

Place-Based Environmental Philanthropy: The Role of Community-Based Organizations in the Skeena Watershed

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of place-based philanthropy in rural community development through a case study of the Skeena watershed. The Skeena is an ecologically significant region in Northwest British Columbia that is confronting the complex and layered forces of change being experienced by many rural regions in Canada. Through qualitative interviews and document analyses, the article illustrates how a robust ecosystem of environmental community-based organizations (CBOs), funded by philanthropic capital, is extending beyond traditional environmental advocacy to fill important structural gaps in community development. Though pressed by capacity issues, the sector is shifting towards highly integrated and collaborative responses to development pressures and is charting alternative pathways for development in the region. The complexity and scope of pressures in the Skeena offer insights for other rural regions and the dynamic potential and challenges associated with place-based philanthropy in community and regional development processes.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article se base sur une étude de cas du bassin-versant de la Skeena pour explorer le rôle joué par la philanthropie territoriale dans le développement communautaire rural. La Skeena est une région du Nord-Ouest de la Colombie-Britannique qui est importante d'un point de vue écologique. Elle doit faire face aux mêmes forces de changement complexes et multidimensionnelles que subissent plusieurs autres régions rurales au Canada. Cet article a recours à des entretiens qualitatifs et des analyses de documents pour illustrer comment un écosystème robuste d'organismes communautaires environnementaux, financé par le capital philanthropique, est en train d'évoluer au-delà du simple plaidoyer environnemental traditionnel pour combler d'importantes lacunes structurelles en développement communautaire. Ce secteur, bien qu'il doive composer avec des problèmes de capacité insuffisante, est en train de répondre aux pressions exercées par le développement de manière hautement intégrée et collaborative, et d'explorer des options alternatives pour développer la région. Au bout du compte, la complexité et l'étendue des pressions dans la Skeena offrent matière à réflexion pour d'autres régions rurales et un modèle pour le potentiel et les défis relatifs à la philanthropie territoriale dans les processus de développement communautaire et rural.

Keywords / Mots clés : rural regions, place-based development, philanthropy, Skeena watershed / régions rurales, développement territorial, philanthropie, bassin-versant de la Skeena

INTRODUCTION

Rural regions across Canada are experiencing a convergence of multiple crises, from infrastructure deficits and ageing populations to global challenges with local implications such as climate change, economic restructuring, and biodiversity loss. These overlapping challenges leave rural governments with ever-expanding mandates yet limited resources to address them. Researchers have identified the inherent complexity of rural resilience that requires moving beyond conventional development and governance approaches to implement bold and innovative solutions (Chirisa & Nel, 2021; Fazey, Carmen, Rao-Williams, Fraser, Murray, Cox, Scott, Hodgson, Tabor, Robeson, Searle, Lyon, Kenter, & Murray, 2017; Parkes et al., 2019). The literature repeatedly shows that conventional, top-down interventions and piecemeal supports from senior governments fail to produce successful and lasting outcomes, and can even generate counterproductive results (Gilbert, 2018). Instead, bottom-up or place-based approaches to community development have been recognized as essential for building rural resilience (OECD, 2020).

Place-based development embraces the notion that local people and organizations are best equipped to understand local problems, and centres the natural, human, and physical assets that make communities and regions unique (Layton, 2016; Markey, Breen, Vodden, & Daniels, 2015). Although rural local governments are often keen to exert greater levels of control over their own development, they frequently struggle to bridge the planning-to-implementation gap due to jurisdictional barriers and human and financial capacity constraints (Sorensen, 2016; Ryser, Halseth, Markey, & Young, 2022). Strategic partnerships with other place-based actors, such as community-based organizations (CBOs), may help to overcome these capacity constraints while maintaining local control (Markey, Halseth, & Manson, 2012).

As actors within the philanthropic sector, CBOs include non-profit, non-governmental, or charitable organizations that operate at a local level and work to address community needs. CBOs' distinct characteristics—including their local knowledge, trust, and relationships—uniquely position them to support place-based development. Community-based organizations are increasingly being recognized as a source of local capacity and a promising partner in rural resilience-building efforts (Gilbert, 2018; Ryser & Halseth, 2014; United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, 2012). However, there is a lack of research on the role of CBOs as locally based philanthropic actors, and even greater gaps associated with the role of philanthropy in rural development (Williamson, Luke, & Furneaux, 2021; Pill, 2017). Most data on the philanthropic sector lacks a rural lens, hindering awareness and understanding of the role of philanthropy in rural communities. Practitioners and researchers alike have made calls for documented evidence of the sector's role in rural community development (Barr, 2020; Glennie, 2019; Hall, Gibson, Markey, & Weeden, 2020). Williamson et al. (2021) identify a third research gap relating to the intersection of philanthropy and the environment: "There is a wide and rich field for future research on place-based giving. Environmental giving is a particular form of place-based giving involving different understandings of location" (p. 1145). These

