

The Social Network of a Geographically Isolated Cultural Nonprofit: International Sonoran Desert Alliance

The International Sonoran Desert Alliance (ISDA) develops cultural arts programming with multi-purposed goals. It is an important regional center for the arts, providing artist housing in the re-purposed Curley School, a visiting artists program, and after-school arts initiatives. Located close to the Mexican border and even closer to the tribal lands of the Tohono O’odham Nation, ISDA incorporates cultural preservation as a significant part of its mission. Local culture is inextricably linked to its environment within the 10,000 square mile Sonoran Desert.

While these facts successfully communicate ISDA as a hard-working nonprofit in a culturally and environmentally interesting environment, they do not adequately capture the truly notable aspects of the environment in which ISDA operates. ISDA is not just in the desert. Phoenix and Tucson, the two closest cities, are in the desert as well. ISDA is located in Ajo, Arizona. Ajo has a population of less than 4,000. It is 43 miles north of the Mexican border; 112 miles south of Phoenix; 135 miles west of Tucson, approximately 90 miles of which are across tribal lands; and 157 miles east of Yuma, AZ.¹ While the small town of Ajo itself has a population density of 132 people per square mile,² the population density of the land for more than 100 miles in any direction is less than 2 persons per square mile.³

The Research Question

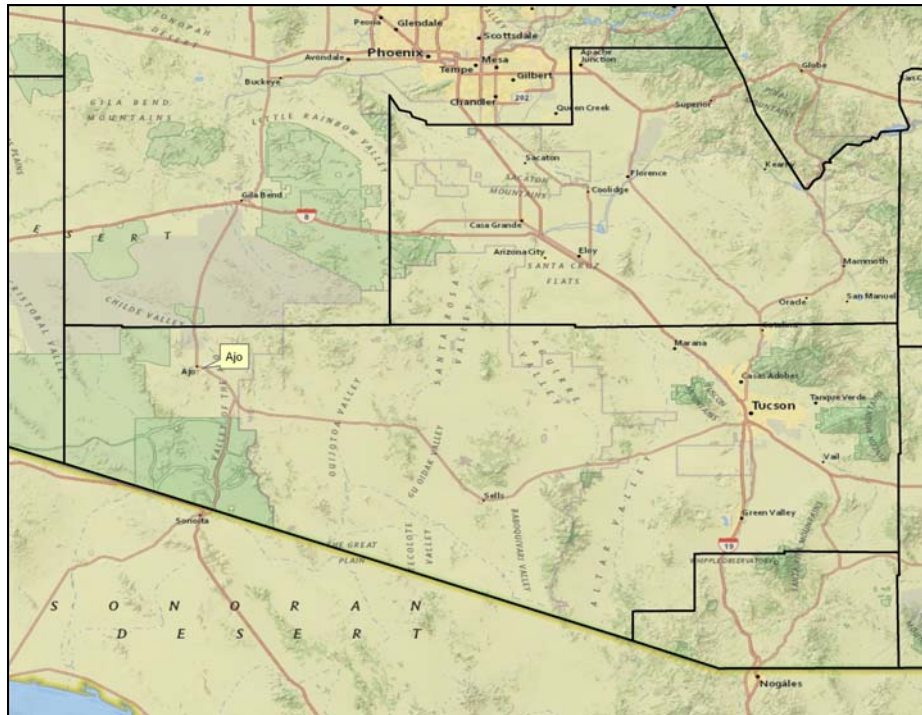
The case of ISDA raises an important question about cultural nonprofits working in geographically isolated settings: must these organizations also work in social isolation? The small size of Ajo seems to limit the number of potential partners in town, and the large distances to the closest population centers seem to present an additional barrier to developing partners. Even ISDA’s location within Pima County, and hence its relationship to County government, seems to put it at a disadvantage. *Figure 1* shows the location of Ajo in Pima County.

¹ The miles reported here are by road, not ‘as the crow flies’.

² Population density is based on US Census data for the year 2000 and reported at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ajo,_Arizona, accessed 6/13/2012.

