

Environmental Support Center Strategic Plan 2007- 2008

An Executive Summary

The Environmental Support Center “promotes the quality of the natural environment, human health, and community sustainability by increasing the organizational effectiveness of regional, state, and local organizations working on environmental issues and for environmental justice.”

In 2006, ESC retained *OpenSource Leadership Strategies, Inc.* to facilitate a strategic planning process designed to articulate strategic goals for the coming three to five years. In the midst of the planning process, however, founding executive director Jim Abernathy stepped down after 16 years at the helm. Additionally, the preparatory data gathered by OpenSource revealed the need to take a broader view of ESC’s strategic direction and the assumptions inherent in its mission.

As a result, ESC adjusted its planning process to focus on developing a shared theory of change that would incorporate its evolving anti-racism lens. In response to the leadership transition, ESC’s Board and staff simultaneously outlined a strategic direction that would guide the recruitment of its new Executive Director, and an interim 18-month action plan to move the strategic direction forward.

To give the Environmental Support Center a 360-degree perspective of itself and the environment in which it operates, the OpenSource team reviewed key organizational documents and surveyed or interviewed 103 stakeholders and observers.

Overall stakeholders hold positive impressions of ESC and want its work to continue, albeit with more strategic focus and a greater presence. OpenSource reviewed key organizational documents and surveyed or interviewed 103 stakeholders and observers. According to their input, ESC faces the need for major change – in strategic

direction and/or structure – in order to fulfill its potential in the current context. OpenSource’s conclusions were:

* ESC is trusted widely as a leader because of its diverse networks, strong relationships, and knowledge of both grassroots environmental communities and funders. However, stakeholders want to see ESC realize its potential as a leader by convening constituents, stimulating broad-based dialogue and collaboration around complex issues – from environmental racism to global warming, and educating funders and the traditional environmental movement about grassroots needs and issues;

* Responses to questions about the impact of racism on the environmental movement reflect the spectrum of organizational missions, constituencies, and focus of work, as well as fundamental tension about how and whether to address racism and other forms of oppression in relation to environmental issues. Those working in or with organizations addressing environmental justice in communities of color communicate a clearer analysis of the role of racism, while those working in organizations that do not explicitly address environmental justice and/or serve predominantly white communities express a range of perspectives, including a sense of befuddlement about the role of racism and a perception that racism does not impact their work at all.

* Several stakeholders pointed to ESC’s unique position to convene grantees for mutual learning, collaboration, and story sharing, as well as collective anti-racism work, and other bridge-building skills. Others urged ESC to leverage its relationships with traditional environmental groups and foundation funders to educate them about the needs of communities most affected by environmental injustices and make these needs a funding priority.

“To take on this role, ESC needs to innovate and experiment with approaches that go beyond the technical assistance and capacity building it currently provides to its constituents. Many recognize that ESC can help fa-

cilitate collective dialogue and strategizing to advance the movement and, without necessarily becoming the spokesperson for the movement, enhance its capacity to articulate a new, bold vision of change“—*OpenSource*

At ESC’s March Leadership Retreat, the Board and staff explicitly outlined the “theory of change” that begins with the organization’s vision and mission, as indicated below.

Vision

All people, regardless of race, ethnicity, or income level, have the opportunity to determine the sustainability of their communities. Dynamic and effective activist organizations at the grassroots, state, and regional levels authentically represent the interests of the community residents to whom they are accountable; and elected officials and others in position of authority respect and advance those interests. As a result, all communities in the country are free from environmental hazards, enjoy a healthy natural environment, and offer employment through ventures that are environmentally and socially sustainable.

Mission

To promote the quality of the natural environment, human health, and community sustainability by increasing the organizational effectiveness of regional, state, and local organizations working on environmental issues and for environmental justice.

ESC’s vision and mission have depended on three core assumptions:

* Given our federal system of government, environmental policy is usually implemented and enforced at the local and state level;

* Thus, local and state environmental groups do much of the ‘heavy lifting’ to effect environmental policy; and

* Chronically under-capitalized, these local and state environmental groups need help in sustaining their advocacy efforts over the long term.

Based on its understanding of the current context as well as its evolving Dismantling Racism lens, ESC’s Board and staff broadened its theory of change rationale to include:

* To be sustainable and effective, local and state environmental groups must not only develop key organizational capacities (e.g., leadership and governance, strategic planning and evaluation, fundraising and financial management, base building, advocacy, and communications) but also embrace a *power analysis*, an *anti-racism lens*, and a *sense of movement building*;

* ESC will prioritize and reach out to environmental justice groups, while strategically supporting the needs of selected mainstream environmental activist organizations;

* Furthermore, ESC will fulfill its potential as a national leader, convener, and model, connecting various segments of the environmental and social justice movements and advancing its evolving anti-racist lens in organizational capacity building.

The ESC Board and staff clarified six programmatic and organizational strategic goals:

1. Keep ESC’s internal Dismantling Racism work alive and integrate it with all organizational and operational aspects;
2. Build ESC’s brand of capacity building – focused on environmental justice groups and selected mainstream environmental activist groups – through a Dismantling Racism lens;
3. With continued humility, leverage ESC’s position to create the conditions that support environmental justice work and bring an EJ lens to the mainstream environmental community;
4. Strengthen ESC’s staff capacity to reflect and advance ESC’s strategic direction;
5. Strengthen ESC’s Board capacity to reflect and advance ESC’s strategic direction.
6. Ensure sufficient, appropriate, and diversified fi-

nancial resources to support ESC's programs, staff, and strategic direction.

Next Steps

Between now and December 2008, these goals will guide the Environmental Support Center's internal and external activities. Key actions will include:

- * Documenting and sharing the internal Dismantling Racism work of the board and staff;
- * Mapping the Environmental Support Center's networks and identifying priorities for outreach and relationship-building;
- * Assessing the needs of environmental justice organizations and selected environmental activist groups;
- * Conducting a comprehensive cross-program evaluation of the Environmental Support Center's current programs;
- * Hiring a new Executive Director to lead the organization on this strategic direction, and increasing the number of board members who represent environmental justice constituencies;
- * Developing a written piece on climate change and its impact on and roles for the environmental justice movement;
- * Talking with environmental and progressive funders about the needs of the environmental justice movement;
- * Exploring ways to act as a convener or facilitator;
- * Determining programs and funding streams that will allow the Environmental Support Center to best fulfill its role in 2009 and beyond.

In addition, the Environmental Support Center will continue to carry out its current programs and commitments, including:

~ **Training and Organizational Assistance** program (TOA) which provides subsidies and other resources

for a broad range of capacity-building activities;

~ **Leadership and Enhanced Assistance Program** (LEAP) which provides money, peer support and other tools for groups engaging in long-term, intensive internal development;

~ **Fundraising for Sustainable Organizations Program** (FUNDS) which provides grant, mentoring and low-interest loans to help design and implement fundraising strategies; and

~ **Technology Resources**, which provides assessments, hardware, software and other materials, training and support for environmental justice organizations in the southeastern and southwestern region of the country.

OpenSource Leadership Strategies, Inc. addresses the organizational development and strategy needs of nonprofits and other social change agents. OpenSource works with Client Partners to align mission-driven outcomes (i.e., what you want to accomplish) with internal systems (i.e., how you accomplish it) for greater impact and integrity. Gita Gulati-Partee founded OpenSource in 2003 and describes herself as, "a practical visionary and a tempered radical." She approaches work and life with a sense of purpose, possibility and humor. For more information please visit their website at www.opensourceleadership.com.



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Building Power at the Grassroots

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