understandings of location, while still place-based, may be characterized by natural boundaries, such as those defined by climate, biodiversity, or topography, rather than institutional boundaries.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to filling these knowledge gaps through a case study on environmental CBOs in the Skeena watershed (“the Skeena”), a region in Northwest British Columbia (B.C.). Home to approximately 60,000 people, the Skeena has several population centres ranging from 5,000 to 13,000 people, and numerous smaller towns and villages. It encompasses the traditional, unceded territories of the Tsimshian, Gitksan, Wet’suwet’en, Carrier Sekani, Ned’u’ten, Takla and Tahltan peoples (Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition, SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, & Bulkley Valley Centre for Natural Resources Research and Management, 2013).

The Skeena is currently confronting many of the same challenges as other rural places. As a region that is richly endowed with natural assets, it has experienced a long-standing tension between natural resource extraction and ecological conservation. While it is among the most biologically diverse watersheds in Canada and most productive salmon watersheds in the world, it is also a globally significant region for natural resource extraction (Pacific Salmon Foundation, 2015; SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, 2019). These divergent forces have sparked international attention and an influx of philanthropic funding for CBOs in the Skeena with an environmental mandate. In the following pages, we explore the role that these CBOs play in the Skeena through the lens of rural development. The objectives of documenting this case study are to address research gaps and to highlight opportunities to advance place-based rural development in other jurisdictions, specifically contributing to what has become an international discourse surrounding issues associated with place-based philanthropy. The following sections present a literature review, provide further details about the methods used in this study and the Skeena case context, and present the findings and discussion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural restructuring

Most definitions of “rural” include reference to areas with low density populations and/or long distances to larger urban centres (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2021). These features exist along a continuum and encompass a wide variety of places, geographies, climates, and cultures. In the Canadian context, du Plessis et al. (2002) present the concept of “degrees of rurality,” which accommodates various interpretations of rural and allows for community identification as rural, even though certain communities may exceed specific population, distance, or density parameters. The case region in this article is “predominantly rural” given its northern and remote location from a major metropolitan influence zone, although two of the population centres exceeded the 10,000-person ceiling attributed to formal definitions of “rural” and “small town” (Beshiri & Bollman, 2001).

Despite the diversity of rural regions, many rural communities have experienced similar patterns of development, triggered by a combination of macro-level forces and ideological shifts since the 1950s. Examining these patterns is crucial to understanding the contexts that continue to shape rural places today and help to situate the growing importance of rural philanthropic organizations. Beginning in the post-World War II era, rural regions across B.C. (echoing national trends) were recognized by the provincial government as sites of significant natural resource wealth. Large scale investments were made in rural infrastructure, while thousands of Indigenous Peoples were dis-

placed from their traditional territories to make way for mega-projects such as mines, mills, and dams (Gunn & McIvor, 2021; Halseth & Ryser, 2017). A deep dependency on natural resource extraction was woven into the fabrics of rural communities.

A second phase of rural development emerged in the 1980s, associated with the rise of neoliberalism that rapidly rolled-back government and corporate investment (Douglas, 2005). Rural communities came to be treated as “resource banks” from which value was extracted and not adequately reinvested to sustain core infrastructure and services. As senior governments retreated from rural places, infrastructure deficits grew and fewer services were provisioned (Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Gibson & Barrett, 2018; Speer, 2019).

We characterize the current era of rural development, roughly beginning in the aftermath of the 2008/09 financial crisis, as a period of “reactionary incoherence.” In this phase, rural policy approaches are disorganized in nature, lacking in regional knowledge and vision, and subject to competing and divergent objectives, yet do draw policy and program attention to address infrastructure deficits (Markey, Halseth, Ryser, Argent, & Boron, 2019). Within the state of incoherence, however, the possibility does exist to better direct rural investments. As globalization, international supply chains, and the mobility of information and capital have led to widespread homogenization of landscapes and cultures, they have also sparked a cultural renaissance that engenders an appreciation for all that makes a place unique (Cairncross, 1997; Douglas, 2005). This centering of “place” has become a central theme in contemporary community development, heightening the role of local actors such as CBOs to co-construct interventions that align with the assets and aspirations of place (Baldacchino et al., 2015). Place-based strategies build on a community’s natural, physical, and human assets and centre them in community development and decision-making. Rural and remote communities tend to cultivate particularly strong senses of place, and place-based approaches have been widely recognized as essential to rural resilience (Douglas, 2005; Gadsby & Samson, 2016; Markey et al., 2012; OECD Regional Development Ministerial, 2019).

