearby lands and waters.

More information

Full reports and additional publications from this research project are available at:

<http://ewp.uoregon.edu/cbos>

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