Poster Title:
Qualitative and Quantitative Methods for Developing a Typology of Community Engagement with Sustainability Programs

Conference Theme:
Decision science and decision making

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Abstract:
Identifying the needs that a community must satisfy to implement sustainability programs is complex, with interplay between geographic, environmental and social influences. Helping communities meet these needs is a focus of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (U.S. EPA) Sustainable and Healthy Communities (SHC) Research Program. SHC provides useful tools and information to communities for improved decision making in response to changing conditions and community goals. One such tool is the Community Typologies Framework. The typology framework categorizes communities according to geographic, environmental, and social influences and lends insight towards the interplay between those influences. More specifically, it utilizes national-level quantitative datasets and qualitative research to construct community types reflective of their policy/programmatic engagement with sustainability, their capacity to establish new programs, and their environmental stressors (in this case, land-use change). Understanding the types of communities allows national and regional organizations to work with communities as groups, and helps individual communities to identify partner communities that may be tackling similar issues.

Phase I of this research used statistical analyses to identify initial groupings of the national-level data based on the interplay between the three components (environmental stressor, existing sustainability programs, and capacity to engage in programs). The data were drawn from the 2010 International City/County Management Association (ICMA) survey of local government sustainability policies and programs and the 2010 U.S. Census. These initial analyses revealed four major types of communities, from which a draft tool was developed to visually display the typology.
Phase II of this research involves qualitative interviews from each of the four community types from within three different regions of the United States (the northeast, the south and the mountain regions). This work will contextualize the types of communities to further develop the understanding of how community type impacts local decision making. Additionally, we will be conducting focus groups with regional planning bodies to understand the value of this information for regional decision making. Finally, in Phase II, we will be refining the tool and conducting feedback sessions with local and regional planners to ensure the usefulness of the tool for decision makers.

Phase I and II of this research seek to answer the following questions: 1) Is it possible to develop a national-level typology of sustainability within communities within the constraints of existing data? 2) Does the qualitative groundtruthing of the quantitative analysis support the statistical groupings, and do those groupings have practical implications? and 3) How can we build a typology tool and framework that is useful to decision makers? The mixed-methods approach to this research aims to provide an important framework and tool for decision makers seeking assistance in furthering the sustainability of their communities.