Situating place-based and environmental philanthropy

A subset of the philanthropic sector, CBOs are associated with many names, including place-based philanthropy, social infrastructure, and community philanthropy, signalling their emergent positionality in the discourse on rural development (Doan, 2019).

As natural resource extraction and industrial development gained prominence in rural communities in B.C., so too did environmental advocacy and conservation organizations (largely funded by philanthropic dollars). These organizations grew to become an influential sector with the power to influence land use and forest management practices in B.C. (Affolderbach, 2011). Recent decades have seen what has been coined a “professionalization” of environmental organizations, as well as an evolution of relationship dynamics between environmental and Indigenous groups (Affolderbach, 2011; Davis, 2009; Hague, 2019). However, existing literature on the environmental philanthropy sector predominantly focuses on large environmental foundations that operate on provincial, national, or international scales. Scholarship investigating the role of community-based environmental organizations is scarce, despite the growing body of literature concentrating on the importance of place in grantmaking (Williamson et al., 2021).

Though place-based philanthropic organizations vary in size, missions, and mandates, they often share a strong understanding of local contexts, a propensity towards long-term and holistic thinking, and a strong network of relationships within their communities (Gilbert, 2018). Both purpose-driven and deeply committed to place, place-based philanthropy exists to create lasting change in the communities it serves. The European Foundation Centre describes place-based philanthropy as, “the act of individual citizens and local institutions contributing money or goods, along with their time and skills, to promote the well-being of local people and the improvement of the community in which they live and/or work” (European Foundation Centre, 2004, p. 5). However, place-based philanthropy may also blend local assets and capacity with external sources of financial capital. This grounding of external capital in local knowledge and relationships gives the sector an “intrinsic advantage” over purely external sources of financing (Glennie, 2019).

In response to the social, political, and economic restructuring that has taken place in rural communities in recent decades, the role of place-based philanthropy has been heightened (Gibson & Barrett, 2018). As senior government support withdrew and local government capacity declined, the philanthropic sector grew to fill the gaps and has since become a vital contributor to rural communities (Ryser & Halseth, 2014). Today, there are over 18,000 rural charities across Canada, from local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to community foundations, voluntary groups and societies (Halseth et al., 2019). Rural communities tend to attract a higher proportion of philanthropic organizations: in recent years, 43 percent of all community foundations and 22 percent of all charities were based in rural areas, despite being home to less than 20 percent of the population (Gibson et al., 2014; Gibson & Barrett, 2018).

Community-based organizations, as manifestations of the philanthropic sector, may be uniquely positioned to contribute to lasting, structural change at the local level (Johnson, 2018; Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019). The sector possesses unique strengths, including its freedom from short-term electoral cycles that allows for longer-term strategies and planning, its long history of operating with limited resources and often innovating to fulfill mandates, and its flexibility and agility with less red tape and compliance requirements than government equivalents (Dodgson & Gann, 2020). Given these advantages, CBOs have stepped in to fill the gaps left by government withdrawal from rural places, and the sector has accrued noteworthy social capital and financial assets that are anchored in local communities (Hodgeson & Pond, 2018). For overstretched rural governments, collaborating with CBOs may assist in bridging the planning-to-implementation gap by utilizing and augmenting the local asset pool (Connelly, Markey, & Roseland, 2009). However, a lack of understanding and awareness of the sector in rural communities often impedes such strategic engagements. As Pill (2017) warns, in addition to the perspective and potential of widening the range of governance organizations to enlist greater levels of capacity to address complex problems, we must also be mindful that CBOs picking up the slack left by state actors may place unreasonable demands on local capacity, lead to more variable and unequal service delivery, and further enable the neoliberalist agenda of privatization and a reduced state.

Methods and case context

This research is part of a multi-year, national research project examining how place-based philanthropy is being used as a mechanism for rural revitalization and renewal. This case study contributes

to further understanding of the authors' core research topic, with a lens of place-based natural assets and environmental resilience. This methodology includes a series of 22 key informant interviews with philanthropic funders and thought leaders from across Canada, which were used to identify trends, opportunities, and challenges in the philanthropic landscape and identify case study regions for further investigation. Criteria for case region selection included (a) non-metropolitan area as defined by Statistics Canada, (b) an active philanthropic sector, as evidenced by philanthropic indicators such as endowment values and organization tenure, and (c) representation from diverse provinces and regions across Canada. Using a combination of the above criteria, the Skeena watershed in Northwest British Columbia was selected as the case region for this study.

