



November 2014

Principle Researcher(s) & Affiliations

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Research Field

Networks
 Collaboration
 Social Innovation
 Collective Impact
 Community Development

Partners & Collaborators

The RDI will work closely with social sector agencies through an advisory group that will help shape the research process, implementation, and knowledge mobilization activities. A Social Network Analysis consultant will be hired to train RDI researchers with methodology, data analysis, and development of a network enhancement strategy. Identified social sector network weavers will have the opportunity to be trained and coached in network weaving in order to lead the implementation of the network enhancement activities.

Funding Sources

Columbia Basin Trust (RDI Funder)

Project Period

From: November, 2014
 To: December, 2015

RDI Contribution: \$50,000
 Partner In-Kind: \$25,000
 Total: \$75,000

Collaboration in the Non-Profit Social Sector: Exploring Networks and Rural Development in the Columbia Basin-Boundary Region

Introduction

This research project seeks to investigate networks and their role in rural development amongst the social sector of the Columbia-Basin Boundary. There is an interest and need for organizations to collaborate, and there is a readiness and record of success in the region's social sector. RDI's research aims to explore the landscape of social sector stakeholders across the region to better understand the nature of their current interactions and to identify opportunities to improve network relationships and collaboration efforts. The research process will facilitate the development of a network enhancement strategy to be implemented by identified "network weavers". With an interest in this work and a willingness to take action, it is anticipated that this research will be readily used by leaders in the social sector. The research will identify and support existing and new network weavers. The research will assess the benefits of using Social Network Analysis (SNA) as a tool for enhancing regional networks and helping the non-profit sector move towards greater collective impact. The project will also help inform RDI's future research related to the non-profit sector, and may allow for further investigation of networks, collaboration, and social innovation within and across sectors in the region.

Research Rationale & Target User Groups

The non-profit sector has a substantial presence in our region, creating meaningful employment and greatly contributing to collective 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 for 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 network, provide an analysis of network interactions, explore elements of successful collaborations, and identify gaps and opportunities to further enhance and facilitate the network. This research intends to contribute to current efforts on increasing regional collaboration for greater 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. How are organizations in the social sector currently collaborating and what opportunities exist for improvement?
2. How have interactions within the non-profit social sector contributed to local and regional rural development initiatives and outcomes?
3. How can collaborative networks and their contributions be enhanced through network analysis and facilitation?

Methods

RDI proposes to use Social Network Analysis (SNA) to understand the current interactions and relationships in the social sector of the Columbia-Basin Boundary region. The research will employ a participatory, embedded case study approach where an advisory group of network members will provide insight throughout the research design, data collection and analysis, and results. As an applied research project, the outcome will be a network enhancement strategy including ideas and options for improving the function and sustainability of the network and its collaborative efforts and impacts.

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 both reflective and prospective questions about the current state and potential future of the social sector network. The survey will be designed to ensure compatibility with social network analysis software in order to identify specific relationships among participants and create network maps. The survey will seek to understand with whom people are working, and to what degree. It will investigate the degree to which groups wish to work together and what shared need or goal might be met. Survey results will be reviewed by the advisory group and shared with the social sector network for feedback and ideas.

Follow up interviews and/or focus groups will be conducted with people who are highly connected according to network metrics and/or demonstrate potential to play a lead role in network weaving. A draft network enhancement strategy will be developed through the participation of identified network weavers, and with feedback from members of the social sector network. The research advisory group will play an important role in assessing and making recommendations for a network enhancement strategy, as well as advising on the relevance and applicability of network analysis as a tool.

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, particularly on the development of the network enhancement strategy. Activities will include webinars, focus groups, presentations, and training focused on network weaving follow-up actions. 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 and Columbia Basin Trust communication channels.