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Principle Researcher(s) & Affiliations

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Research Field

Organizational Capacity
Networks
Collaboration
Social Innovation
Collective Impact
Community Development

Partners & Collaborators

Non-Profit Social Sector Advisory Committee
Columbia Basin Trust

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Partner In-Kind: \$25,000
Total: \$75,000

The Columbia Basin-Boundary Non-Profit Social Sector: Exploring Capacity, Innovation, and Collaboration

Introduction

The non-profit social sector plays a critical role in the social well-being of our region. This applied research project will explore key characteristics, financial and human resources, organizational capacity, social innovation, and organizational connections in the Columbia Basin-Boundary non-profit social sector. The research is an important first step towards enabling evidence-based decision-making by our regions' colleges and Columbia Basin Trust in efforts related to strengthening the sector. The research will provide individual non-profits and the region as a whole with benchmark data against which to compare experiences and characteristics. In addition, the research will explore collaborative networks and highlight examples of innovation in the region's non-profit social sector. There is an interest and need for organizations to innovate and collaborate, and there is a readiness and record of success in the region's social sector.

Research Rationale & Target User Groups

The non-profit sector has a substantial presence in our communities, creating meaningful employment and greatly contributing to individual and collective health and well-being. Sustaining non-profit organizations, however, is becoming increasingly challenging. Funding has declined, while expectations continue to grow. Volunteer capacity has a limit. Typical funding models are built on short-term contracts and processes that place organizations in competition.

While faced with significant stress, the non-profit sector has become a force of innovation in our society. The traditional boundaries of non-profit scope are blurring, and organizations are finding novel intentional ways of working together. The literature is rich with information about the benefits of social innovation, collaboration, and collective impact. Networks of individuals and organizations can create learning regions with the ability to adapt, experiment, and invent. Network weaving is a tool for supporting more intentional networks, where organizations can work on the same issue, challenge, or vision with structures created to mobilize their collective energy and resources. Managing an intentional network is the foundation for collaborative social innovation.

Leaders in the Columbia Basin-Boundary social sector are actively discussing and practicing varying levels of networking, cooperating, coordinating, and collaborating. This research project will create a baseline understanding of the social sector's characteristics and capacities, provide an analysis of network interactions, explore the elements of successful collaborations, and identify opportunities to further enhance and facilitate the network. This research intends to contribute to current efforts on increasing collaboration for greater sustainability and impact of the social sector, and will contribute to the overall interest of collaboration across the non-profit sector in our region.

Primary Research Questions

1. What are the key characteristics of social non-profit organizations and what financial and human resources are in place within the region?
2. What challenges and opportunities are the region's non-profit social sector experiencing?
3. In what ways are the region's social non-profit organizations advancing rural development through innovation and collaboration?
4. What are the strengths and limitations of our region's non-profit social sector network?

Methods

RDI proposes to conduct an online survey of social sector organizations, as well as key informant interviews. Analysis will include the use of Social Network Analysis (SNA) to understand the current interactions and relationships within the social sector network. The research will employ a participatory, embedded case study approach using descriptive statistics and grounded theory to code qualitative data. An advisory group of representatives from the social sector will provide insight throughout the research design, implementation, and dissemination of findings. As an applied research project, the outcome will include possible next steps for improving the function, sustainability and impact of the social sector in the Columbia Basin-Boundary.

Key Activities

The research process includes several steps beginning with forming a research advisory group and building an inventory of social sector individuals and agencies from across the region. The first stage of data collection is an online survey which will include questions about social sector organizations' attributes, capacities, and challenges. The survey will also include network questions, designed with compatibility for social network analysis, which allows for an understanding of interactions amongst organizations and the creation of network maps. Survey results will be reviewed by the advisory group and shared with the social sector network.

Follow up interviews or focus groups may be conducted with representatives from social sector organizations in each of the main sub-regions of the Columbia Basin-Boundary (Valemount, Revelstoke, Columbia Valley, South East Kootenay, West Kootenay, Boundary, Elk Valley). Through a semi-structured group interview, participants will be asked to:

1. review and discuss survey results, including a review of selected social network maps;
2. share stories of collaboration and discuss what contributed to their success or failure; and
3. discuss strategies for innovation and collaboration for the social sector at the sub-regional and regional scales.

Knowledge Mobilization and Products

Knowledge mobilization activities will focus on keeping the social sector network apprised of the research project and providing both learning opportunities and possibilities for feedback and ideas. Activities will include the sharing of knowledge briefs, webinars, presentations, group meetings, and the possibility of training focused on network weaving. Knowledge mobilization will also include press releases (launch, key milestones, and conclusion of project), project updates in the RDI e-newsletter, project overview and progress updates on the RDI website, and discussion and promotion by advisory group members. The project will be promoted through Selkirk College, College of the Rockies, and Columbia Basin Trust communication channels.