The case study is primarily based on qualitative data that captures the perceptions, knowledge, and beliefs of individual participants. As such, it is subject to the biases, opinions, and motivations of participants. Interview questions were designed to probe perceptions of trends, challenges, and opportunities faced by environmental CBOs, and to explore the roles of CBOs in the Skeena. Participants were asked to describe the role that CBOs play, for example, in community development, reconciliation, and local climate action, as well as how each of these broader trends have or continue to shape the landscape and contexts that CBOs operate within. Other characteristics of the sector, such as the extent and nature of collaboration among CBOs and with Indigenous communities and municipal and regional governments, were also explored through focused questions. Semi-structured interviews were held with 19 individuals, including, (a) individuals who are actively involved with CBOs in the region, (b) elected officials and government staff from regional, provincial, and federal governments, and (c) individuals from Indigenous-led organizations and governments. All interviews were conducted remotely and ranged from 35 to 70 minutes in length. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo software, in accordance with a pre-prepared codebook, which allowed for coding of the data by both question and theme (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

As noted, the Skeena region is home to approximately 60,000 people. The primary population centres within the watershed are Terrace (population 13,663) and Smithers (5,351); smaller communities include Kitwanga, Hazelton, Kispiox, Houston, and Dease Lake (SkeenaWild Conservation Trust, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2017) (see Figure 1). The City of Prince Rupert (population 12,220) is situated just outside of the watershed itself but borders the Skeena River estuary, a critical component of the watershed. Municipalities in the Skeena watershed have a significantly higher proportion of Indigenous Peoples than the provincial average of 5 percent. In Smithers and Terrace, respectively, approximately 14 percent and 22 percent of residents identify as Indigenous (City of Terrace, 2018; Town of Smithers, 2019).

The development dynamics and tensions present in the Skeena provide evidence of three broader themes in rural development. First, the impact of 30 years of rural withdrawal by senior governments, combined with limited policy capacity to orient towards a new development pathway presents considerable challenges for the region. Boom-and-bust economic cycles continue to fail to adequately return benefits to rural regions (Aalhus, Fumerton, & Oke, 2018; Parkes et al., 2019; Reschny, Brisbois, Parkes, & Harder, 2017). Even during periods of economic "boom," significant amounts of resource wealth leaves rural communities and flows to urban centres. In the Skeena, recent years have seen a boom of industrial development, including one of the largest energy in-

vestments in the history of Canada and major projects worth over \$150 billion (representing 60% of all major industrial projects being built or proposed across B.C.) (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2019; LNG Canada, 2018). Despite this boom, the region faces a \$600 million infrastructure deficit (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2019).

Second, the natural capital of rural regions provides critical ecosystem services—including carbon sequestration, food production, sustaining biodiversity—that “travel” great distances to benefit rural and urban citizens alike and provide opportunities for recreation. However, the cumulative impacts of resource extraction are contributing to ecological decline and degrading the capacity of rural regions to provide ecosystem services (Allred, Smith, Twidwell, Haggerty, Running, Naugle, & Fuhlendorf, 2015; Robertson, Schuster, Mitchell, Cameron, Jacob, Preston, Neupane, Vickers, & McMillan, 2018). At

present, a large proportion of Canada’s critically important ecosystem service hotspots (54–66%) overlap with current and planned resource extraction activities (Mitchell, Schuster, Jacob, Hanna, Dallaire, Raudsepp-Hearne, Bennett, Lehner, & Chan, 2021). Sectors such as forestry, mining, and oil and gas extraction are central to many resource-based economies but have all been recognized as having a major impact on biodiversity (Gayton, 2007). The Skeena has experienced these consequences of resource extraction, with cumulative impacts degrading the region’s forests, water quality, and fish habitat (Skeena Watershed Conservation Coalition et al., 2013). The natural environment throughout the Skeena is also increasingly being recognized as an important pillar for local economic development, particularly through nature-based tourism. In the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (a district within the Skeena), annual visitor expenditures increased by 25 percent between 2008 and 2015, contributing nearly \$60 million to the region (Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako, 2017). Guided fishing tourism in the Lower Skeena increased nearly 60 percent from 2013 to 2016, and the Skeena’s wild salmon fishery has been valued at nearly \$110 million annually (Edinger & Britten, n.d.; Swainson, 2009).

Third, climate change will continue to exacerbate many of the challenges outlined above, with significant and disproportionate effects predicted in rural communities (BC Climate Action Secretariat, 2019; Wall & Marzall, 2006). Increased prevalence of wildfires due to climate change has been iden-

Figure 1: Skeena watershed, showing the location of major tributaries and communities (Walters, Lichatowich, Peterman, & Reynolds, 2008)



tified as a threat to the health and safety of forest-adjacent and forest-dependent communities across Canada (Kipp, Cunsolo, Vodden, King, Manners, & Harper, 2019). This increased prevalence of wild-fires, along with more intense precipitation and extreme heat, are being experienced in the Skeena (City of Terrace, 2018; Swainson, 2009). Like other rural regions, some characteristics of the Skeena, such as demographics, remoteness, and under-resourced social and physical infrastructure may increase community vulnerability to climate change (Kipp et al., 2019). The case for rapid rural transitions is growing in urgency, yet communities in the Skeena “are vastly unprepared to support what may come about in the immediate future” (Northwest BC Resource Benefits Alliance, 2019, p. 2).