³ The Nature Conservancy. 2000. “Population and conservation in the Sonoran Desert,” pp 188-9 in AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment, Paul Harrison, Fred Pearce, and Peter H Raven (eds). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Figure 1
Pima County, Arizona



Pima County, Arizona, extends to the Mexican border. The County seat is Tucson. The map of Pima County presented in *Figure 1* above shows Pima County with Ajo to the west and Tucson to the east. Almost all of the land between the two cities is tribal land of the Tohono O’odham Nation. South and southwest of Ajo are the Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument and the Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge. We include the counties north of Pima County to show the location of Phoenix, the closest city of significant size to Ajo.

In this paper we discuss the results of determining and mapping ISDA’s community partner organizations. We asked ISDA to provide us with a list of the different community initiatives in which they were involved, along with their partners in the initiatives. They provided data on four social networks currently of importance to them:

- Ajo Food Partnership
- Community for All Ages Network
- Shared Asset Measurement Network
- Southwest Rural Policy Network

ISDA is a partner in all of these networks, although they did not initiate all the networks. These social networks represent specific links in time and space to other organizations in a setting in which resources and information are shared. This sharing of resources and information allows all of the organizations in the network to respond more quickly and effectively to new problems and opportunities.

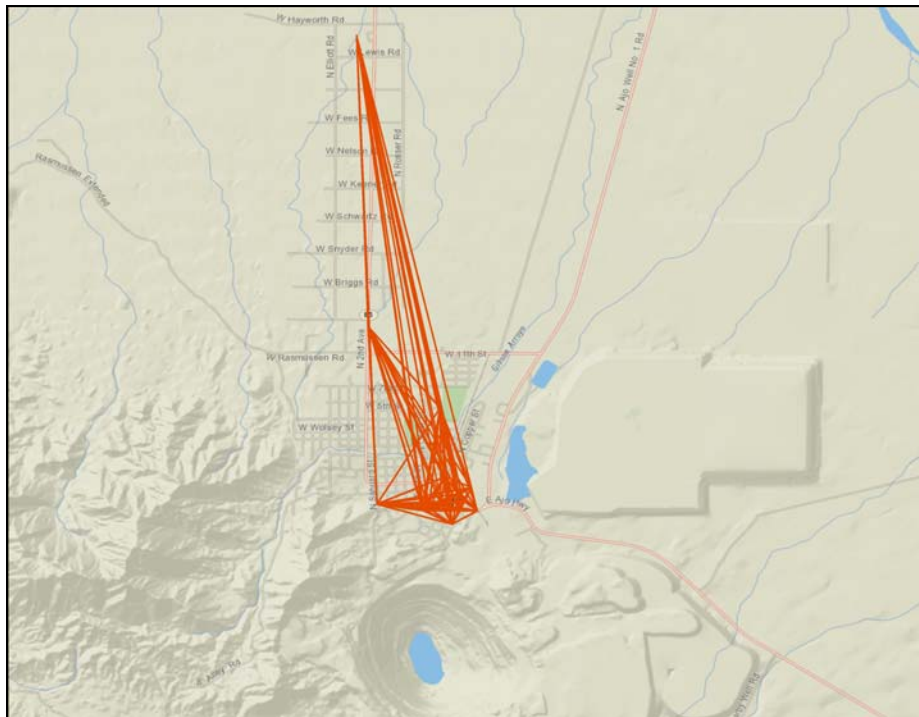
We did not place a geographical restriction on ISDA when requesting data on their partners. We asked for a list of community partner organizations. As we analyzed the data for ISDA’s social networks, we realized we had to think of “community” in a new light since the geographical spread of ISDA’s social network was much greater than other cultural arts organizations we had studied. We will present the results of ISDA’s four social networks in their entirety, but first we examine ISDA’s network restricted geographically to Ajo only.

Taking into account Ajo’s geographical isolation, ISDA’s opportunities for community partnerships seem limited to the town of Ajo and county government offices in Tucson. Let’s explore this further by examining ISDA’s social network in Ajo. Then we will examine ISDA’s full social network.

