



Community Capitals: Social Capital

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The Community Capitals Series introduces the concept of measuring success in communities based on seven dimensions called community capitals. Capital is any type of resource capable of producing additional resources. When those resources or assets are invested, they become capital (Flora, et al. 2004). Community capitals are all of the things in a community that have the potential to be a resource that can be invested, saved, or used up. This is the fifth in the series.

What makes a community a desirable place to live? While the answer may have to do with resources, location, size, or jobs, ultimately people enjoy living where they feel connected and included. Social capital is that network of connections among individuals and organizations in a community, and even between communities themselves. Basically, it's the glue that holds a community together.

Why is Social Capital Important?

Social networking can become one of your community's greatest resources. Individual, group, and community-wide efforts are more effective when that network is functioning. A well-functioning network in a community may be a resource for shared knowledge and ideas, reciprocal labor and money, or mutually beneficial endeavors. It can also create norms and trust that give a community its reputation.

When there is a strong presence of social capital in a community, goals are set and decisions are made based on consensus. Members want to be part of the group; they generally like each other and get along well. They are loyal and united in the pursuit of group goals. A shared vision of optimism is present, not in the form of fantasy but of realistic hope.

In a paper from Johns Hopkins University on communication for social change, the authors cite six related dimensions to social cohesion (Figueroa et al, 2003):

- Sense of belonging
- Feelings of high morale
- Trust
- Goal consensus—many voices in making decisions
- Reciprocity—favors are done with confidence of favors being returned
- Network cohesion—sharing between organizations, agencies, neighbors

Social capital is significant because it affects a rural community's capacity to organize for development. Tasks such as planning, evaluating, mobilizing resources, coordinating activities, and resolving conflicts are more manageable in a community that is well connected both internally and externally.

How Can A Community Develop Social Capital?

Building social capital is a necessary part of any community development effort. Two types of social capital are involved in fostering healthy communities. The first is closed social capital, which is built within the community and may begin with taking an inventory of existing assets. Getting groups to communicate and work on projects together also builds closed social capital.

Bridging social capital among local communities and regional or state institutions is the next step. Rural communities must build cohesiveness internally, and then be willing to

work with other communities to establish bridges necessary to obtain more regional resources. The goal is for individual communities to keep their own identities while forging new relationships with other communities that build a regional reputation.

Bridging social capital relies on long-term trusting relationships and requires citizens to venture beyond their familiar communities and culture. In a community setting, bridging brings together groups of individuals who collectively possess more knowledge and ideas than individuals acting alone.

A caution, when building social capital, is to be aware of the possibility of exclusion. A small, cohesive group may develop that is hard for newcomers to join. Groups based on racial or ethnic backgrounds, faith, or political preference are examples of fairly closed groups. While these groups can have their place in a community, care should be taken to bridge between these groups and ensure that other, broadly based community groups are also available that encourage cross-representation of citizens.

Conclusion

Strengthening communities where residents have a sense of ownership and pride is a long-range goal of community

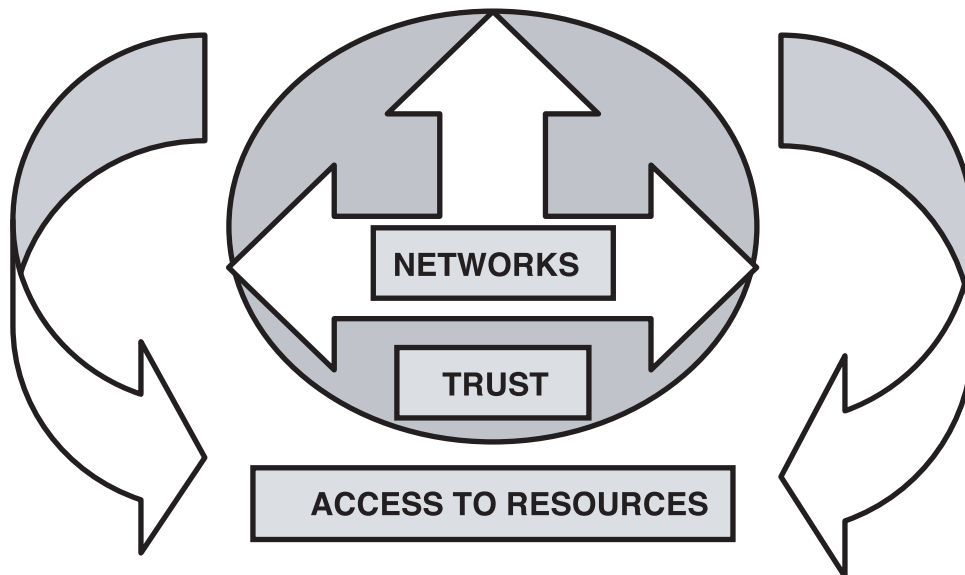
development. This requires a mix of investments in individuals, families, and institutions that aim to build trust in existing and new social networks.

Community-wide social capital depends not on the number of relationships or groups, but on the quality of relationships between individuals, institutions, and socially defined groups. The process takes time and energy, and it is a task that is never quite complete, but it helps making a community a more desirable place to live.

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Figure 1. Three Key Elements of Social Capital
(Schneider 2004)



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