FINDINGS

Our research focused on 13 different environmental CBOs in the Skeena with a primarily environmental mandate. Their work spans three distinct categories that relate to community development: research and monitoring, policy and advocacy, and community programming. Some CBOs conduct work across multiple categories. The sector has widely diversified sources of funding, including grants from larger philanthropic foundations, corporate donors, government, fee for service work, sales revenues, social enterprises, individual donors, and interest-generating endowments. Of the CBOs identified, 77 percent (10) have charitable status, and nearly 50 percent are based in the town of Smithers. The findings are presented below with a thematic focus on place-based dynamics, the role of environmental philanthropy, and the CBOs' primary areas of impact.

Place-based dynamics

A universal theme across interviews was a deeply rooted connection to place held by all participants, from CBO staff to government representatives. For example, numerous participants spoke of how salmon are a unifying force that receive broad support across the region, and as such, are at the heart of many conservation efforts in the Skeena. Multiple CBOs work on Skeena salmon conservation, including through salmon research, monitoring, and sustainable fisheries, often in partnership with local First Nations.

The strong sense of place and community in the Skeena is mirrored by a general suspicion of outside interests and prioritization of local values. Several people spoke of a lack of trust in organizations not based in the region, regardless of the organization's intentions or mandate. Stories were shared of outsiders, including large Environmental Non-Government Organizations (ENGOS), who “blundered in” without the context or understanding of what it is like to live in a tight-knit community, which limited their ability to engage in meaningful work. Participants spoke of the trust held in locally based organizations, which is shaped by relationships with people in the community and the inherent understanding these organizations have of local contexts. Participants frequently noted the importance of relationships in moving work forward.

The wide degree of collaboration both among CBOs and between CBOs and First Nations is a defining feature of the sector in the Skeena. Many participants noted the benefits of collaboration and coalition-building, including the efficiencies achieved from combining efforts and pooling resources, and the benefits of avoiding duplicative work. Having “strength in numbers” was noted as being particularly important when advocating for policy changes at the provincial or federal levels. However, collaborations between CBOs and local governments were found to be minimal and was

noted as an opportunity by several participants. The select organizations that did reference collaborations with local governments cited those partnerships as critical to getting meaningful projects off the ground. Several participants cited early examples of governments, both First Nations and settler governments alike, working closely with CBOs. For example, some CBOs have conducted pilots and provided proof of concepts, such as in sustainable and regenerative local food projects, that can subsequently inform policy changes. Other CBOs generate data, such as local ecosystem valuations, that can inform decision-making for First Nations or local governments.

Role of CBOs

Participants broadly felt that CBOs have played, and continue to play, a critical role in the region. The roles expressed by participants can be categorized into the following areas: 1) filling gaps left by government, 2) blending external capital with local capacity, and 3) promoting dialogue and accountability.

First, when asked to reflect on the relationships between governments and the local environmental philanthropy sector, many participants spoke of the impacts of government withdrawal in the region and the offloading of government responsibilities to the philanthropic sector. It was felt that the demand for resource extraction in the Skeena has not been coupled with sufficient government resources to monitor and evaluate environmental impacts. Several participants responded with notable frustration and disappointment when speaking of the abdication of government from environmental research, monitoring, and management. One participant also commented on the burden that this places on local First Nations to respond to and assess a high number of industrial proposals for projects in their territories: "Part of the challenge is that government agencies that are responsible for resource management have been severely gutted over the last several decades and just lack capacity" (Research participant #13).

It was clear that CBOs are contributing significantly to filling this gap. Several CBOs in the region have research-related mandates, with some also feeding data directly into government systems. One participant from an Indigenous-led organization spoke of the role CBO research plays in informing Indigenous governance and territory management strategies. However, having CBOs take on such responsibilities also creates tension. Some participants, both from inside and outside of the environmental sector, saw environmental research and monitoring as a role that should inherently be filled by the government in the long-term. Another participant noted how this role needs to evolve as local First Nations continue to build internal capacity and assert their rights in governing their traditional territories:

As First Nations continue to build more capacity to have their own in-house biologists or wildlife experts, water experts, all of that expertise is growing in our region, and so we rely less and less on those organizations [CBOs]. But they definitely are partners in a lot of different work that we do. (Research participant #6)

Several participants from outside of the sector expressed concern over CBOs conducting scientific research due to their environmental priorities and the potential for bias to be embedded in the results. However, two participants who work for different research-based CBOs in the region reflected on their intentional efforts to avoid advocacy-based work, ensuring that they presented scientific

facts. Both participants noted their success in avoiding perceptions of bias and having their research leveraged by governments, industry, and environmental groups.

