

Just Don't Call It Entrepreneurial (even though it is)

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Any number of words describe Coastal Enterprises, Inc.—a non-profit development organization with offices across Maine: holistic, innovative, caring, effective. Another, equally appropriate term, however, gives CEI founder and president, Ron Phillips pause. That word? Entrepreneurial.

“I’ve heard us described as entrepreneurs,” says Phillips, “but I’ve never defined myself or our organization as entrepreneurial.” What we’ve done, he says, “had nothing to do with entrepreneurship. It had to do with survival. You just think about getting the job done.”

And for more than 25 years, CEI has been getting the job done, “helping people and communities, particularly those with low incomes reach an adequate and equitable standard of living, working and learning, in harmony with the natural environment.” In pursuit of that mission statement, the organization has spurred close to \$450 million in private and public investments in more than 1,300 business and housing projects; created or sustained some 15,000 jobs; and counseled that many small businesses.

CEI has done all that by concentrating on what it calls “seven strategic interventions”: financing, technical assistance, social targeting, economic sectors, partnerships, policy, and asset development—all done within a framework of social justice and environmental sustainability. The targets of CEI interventions run the gamut, from child care to job training to venture capital; from farmers, fishers, and loggers to toothpaste-maker Tom’s of Maine. The goal, however, remains the same.

I was trying, says Phillips, “to create an organization to provide resources to back other people who need resources.”

“It turns out,” he allows, “that that was entrepreneurial. But we didn’t call it that.”

CEI’s genesis came in the mid-1970s when Phillips, up from New York City and a few years out of seminary, met a group interested in creating a community development corporation to invest in small businesses, create jobs, and develop natural resource industries in the state. Phillips, who’d been working on domestic and international economic development issues at the National Council of Churches and the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility, saw an opportunity to continue his work at a grassroots level in a state that was, at the time, largely undeveloped and dependent on outside-owned corporations, military contracts, and transfer payments. He joined in.

“I personally had a passion ... in alternative development from corporate America. Personally, that became my ministry or calling.”

Over the years, CEI evolved. Early on it focused on adding value to the natural resource

sector, organizing farmers markets and cooperatives, spurring aquaculture, and helping producers expand into processing. In the early 1980s, CEI took on the additional challenge of helping businesses start and expand in order to diversify the economy and create jobs. Later in that decade, it conducted pioneering research into women's business ownership, developed strategies for micro enterprises, and began providing business training for refugees and immigrants. It also got into housing and child care. In the 1990s, CEI broadened its mission to encompass environmental and sustainable economic development concerns.

Throughout its evolution, CEI has remained true to its mission. Pursuing that mission has just become a bigger job, encompassing more than originally envisioned. The expansion has come from what Phillips calls "a tacit encouragement of risk taking and getting out there to see what you can uncover. We're kicking around out there and getting our hands dirty." Unlike many, perhaps even most, development organizations, CEI sees just how many things go into "development" as opposed to mere "growth."

In keeping with that attitude, CEI is about to embark on another evolutionary step, one which Phillips says will result in CEI becoming more of an investment banking institution that enables private capital to better produce social goods.

CEI also plans to broaden its geographic reach—expanding in the Northeast, the United States, and overseas. We want to actually invest internationally, says Phillips, not just talk about it.

All of which says that despite the long years of work and the impressive results in "getting the job done," the job is not yet done.

As Phillips puts it, "I don't see us as a dying institution."