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The Network Structure of Environmental Justice Social Movements

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What is this research about?

We know there are many organizations working on environmental justice (EJ) around the Delta and across California, each with different approaches, focusing on different issues and engaging in different policy debates. The effectiveness of an EJ movement to influence environmental policy and decision-making may depend on how well these EJ groups work together in collaborative networks. Based on research on social movements, we know that organizations form networks of relationships to help amplify their efforts by building capacity through collaboration. Past research on social movements suggests there are two main factors that influence how organizations choose to form these partnerships: resources and work priorities. Individual organizations do not have sufficient resources on their own to support a social movement and therefore must pool resources together to engage in collective action; resources may include funding, knowledge, and personnel among other assets. Second, organizations usually prefer collaborators that share similar work priorities, similar geographies, or similar commitments to the broader movement. This research project assesses how EJ groups working in the Delta form partnerships with different types of organizations, and the implications these partnerships may have on achieving the movement's broader aims.

Methods

We answer our research question by analyzing the collaboration networks of 21 EJ organizations working in the Delta that were collected through two different interview efforts (Rudnick et al., 2022; Pozzi et al., 2024). Each interview effort asked participants to name organizations they collaborate with on EJ issues in the Delta. Based on interview data, we developed network "maps" that show how organizations partner together (see Figure 1). We acknowledge these networks are not the entire list of collaborators for each of these organizations, but rather they represent a subset of partners who specifically work on EJ efforts in the Delta region. Following the interviews, we collected publicly available data online about the organizations that were

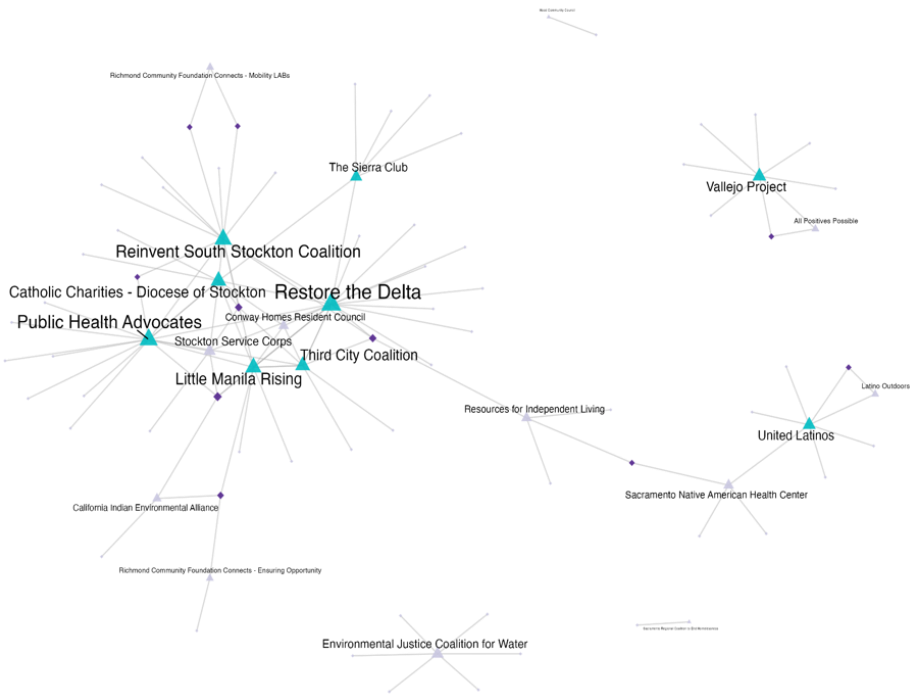

Figure 1 Combined network map of all 21 networks in the paper. Organizations interviewed are marked with a triangle; organizations that were named as partners, but not interviewed themselves are marked with a diamond. The organizational "nodes" are scaled in size based on how many partners are connected to them (i.e. "degree"), with larger nodes having more partners. Blue nodes mean an organization was named as a collaborator more than once and purple nodes mean an organization was interviewed and named as a collaborator.

named as partners (but not interviewed themselves) to know their organizational type, year established, number of staff, financials, geographic scale, commitment to EJ, and the type of issues they work on. Once all the data was compiled, we used a statistical modelling approach to estimate the correlation between organizational attributes and likelihood of collaboration between two organizations.

Key findings

Through our 21 interviews, we identified a total of 72 unique collaborators across all networks. On average, an EJ network contained six collaborators and ranged from 1 to 20 collaborators. Interviewees were predominantly Community-Based Orgs (n:10) and Non-Governmental Orgs (n:6) and majority considered EJ a key work area or their central purpose (n:14). Economic development and pollution and public health were the top two concerns. While our analyses showed that EJ groups have a variety of approaches for developing partnerships based on their capacity and the centrality of EJ to their mission, we saw that organizations were more likely to form partnerships with other organizations that were participating in the same collaborative group (e.g., Stockton Rising), working on similar issues of concern, or working in the same local geographic area. We also found that organizations were *less* likely to form partnerships with organizations that were further away from them or did not have 501c3 status.

Overall, the results provide evidence of EJ groups preferring collaborators with similar work priorities as themselves, while also seeking out "broker organizations" – or those organizations that span across otherwise disconnected groups of organizations. Connecting with a broker organization is a key strategy for accessing important knowledge and a wider community of partners. Our results also highlight the diversity of organizations working on EJ and how broadly EJ is conceptualized across organizations in this region. These orgs work on issues ranging from public health and pollution to tree-planting to workforce development, all of which have come to fall under the umbrella of "EJ". Participating in a collaborative or coordinating on a specific issue is way for an EJ group to find their community of trusted partners within the diffuse bounds of the EJ movement.

How to use the findings

EJ groups can use these findings to understand the role they play in supporting the Delta EJ movement, find out who the broker organizations are, as well as identify organizations they are not working with yet but could be beneficial to collaborate with moving forward. EJ groups trying to become more central to the Delta EJ movement could partner with organizations that participate in several EJ-related collaboratives such as Public Health Advocates, GRID Alternatives, and the Sierra Club to name a few examples. The findings from this study can also be used to inform government programs and funding opportunities that support collaborative relationships between EJ groups and build capacity for EJ in the Delta. Government agencies who want to partner with EJ groups can prioritize engagement with broker organizations and co-develop programs that directly address priority issues of EJ groups. Figure 1 shows how certain organizations like Restore the Delta and Little Manila Rising connect with both local EJ groups and regional organizations. Agencies can prioritize engagement with organizations that span across different communities to more efficiently connect the broader Delta EJ movement. Secondly, co-developing programs that focus on priority issues for EJ groups will incentivize participation and sustainability of EJ efforts. For example, given that workforce development is a top issue for many EJ groups, providing opportunities for EJ leaders to work alongside government employees will help build technical capacity in both the EJ community and agency staff. Lastly, these findings show how long-term and repeated investment in EJ communities can support collaboration among EJ groups. Funders who want to invest in EJ network capacity building could directly invest in funding collaborative groups of organizations that are working together on a designated set of goals. This will provide EJ groups with much needed resources to continue coordinating and jointly implementing programs.

Literature Cited

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