Second, of the 13 environmental CBOs, ten operated as a registered charity for at least a one-year period between 2016 and 2020. Based on publicly available financial reporting, these ten CBOs with charitable status collectively reported revenues of nearly \$10 million over the same five-year period. This figure is a conservative estimate of the sector's impact; it does not account for CBOs that are not actively registered charities, nor does it account for the operating revenues of at least two CBOs prior to receiving charitable status. Additionally, two of the CBOs are local satellite offices of larger provincial or national charities; these organizations do not provide a regional funding breakdown, making it difficult to quantify their impact in the Skeena. As such, the actual five-year revenues of all CBOs operating in the region are likely much larger and represent a significant inflow of capital to the regional economy. Most organizations reported receiving a large proportion of their funding from sources external to the region. This funding is blended with local human capital and further supports capacity building in the region. One participant commented on their organization's intentional efforts in capacity building through hiring and training local people and running skill-building programming.

The international attention and exposure that the Skeena has received was thought to have contributed to cultivating a strong sector of CBOs and improving access to funding and supports from larger national and international organizations. It was also recognized as an increasing driver of direct funding to local First Nations.

Finally, CBOs in the Skeena were noted as playing a key role as the conveners and facilitators of important discussions about regional development. According to participants, these organizations play this role by hosting events, conferences, and seminars, and providing the public with different perspectives and information—referred to by one participant as “the other side of the story.” Participants noted that CBOs can also act as translators, communicating information and science in lay language in a way that is digestible and accessible to the public. One participant referred to this as “information democracy,” which is a core pillar of their organization's values. This public dialogue and knowledge dissemination was seen as critical in holding industry and government accountable and promoting transparency: “[CBOs] are pretty crucial for encouraging critical thinking and dialogue around what's happening in the region” (Research participant #18).

Areas of Impact

Although environmental protection and conservation has historically been the primary focus of the local environmental sector, the work of many environmental philanthropic organizations in the Skeena is increasingly stretching beyond causes that are purely “environmental” in nature. Many organizations in the region not only have a strong understanding of the interconnectedness between environmental, social, and economic issues, but they are also actively incorporating this systems lens into their programming and initiatives. Three areas of impact stand out from the research.

First, several CBOs have dedicated substantial time, funding, and energy to advocating for change in policies and management practices that affect the integrity of the environment. The areas of ad-

vocacy were predominantly focused on fisheries and other extractive industries such as mining and forestry. Multiple participants involved in this advocacy and policy reform work noted their tight-knit collaboration in the work with other local organizations.

Second, participants from CBOs noted that most of their work was done in partnership with local First Nations, with several organizations noting that they had Indigenous staff or board members. Numerous participants felt that environmental philanthropy fosters opportunities for direct, tactical collaboration between settler and Indigenous Peoples and creates opportunities for relationship-building and partnership. This was broadly seen as supporting “reconciliation” efforts in the region: “[The sector] provides funding for First Nations and non-First Nations people to work together, which I think goes a long way in addressing reconciliation” (Research participant #8).

CBOs are supplementing the capacity of local First Nations in territorial management, for example, through ecological monitoring and research. However, this is a delicate balance: over-involvement can also hinder Indigenous capacity-building by maintaining control and power structures outside of Indigenous organizations. Several participants underscored the importance of CBOs reflecting on the space they take up, as well as the frequent disparity between the intent and the impact of engagements with Indigenous peoples. While there was strong interest among CBOs in decolonizing organizational processes and practices, efforts to do so remain limited to several individuals. Finding the capacity and resources to support decolonization and reconciliation efforts was cited as a barrier by several organizations. For instance, multiple organizations noted their difficulties in accessing funding to support relationship-building with First Nations:

We had environmental groups that were sort of acting as the middleman between philanthropic foundations and First Nations. And that really limited capacity building for First Nations, that limited the relationships that could be built. And so, a lot of my work has been trying to actually work more directly between First Nations and philanthropic foundations. (Research participant #6)

Third, the lack of local benefits from industrial resource extraction was also a point of concern—many participants noted how industrial projects tended to create mostly temporary jobs that are filled by a transient workforce, rather than long-term, stable jobs that are available to locals. CBOs were noted as a powerful force in the region that can have significant influence over economic development decisions. However, there has been a concerted effort and a recent shift among CBOs away from reacting to industrial development and proactively towards demonstrating sustainable development. This has manifested through the support and funding of local initiatives such as sustainable Indigenous-led fisheries, regenerative agriculture social enterprises, and business innovation programs and projects. One organization also convened a local Community Economic Development Committee to promote the social, economic, and cultural health of the area.

