



The Success Lab

Advancing Place-Based Environmental Impact Through Research and Practice

Place-based environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) play a critical yet often under-recognized role in stewarding natural resources and supporting resilient communities. Rooted in specific landscapes, these organizations hold the relationships, legitimacy, and local knowledge required to navigate complex social and ecological challenges.

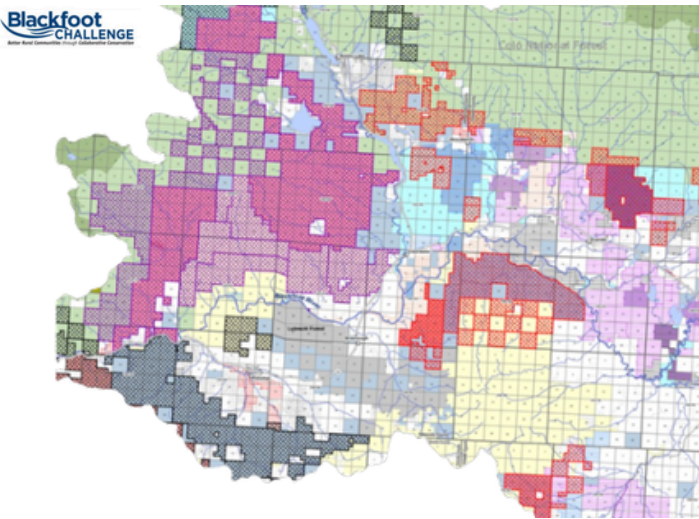
Yet the conservation and development fields lack shared language and evidence to explain how place-based ENGOS generate durable change. Their contributions are often measured through transactional outputs— projects completed, hectares restored, meetings held— rather than the deeper relational, institutional, and governance work that sustains long-term impact.

Our Approach

The Success Lab is a collaborative, applied research initiative focused on understanding how place-based ENGOS contribute to long-term social and environmental change across specific landscapes. Working in partnership with practitioners, the Lab examines impact across multiple pathways, including governance processes, institutional arrangements, organizational practices, and knowledge translation. Our work combines social science theory, participatory research methods, and practitioner expertise to co-produce knowledge that is both academically rigorous and operationally useful. Rather than evaluating individual projects, the Success Lab focuses on the organizational practices and contextual factors that allow ENGOS to navigate complexity, adapt to change, and sustain impact over time.

How Success Lab Works

- Deep, place-based case studies with selected ENGOS to understand organizational practices, relational dynamics, and enabling conditions for success
- Participatory research design that engages practitioners in shaping questions, interpreting findings, and identifying what is most useful
- Translation to practice, turning academic insights into frameworks and reflection tools that can travel across contexts
- Learning and training for graduate students and environmental practitioners worldwide through integration with Yale School of the Environment curriculum, seminars, and convenings



Landscape complexity emerges from the mosaic of ownership, conservation, and governance systems across the Blackfoot watershed. Credit: Blackfoot Challenge

The Challenge

Addressing climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequity requires transformative change, and ENGOS are on the front lines of driving it. They build coalitions, bridge knowledge across scales, and create space for shifting societal norms while navigating shrinking budgets, shifting donor priorities, and political uncertainty. Despite these responsibilities, most ENGOS lack the tools to assess impact beyond transactional measures. Existing impact frameworks rarely account for governance context, historical dynamics, or broader community processes, and the academic literature under-theorizes ENGOS' role in democratic and hybrid governance systems. Without clearer understanding of what enables place-based ENGOS to succeed, the field risks inadvertently undermining effective practice at precisely the moment these organizations are most needed.

Pilot Case-Studies

The Lab's initial research includes two pilot case studies:

- Blackfoot Challenge (Montana) — A landscape-scale collaborative conservation organization working across private and public lands.
- Urban Resources Initiative (Connecticut) — A long-standing community-forestry organization advancing urban environmental stewardship.

Together, they offer contrasting and complementary perspectives on how ENGOS operate across different governance systems, social contexts, and ecological settings.



William Tisdale, URI staff, and community members planting trees at the Botanical Garden of Healing in New Haven, CT. © Mike Doolittle.

What We're Learning

Across both case studies, early findings reveal practices often invisible in standard impact reporting but central to durable change. Effective place-based ENGOS tend to:

- Serve as critical bridging organizations, connecting communities, scientists, and public agencies.
- Build and sustain trust-based relationships across diverse stakeholders.
- Recognize community members as experts in their own landscapes and lived experience.
- Translate scientific evidence into locally meaningful action.
- Support democratic engagement while navigating politically and socially contested environments.



Who We Are

Led by Dr. Amity Doolittle at the Yale School of the Environment, the Success Lab brings together researchers, practitioners, and students with expertise in environmental governance, participatory research, and applied scholarship. Embedded within YSE's graduate training program and Yale-ELTI's capacity development program, the Lab creates direct pathways from research to practice, training, and broader field learning.

Learn More at <http://successlab.yale.edu>