

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE NEEDS ASSESSMENT REPORT

Executive Summary

Introduction: In March 2009, the Environmental Support Center (ESC) launched the Environmental Justice Needs Assessment Project to determine how it might better support environmental justice efforts around the country, particularly those with limited resources. To this end, project staff interviewed directors or board members from groups assisted by ESC in the past about ways to maintain, improve, or create programs and services that could strengthen the capacity of environmental justice groups around the country. After developing the survey instrument, the assessment took place in the spring of 2009.

Methodology: Groups interviewed for the needs assessment were selected from a sample of 149 assisted by ESC between 2004 and 2008. Using selection criteria that would ensure a mix of geographic location, age, budget size, and number of staff, an initial pool of groups was narrowed from 149 to 68, who were invited to participate in the interviews. As an incentive for participating, each group that completed the interview was entered into a drawing to receive \$1,000 worth of technology equipment accompanied by consultation from ESC's Technology Resources Program.

A team of four ESC staff and consultants conducted interviews under the direction of Midge Taylor, an independent consultant who served as Project Manager. The interview team created and tested a survey instrument by interviewing six groups. After producing a final survey form, the team conducted 52 interviews during a seven-week period.

Respondent Profile: Groups interviewed work in 21 states around the United States, with some emphasis from the South and Southwest where ESC provides a regional program. A budget of \$50,000 was the mode for this pool, although three groups had budgets exceeding \$500,000 in 2008. Foundation grants comprised the largest source of income (50% or more for 30 groups). Individual contributions provided the next highest source followed by government, corporations, and grassroots fundraising. Average staff size was 2.78, although groups were not asked to distinguish between paid and unpaid staff.

The average age of participating groups was 13 years. Over two-thirds of the groups were founded with a commitment to operating over the long term. The others, who expected to resolve a problem and shut down, are still in existence. Reasons given for formation included challenging a government decision; gathering information; alerting the public; investigating health conditions; or monitoring and protecting a natural resource.

Twenty-six percent of groups dedicate 50% to 94% of their time on environmental justice work, while 14 spend 100% of their time on environmental justice. Non-environmental issues named most frequently were voter education and registration, cultural awareness and preservation, immigration, criminal justice, tenant rights, reproductive rights, and political empowerment and education.

Findings

Capacity-Building Needs: At 17%, computers and technology were cited most often as items that would contribute to building stronger organizations. This category was followed by staff recruitment, training, and retention (15%), education of community members (9%), fundraising (7%), and “Other” (17%), which covered concerns expressed by one or two groups.

Topics for Further Education: At 17%, fundraising topped the list of management topics groups wanted to learn more about, with board development and financial management following, at 15% and 10% respectively.

Preferred Learning Methods: Working with consultants received a score of 50 out of a possible 60 points, while mentoring received a 49, followed closely by 47 for peer learning. In initial test questions, webinars were also favored by the few who had been exposed to them.

Barriers to Capacity-Building: Most frequently cited barriers to building a stronger organization included heavy workloads combined with too few staff; community apprehension of opposition; the length of time required to develop community leadership; lack of accountability among local and state elected officials; and racism. Perceived solutions to barriers included more staff and training; strategic planning; money; board development; computer and office technology; community education; and leadership development.

Access to Resources: Groups participating in alliances and membership organizations gained significant access to a wide range of resources and assistance. Interviewees named roughly 200 groups and individuals as allies, and 58% belonged to a total of 79 membership organizations. Groups cited many reasons for working together: collaboration on policy work and research, networking opportunities, support on shared issues, shared legal resources and strategies, joint training sessions, and others.

Usefulness of Gatherings: Groups attend a significant number of gatherings. Characteristics of worthwhile events included time for networking and letting groups tell their stories, facilitated sessions, take-home tools and materials, and sessions designed for 50-70 attendees with shared interests. Disappointing gatherings lacked structure, were too big, failed to promote cultural sensitivity, and did not allow time to consider strategies or how to implement the lessons learned at the event.

Advice to ESC: Specific outreach recommendations from interviewees to ESC were extremely varied, ranging from “Keep doing what you’re doing,” to increasing ESC’s visibility through conference attendance and coalition networking. Other suggestions included a regular newsletter with information about funders, specialized long-term assistance, changes in the reimbursement policy, improved staff diversity, peer mentorship, and gatherings focused on specific capacity-building skills for groups with shared interests.

Recommendations to ESC

- **Continue to support gatherings** organized by and highly valued by grassroots environmental justice groups, but take on the role of convener on special occasions.
- **Every other year, coordinate an environmental justice gathering** that would allow groups to network, tell their stories, share information, discuss their needs, break down feelings of isolation, and celebrate the work of environmental justice activists.
- **Give priority consideration to requests for one-on-one and small-group assistance.**
- **Continue to support collaborations and relationships** between groups like the ones found in membership organizations and alliances. Encourage groups to talk with funders about the benefits gained from these relationships.
- **Help interested groups develop a plan to acquire and maintain paid staff**--within the context of larger organizational plans.
- **Co-host periodic webinars** for environmental justice groups to learn practical ways of applying technology to their work in different communities. Build on the Technology Resources program and collaborate with other nonprofits on fundraising, marketing, and other responsibilities for these sessions.
- **Use this report to stimulate funder interest in funding capacity-building services** by engaging funders in continuing discussions about capacity-building. Work toward being seen as a viable advisor to funders who care about grassroots organizations.
- **Use this report to encourage more information technology grants** from grantmakers intrigued by the role of technology in advancing social causes.
- **Pursue joint funding to collaborate more intentionally** with key capacity-building organizations committed to providing culturally competent support to environmental justice groups and rural or low-income communities.
- **Assemble a team of seasoned social justice activists to serve as mentors** to groups over two to three years, or longer. Each mentor would be paid an honorarium, responsibility for which would be shared between ESC and the client group.
- **Promote ESC's anti-racism work** to the environmental and environmental justice communities. Build partnerships with groups that conduct related workshops and consultation.