Participants frequently noted the sector’s direct impact of job creation and recirculation of wealth in the local economy and CBOs were seen as a source of long-term, stable jobs. From 2016 to 2020, CBOs that were registered charities accounted for 59 annual full-time and part-time positions and spent nearly \$7 million compensating those employees and paying for professional services:

“There’s been stable jobs associated with environmental management, stewardship, conservation for years. And they probably outweigh, because they’re more long term, they’re more durable than these promised industry jobs” (Research participant #6).

DISCUSSION

Structural role of CBOs in place-based development

Community-based organizations in the Skeena region are advancing community development in multiple ways. First, they are addressing and responding to senior government withdrawal and the resulting rural government capacity bottlenecks that have pervaded rural communities across the country (Douglas, 2005; FCM, 2012). The retreat of government in the Skeena is consistent with broader trends of rural restructuring in Canada (Ryser et al., 2022). In the wake of this withdrawal, CBOs are filling gaps and roles that traditionally would fall under government purview, including conducting environmental research and monitoring, collaborating with First Nations on sustainable resource management initiatives, convening public discussions on environmental management, and making policy recommendations. This allocation of roles offers some benefits, including freedom from short-term electoral cycles that allows for longer-term orientation and greater flexibility due to less red tape and compliance requirements than government equivalents (Dodgson & Gann, 2020). However, it also comes with challenges. Research participants from outside of the sector were quick to raise concerns about the government’s lack of participation or collaboration in these initiatives, including the potential for bias to be embedded in the work led by CBOs, and the sector’s dependency on external philanthropic funding to conduct this work.

Second, CBOs are advancing place-based development by conducting their work with a distinctively place-based lens. The sector’s work centres around promoting, understanding, and preserving the unique natural assets of the Skeena. In this way, CBOs are contributing to a process of reframing community development around the assets that already exist in the region (Mathie, Cameron, & Gibson, 2017). The sector’s rootedness in the community and unwavering commitment to local priorities provides it with an intrinsic advantage over external actors (Gilbert, 2018; Layton, 2016).

Third, the work of CBOs is directly reducing the barriers to place-based development, which may better position local governments to pursue place-based approaches in the future. The sector has accrued considerable local capacity, which the literature has shown to be a key barrier to place-based development (Gibson & Barrett, 2018; Markey et al., 2015). Community-based organizations are providing examples of approaches to development rooted in local assets and proof of concept initiatives that can guide governments both in the Skeena and elsewhere. They also produce considerable locally relevant research and data, a lack of which in rural communities has been documented to hinder the uptake of place-based approaches (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, 2019). Multiple CBOs in the region have a primary mandate of monitoring and conducting environmental research and generating data that is used to inform regional decision-making. A portion of this research relates to understanding the impacts of climate change at a local level, which is helping to ground this complex, global issue into regional contexts, and supports community understanding and dialogue about resilience.

To scale its impact, it is critical for the sector to engage government in its work (United Nations Office for Partnerships, 2019). At present, however, the sector remains underrecognized and un-

derutilized by local governments. This is likely driven by several factors, including the limited capacity at the local government level to develop relationships and create such opportunities. The politicization of environmentalism in the region and the fault lines that have developed around industrial projects may also be contributing to a strategy of avoidance by local governments. Participants from various levels of governments attributed their lack of partnerships with CBOs in the region to their requirement of remaining “neutral,” particularly in reference to relations between environmental groups and industry. While conventional definitions of collaboration may require collaborators to be more closely aligned in terms of values, newer theories embrace the notion of plurality, or “attending to multiple diverse wholes,” and suggest that conflict and complexity should instead be embraced and centred in co-creation (Kahane, 2017).

Interestingly, one of the most effective strategies for engaging government is something that CBOs in the Skeena are already doing: leading by example (United Nations Office for Partnerships, 2019). Numerous participants in this research commented on their organization’s strategic shift from “opposing” industrial development to “proposing” sustainable resource management through scalable initiatives and proof of concepts. Accordingly, by continuing to demonstrate success, governments will eventually take note of the value that is being created by CBOs in the region. In an era of limited capacity, expanding mandates, and increasingly complex and overlapping challenges facing rural governments, there is a significant opportunity for local governments to synergize with existing local assets to support place-based development.