Ajo Food Partnership

The full name of the Ajo Food Partnership is “Ajo Food Partnership – Creating a Community Food System.” The town of Ajo had fallen under the definition of a food desert, with limited access to foods that are local, fresh and healthy. A typical characteristic of a food desert is a food delivery system reliant on long-haul trucks delivering to supermarkets pre-packaged foods with an extensive shelf life. The goal of the Ajo Food Partnership is to bring together small organizations working independently on issues of local food, healthy cooking, and obesity and diabetes to share information and resources and gain visibility for the issues of food and health. Of the four social networks on which we have data, if we limit our focus to the town of Ajo, the only network we see is the Ajo Food Partnership. This network is presented in *Figure 2* (in orange).

Figure 2
Ajo Food Partnership in the Town of Ajo



ISDA has 16 partners in the Ajo Food Partnership within the town of Ajo. To see the names of these organizations and their location in Ajo, go to our interactive network map at <http://web.williams.edu/Economics/ArtsEcon/mappages/ISDA/ISDANetLoc/ISDANetLoc.htm>. The food partners in Ajo include the café, grocery store, small food producers, health organizations, the schools, the Ajo Chamber of Commerce, and relevant local Pima County offices.

Now let us examine the full Ajo Food Partnership, no longer limiting our interest to just the town. *Figure 3* presents the full Ajo Food Partnership. We see that the network spans Pima County, but is contained within it. The towns included in the network are Ajo, Tucson, Sells, and Topawa. Sells and Topawa are between Ajo and Tucson, to the south on tribal lands. The network spans 135 miles, a much greater distance than we typically see in a “community” network.

Figure 3
Ajo Food Partnership



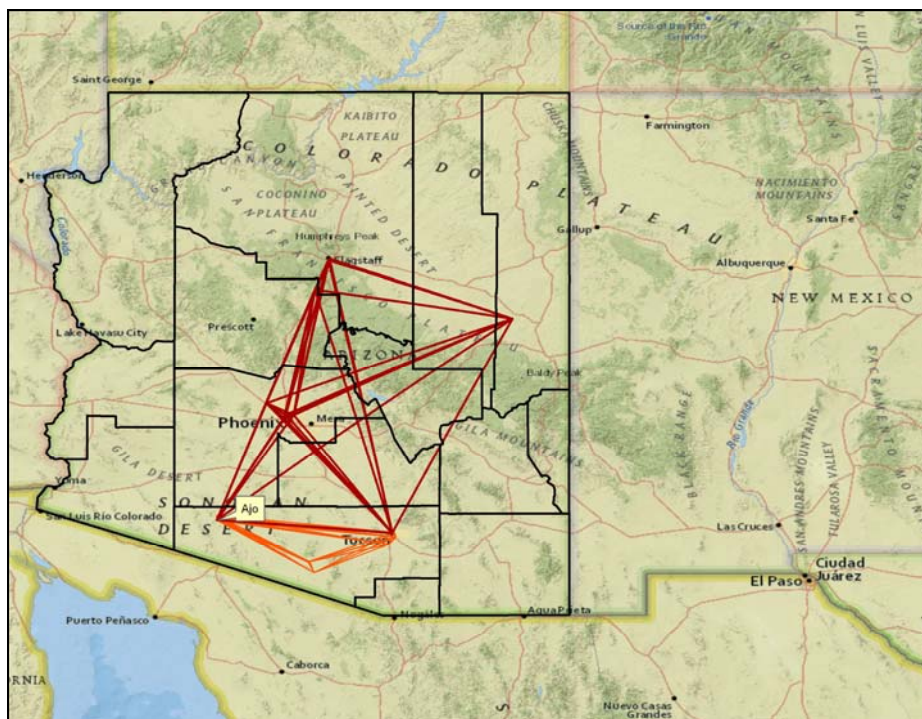
Community for All Ages Network

Community for All Ages is a national program housed at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. Its mission is to facilitate participating communities in building strong social networks that include all ages and cultures, and in providing opportunities for lifelong civic engagement and learning.⁴ ISDA sent us a list of national partners in Community for All Ages, marking those with which they had particularly strong ties. We included all of these in the social network

⁴ <http://www.communitiesforallages.org/vision>, last accessed 6/15/2012.

except for the national Community for All Ages office in Philadelphia and the Center for Assessment and Policy Development in Conshohocken, PA, due to their great distance from ISDA. *Figure 4* presents ISDA’s Community for All Ages network (in red) along with the Ajo Food Partnership.

