Informing, Enabling and Inspiring Social Innovation by Geographic Systems Mapping: A Case Study in Workforce Development

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Abstract : The nonprofit and public sectors are increasingly turning to Geographic Information Systems for data visualizations which can better inform programmatic and policy decisions. Additionally, the private and nonprofit sectors are turning to systems mapping to better understand the ecosystems within which they operate. This study explores the potential which combining these data visualization methods—a method which is called geographic systems mapping—to create an exhaustive and comprehensive understanding of a social problem's ecosystem may have in social innovation efforts. Researchers with Grand Valley State University collaborated with Talent 2025 of West Michigan to conduct a mixed-methods research study to paint a comprehensive picture of the workforce development ecosystem in West Michigan. Using semi-structured interviewing, observation, secondary research, and quantitative analysis, data were compiled on workforce development organizations' locations, programming, metrics for success, partnerships, funding sources, and service language. To best visualize and disseminate the data, a geographic system map was created which identifies programmatic, operational, and geographic gaps in workforce development services of West Michigan. By combining geographic and systems mapping methods, the geographic system map provides insight into the cross-sector relationships, collaboration, and competition which exists among and between workforce development organizations. These insights identify opportunities for and constraints around cross-sectoral social innovation in the West Michigan workforce development ecosystem. This paper will discuss the process utilized to prepare the geographic systems map, explain the results and outcomes, and demonstrate how geographic systems mapping illuminated the needs of the community and opportunities for social innovation. As complicated social problems like unemployment often require cross-sectoral and multi-stakeholder solutions, there is potential for geographic systems mapping to be a tool which informs, enables, and inspires these solutions.

Keywords : cross-sector collaboration, data visualization, geographic systems mapping, social innovation, workforce development