Change in the philanthropic sector

The nature of the work being advanced by philanthropic actors in the Skeena, both CBOs and funders alike, provides tangible evidence of significant change across the broader philanthropic sector. As the environmental philanthropy sector in Canada has undergone a period of “professionalization” in recent decades, so too have the organizations in the Skeena transitioned to being more sophisticated and influential actors in the community addressing complex issues of structural significance to the region (Affolderbach, 2011). The global philanthropic sector has also been documented to be shifting towards systems-change approaches to address complex and interconnected issues in society (Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, 2019; Rural Development Institute, 2011). There is a growing acknowledgement that environmental philanthropy must continue to move beyond the siloed paradigm in which it has operated in the past, and link climate and conservation work with economic, health, and social justice priorities (Phillips & Wyatt, 2021). A reckoning of the interconnectedness of priorities is well underway in the Skeena, so much so that the characterization of “environmental” may no longer be accurate for some organizations that have moved well beyond purely environmental objectives. Considerations of political, economic, social, and environmental priorities are increasingly being embedded in the work of environmental groups, which marks a significant evolution from past approaches in B.C., where ENGOs narrowly focused on environmental issues and dismissed the intersections of “race, class, gender and sexuality ... as ‘social’ issues” (Braun, 2002). For example, CBOs in the Skeena are co-creating sustainable fisheries with local First Nations and launching regenerative agriculture projects, both of which offer a host of co-benefits to the community that stretch well beyond environmental outcomes.

Another area of significant change amongst philanthropic actors in the Skeena region concerns collaboration and coalition-building between the environmental philanthropy sector and First Nations. This process has been ongoing for several decades and has created substantial opportunities for the building and deepening of relationships between settler and Indigenous communities. Partnerships with First Nations were recognized by most CBOs as imperative, and the sector is in a state of rapid transition with regards to how such partnerships are perceived and pursued. This transition is inherently complex, and CBOs continue to learn and evolve through a process of trial and error.

As issues of racism and social equity have been thrust into the mainstream spotlight in recent years, the philanthropic sector is reckoning with racism and increasing considerations of racial equity in its work (Buteau & Orensten, 2020). For settler-run CBOs that are committed to working with Indigenous partners, there is an opportunity to embed decolonization efforts into organizational culture, strategies, and processes. Currently, efforts to decolonize the work of CBOs in the Skeena are piecemeal and tend to be reliant on select individual employees, rather than organizations themselves, which is consistent with findings on the broader philanthropic sector (Hague, 2019). As First Nations build their internal capacity and increasingly reclaim their rightful roles in territorial management and governance, CBOs will also be required to evolve. This includes consideration of how the power held by CBOs can be transferred or shared with Indigenous-led organizations. Engaging paid experts to navigate the complexities and nuances of this shift may prove highly valuable for organizations and was noted as an opportunity for CBOs in the Skeena.

Perhaps the most effective way for philanthropic funders to support reconciliation is through directly funding Indigenous-led initiatives, including the revitalization of Indigenous laws and governance structures (Atleo & Boron, 2022). Yet, there remains significant room for improvement in Canada with regards to directing philanthropic funding to Indigenous-led organizations. Foundations providing philanthropic funding to the Skeena may be on the leading-edge of this change; a review of grants awarded by MakeWay (formerly Tides Canada) to recipients based in the Skeena between 2018 and 2021 shows that 36 percent more funding was allocated directly to First Nations (\$1.3M) than to environmental groups (\$863K), (MakeWay, 2022). As this trend continues, it will be critical to allocate funding not only to band councils but also hereditary leadership groups and other Indigenous-run organizations as funding recipients.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) states that reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians “also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). From this perspective, there is undoubtedly a significant opportunity for the environmental philanthropy sector to contribute to advancing reconciliation, by promoting a long-overdue societal shift in how we interact with the natural world. The Skeena would be an excellent region to conduct further research on this topic.

CONCLUSION

This case study provides evidence to support assertions that the philanthropic sector, through community-based organizations, can serve as a strategic partner in place-based development. The philanthropic sector is increasingly orienting towards systems-level change and holistic responses—an approach that is crucial to tackling today's complex and interconnected issues. However, limited awareness and understanding of the sector's role is hindering support that could help to accelerate regional transitions. There are also legitimate concerns regarding the resilience of relying upon non-state actors dependent upon variable sources of philanthropic funding.

This case study also offers several key takeaways for philanthropic actors to help broaden their impact. It provides further evidence to support the transfer of power to local organizations. It highlights the importance of rethinking funding strategies to reflect this new philanthropic paradigm, such as increasing multi-year and operational funding, and funding more innovative projects that can contribute to lasting systems change. Finally, the Skeena case reinforces the need for further research on the role of CBOs in rural development, and for improved data collection and reporting with a rural lens to monitor the sector's impact.

The complexity and scope of overlapping pressures in the Skeena offer a glimpse into the challenging landscapes that rural regions are presently navigating. As rural regions continue to grapple with infrastructure deficits, government capacity challenges, and economic, political, and climate transitions, building resilience to these and other shocks requires rethinking philanthropic roles and development strategies.

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