Figure 4
Community for All Ages Network



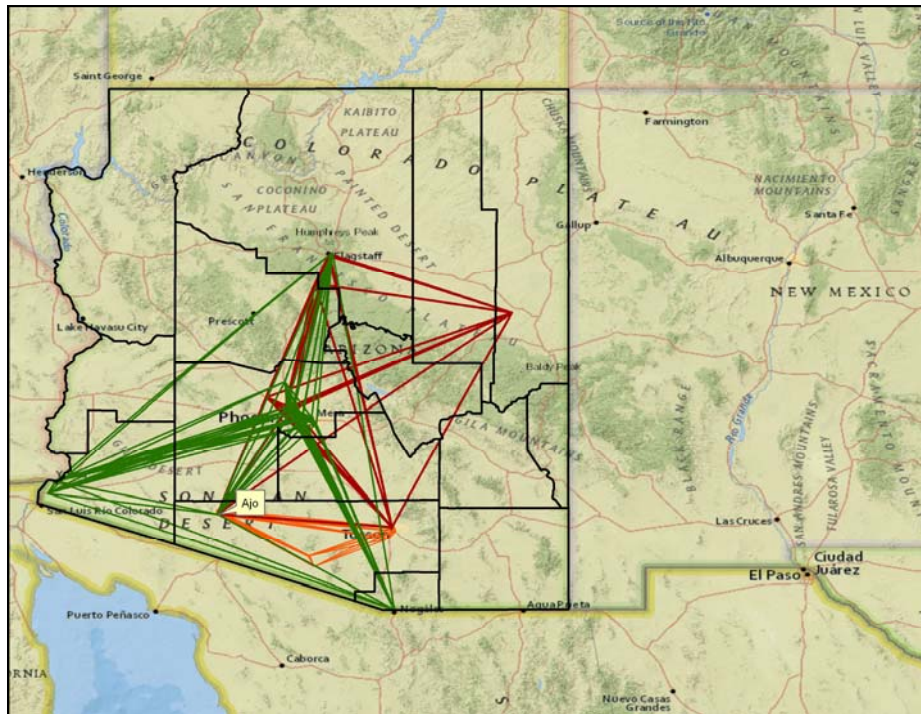
The Community for All Ages network consists of 10 partners with which ISDA has strong ties. They are located in Flagstaff, Phoenix, Tucson, Sedona, St Johns, and Surprise, Arizona. The network consists of community oriented organizations – community action networks, community centers, community development corporations, and community associations.

Shared Asset Measurement Network

The Shared Asset Measurement (SAM) network is an initiative of the Arizona Alliance of Nonprofits. It focuses on nonprofits becoming more effective leaders and fundraisers through data collection and evaluation. A centerpiece of the SAM network is ‘using outcome data to communicate impact.’⁵ Interestingly, the initiative encourages nonprofits to collect, analyze, and present data to help their own client population think about the assets available to them as well as to better articulate and utilize their own organizational resources. *Figure 5* presents the Shared Asset Measurement network (in green).

⁵ http://www.asu.edu/copp/nonprofit/asst/AZNPCR_11_01_26.htm

Figure 5
Shared Asset Measurement Network



The Shared Asset Management network consists of 16 partners of ISDA. It includes organizations in the Arizona cities of Phoenix, Tucson, Nogales, and Window Rock; the New Mexican cities of Albuquerque, Taos, Gallup, and Las Cruces; and Cortez, Colorado. Health, community, and children’s organizations are among the organizations in the network.

