

**Evaluation of the Environmental  
Support Center's Four Core Programs**

**Final Evaluation Report**

**Prepared for:**  
Environmental Support Center

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# Executive Summary

## Overview

**Introduction:** The Environmental Support Center (ESC) commissioned Mosaica: The Center for Nonprofit Development and Pluralism to conduct a comprehensive external evaluation of ESC's four core programs: Technology Resources (TR), Training and Organizational Assistance (TOA), Leadership and Enhanced Assistance (LEAP), and Fundraising for Sustainable Organizations (FUNDS). The evaluation was conducted between April and October 2008.

**Evaluation Approach and Methodology:** The primary purpose of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of ESC's four core programs. The evaluation included a documentation and assessment of the immediate- and medium-term effects on grantee organizational, programmatic, and advocacy capacity, as well as the grantees' impact on human health and environmental issues. Mosaica analyzed grantee and program-related data from 2005 to early 2008. Data collection and analysis efforts included: interviews or surveys of 30 ESC grantees; interviews with the four ESC program staff; surveys of the ESC Board; interviews with 12 ESC external stakeholders; and an analysis of more than 100 applications or evaluation forms, 399 profiles and grants data, 24 program reports to ESC's Board, and several past evaluation reports.

**Grantee Profiles:** In an analysis of grantee organizational profiles, Mosaica found: Most groups providing information on their type organization described themselves as environmental activist (EA) groups (57%), while almost all others (42%) described themselves as environmental justice groups (EJ). More groups reported working locally or regionally. Most reported a budget under \$500,000, median income was \$250,000, and three reported a budget of zero. Median staff size was 6. ESC has racial/ethnic data on 162 groups; of these 38% are controlled by communities of color (majority of staff and Board are persons of color), and 51% have Boards that are majority people of color. In their work, 41% focus on communities of color. As the top three issue areas, groups most often identified environmental justice (154), human health/environment (129), and water (135).

## Findings

**Grantmaking:** From 2005 to early 2008, ESC awarded \$1.3 million in 578 grants to 399 groups across the country. Most organizations receiving funds during the evaluation period were funded under one program one time.

**ESC Role, Uniqueness, and Niche:** ESC provides support that is not available elsewhere, and links organizations to expert and "reputable" capacity builders that its groups might not readily identify or afford. Respondents found ESC accessible and the informal advice it gives helpful. Many noted that ESC is a pioneer with a long, credible history working with grassroots organizations. They also noted that ESC supports groups

that some would consider “risky” and that as an intermediary it is “closer to the ground” than most funders.

**Effectiveness Overall:** ESC received mostly 3s on a 4-point scale for the effectiveness of its approach and other impacts (e.g, success in reaching broader environmental goals and contributing to increased capacity among its groups) but it received mostly 2s on its contribution to policy change, implementation, and environmental wins. When indicating if ESC’s program should expand, remain at current level, or be eliminated, the most common answer for each program was to expand – but most respondents were not sure.

**Internal and External Factors Affecting ESC’s Work:** Despite a lack of diverse funding base, the current environment is seen as rich in opportunity – benefiting from public awareness of climate change, a new federal Administration, and technology advances.

**Grantees, Board, staff, and stakeholders recommended the following changes:**

- *Strengthen fundraising efforts and diversify the funding base* through prioritizing donor relationship building, earned income, individual donors, government grants and contracts.
- *Expand its contribution to the field and role as a convener for the movement* by involving grantees, funders, capacity builders, current and new partners – to share successes, play a lead role in EJ agenda-setting, and facilitate funder discussions about EJ support.
- *Develop a more targeted approach to be more strategic* – which may mean prioritizing support for a core group, geographic area(s), type of capacity building, or issues.
- *Find a way to more directly address dismantling racism in programs*, making it integral to all ESC work and better understood throughout its grantee network.
- *Continue ESC one-on-one staff support for grantees* (e.g., finding a consultant, informal advice and assessments).

## Conclusions

1. ESC plays a unique and important role in the environmental movement.
2. ESC has clearly defined its target organizations and the scope of its activities and these groups appear to be well served by ESC programs.
3. While ESC has been strategic in the type of organizations it supports and the type of assistance it provides, it has not yet developed numerical targets to ensure that its limited resources have maximum impact.
4. ESC’s program design includes some components that appear particularly important to small environmental groups: a focus on small-budget groups, environmental action organizations, and groups run by and for communities of color; simple and quick-turnaround application and approval process; mix of types of training and technical

assistance supported, different levels of assistance; and direct communications with and advice from ESC personnel.

5. The programs benefit from some added components that do not appear essential for program success (e.g., formal peer support or program linkages).
6. ESC's varied programs seem to produce similar outcomes. They have similar but not identical target groups (largely a result of different funder priorities), most have a similar application processes, and they overlap in the types of capacity-building supported. TOA and LEAP fund a variety of organizational development areas while TR focuses on technology and FUNDS on fundraising. FUNDS is most distinctive because of its more demanding requirements; many of ESC's small grassroots organizations would not be eligible – which is somewhat inconsistent with ESC's theory of change and stated priority groups.
7. ESC does not currently fully or systematically collect the information needed to assess its programs on an internal, ongoing basis.
8. Current funding limitations – both amounts and flexibility – create challenges on geographic and issue access to funds, level of staff support, and the scope of peer-to-peer opportunities.

## Recommendations

Mosaica offers the following recommendations for strengthening ESC's already strong programs:

1. **ESC, to ensure it has the most impact, should prioritize the number of groups served, the environmental issues funded, and/or the geographic areas targeted to maximize its resources and contributions to the field.** In addition to its grantmaking activities, ESC will likely need to expand its field-building work by holding convenings, etc. and playing a greater role in defining the environmental justice landscape. ESC would do well to consider being less confined by the 'intermediary' role, and becoming a more visible leader among philanthropic organizations.
2. **ESC should retain flexibility in the types, levels, and lengths of capacity-building services.** It may be useful to consider supporting a somewhat narrower range of capacity-building services, but offering a variety of opportunities appears to have been extremely valuable to the small organizations ESC targets. These groups have extremely diverse capacity-building needs and typically no other source of such assistance. ESC should allow each grantee some flexibility in the length of the capacity-building engagement.
3. **ESC may be able to increase operational efficiency by rethinking the current program distinctions and using common forms and procedures.** Mosaica recommends ESC combine the four programs or at least the TOA and LEAP programs. Using the field-level priorities described in the first recommendation, ESC should be able to streamline its programs. ESC should continue to provide more

oversight to the larger capacity building grants and to grantees that it is proactively investing in.

4. **ESC needs to diversify and expand its funding.** This expansion is, of course, likely to be very challenging in the current economic environment. Ideally, ESC can obtain flexible funds, but if not possible, ESC should consider whether a geographic focus might allow a similar level of targeting at a regional rather than a national level.
5. **ESC should explore program issues and options in its next strategic planning process.** In exploring how to maximize its impact with limited resources, ESC should review its target group priorities, and consider focusing on a specific geographic area, particular environmental issue(s), or particular target groups; explore dismantling racism and how to operationalize it; explore how (if at all) it might best assist groups in severe organizational crisis; and consider whether to deepen impact by focusing on a subset of grantees and providing multiple grants or multi-year grants.
6. **ESC should strengthen its internal capacity to monitor, document, and track its grantmaking activities and results** by developing formal plans and making the best use of today's technology.