Southwest Rural Policy Network

The Southwest Rural Policy Network is based in Tucson, AZ.⁶ The network facilitates 14 organizations in Arizona, New Mexico, and Southern Colorado in bringing together their experience and expertise as a resource for each other. Each organization works on social issues affecting their local community. The first guiding principle of the network is that each member will fully participate in the network, making this a true social network in the sense that members meet regularly in a shared space. Policy areas include health, economic justice, social justice, and the environment. *Figure 6* presents the Southwest Rural Policy Network (in blue).

⁶ <http://www.southwestruralpolicynetwork.org/home>

Figure 6
Southwest Rural Policy Network

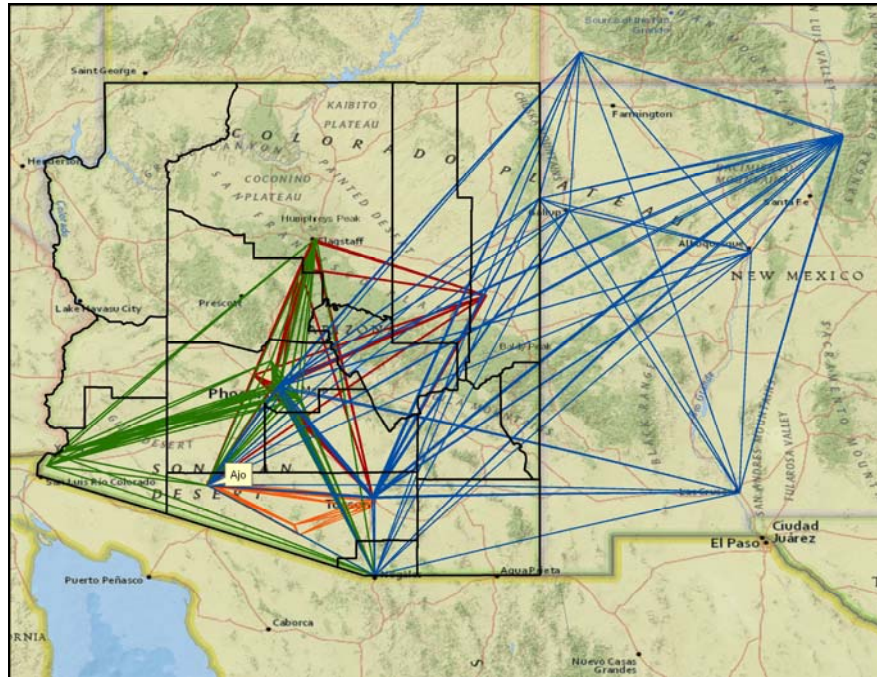


Figure 6 displays the Southwest Rural Policy Network as well as ISDA's 3 other networks. It is the most dispersed of the networks, with partners in Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. An examination of the Southwest Rural Policy Network web site, however, confirms that it is an activist network with the central goal of bringing shared resources (especially knowledge and experience) to bear on local issues identified by each partner community.⁷

Conclusions

We began this paper with the question of whether geographically isolated cultural arts organizations must have limited social networks due to the constraints of their isolation. Collecting data on 4 networks identified by ISDA as community partners, we saw that ISDA's partners are spread over a much larger area than typical. The most local network, the Ajo Food Partnership, spans 135 miles in Pima County, from Ajo to Tucson. Two of ISDA's networks – Community for All Ages and Shared Assets Measurement – extend much farther than the county, spanning most of Arizona. The Southwest Rural Policy Network spans parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado. Its longest span, from Ajo to Cortez, Colorado is more than 500 miles.

An examination of ISDA's social network has revealed that the social networks of geographically isolated cultural nonprofits look very similar to the social networks of organizations in urban areas, except that they are spread over hundreds of miles instead of tens of miles. This dispersion has real consequences for the geographically isolated organization, requiring extra time and resources to find partners and travel to meet with them.

⁷ <http://www.southwestruralpolicynetwork.org/>, accessed 6/15/12.

