

BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY: HOW DIFFERENT GROUPS CONTRIBUTE

Adapted from
Building Community Capacity: The Potential of Community Foundations,
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BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY: HOW DIFFERENT GROUPS CONTRIBUTE¹

Community capacity is defined as “the combined influence of a community’s commitment, resources, and skills that can be deployed to build on community strengths and address community problems.”

A variety of community groups and institutions contribute to community capacity. Each is a potential partner in the work of strengthening the viability and vitality of communities. In partnership, each can gain in capacity.

Families

Families, in their informal way, have been the first agent of community capacity building since the beginning of recorded history.

Commitment. Families help generate and preserve value systems (Gardner, 1991). Nature appears to assign to families the task of easing individuals into the larger community and of importing the rules and norms of behavior. Families are designed to nurture, encourage, and support their members as their participation in the larger community increases.

Resources. Families consume goods and services, and they also produce them. They spend money and save it. Families accumulate material resources, and in doing so, demonstrate to their children necessary values and skills.

Skills. In both subtle and overt ways, families learn, encourage learning, and in essence, teach the principles of capacity building. They show their members the uses of information, material resources, and the values that underlie their acquisition and deployment. Families teach – in varying degrees – problem solving, planning, organizational development, and management.

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Neighborhood and community development groups

Neighborhoods, for the past several decades, have been next to families as the next element of community, at least for urban and perhaps suburban Americans. They reveal and represent much of the world to those who reside there. They symbolize safety or danger. They provide the place for friendly gatherings or isolating alienation. Neighborhood groups mobilize (or don't) to preserve or secure a better quality of life for their residents.

Neighborhoods and clusters of neighborhoods embrace countless groups that operate without regard to official or institutional structures (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). Many of these are clubs or associations of persons gathering for some common purpose. They meet periodically and support themselves. These include block clubs, garden clubs, service clubs, book clubs, ethnic affinity clubs, and more. Others are structured "neighborhood associations," groups of people that identify with neighborhood-related causes and issues. Neighborhood-based organizations have flourished in the last ten years, partly because of the decentralization of financial resources and partly because of a rediscovery of the "grassroots" as a political bedrock.

Commitment. Neighborhood and development groups create support for change, as well as for stability. They support political movements behind better housing, schools, recreation, health, safety, and other issues. In addition, neighborhoods or clusters of neighborhoods create processes for facilitating governance and justice, such as elections, juries, political parties, police, and advocacy groups.

Resources. Neighborhoods are host to retail and service areas, to formal institutions for spending, saving, and investing. Considerable money changes hands in neighborhoods. Most of the formal institutions that exist in neighborhoods, like schools, parks, churches and other religious institutions, draw their support from a larger territory – several neighborhoods together, or urban districts made up of several neighborhoods and beyond.

Skills. Though largely informal, skills provide an important fabric to community life and allow individuals to "live in community." They provide capacity for the larger community because, by definition, they are organized around common issues, themes or interests. Individuals educate each other and the larger community, raise money in support of projects they want to promote, and develop the political and organizational skills to accomplish their goals.

Associations and coalitions

In unity there is strength and, recognizing this, voluntary groups and nonprofit organizations have joined together at various levels to gain greater voice and influence in decision-making arenas that affect them.

Commitment. Associations and coalitions by definition represent the mutual commitment of their members to their common purpose. People organize geographically as well as by issue area or interests. At the neighborhood level, individuals coalesce and form a neighborhood group. At the city level, neighborhood groups become the city's Neighborhood Resource Center. At the national level, they become the National Association of Neighborhoods. Coalescing occurs along issue areas or occupational lines. The National Coalition Against Domestic Violence has a membership of statewide coalitions. The National Association of Social Workers has state chapters of individuals.

Resources. Membership organizations usually measure their assets in membership, not dollars. Larger organizations have more clout with those they're trying to influence – typically legislative or regulatory bodies, groups that affect the rules and regulations affecting their particular arena and occupation.

Skills. A common purpose of associations and coalitions is to enhance their members' skills. They do this through a variety of “member services” such as specialized publications, training programs, and annual conferences. The more sophisticated also have programs of “mentoring” or “technical assistance” to help member individuals or organizations develop their administrative, programming, or leadership skills.

Charities

Charities provide relief to individuals suffering from economic disaster (unemployment or dislocation), natural disaster (floods, illness, cultural deprivation), or family disaster (abuse or neglect).

Commitment. Charitable organizations reflect society's commitment to help those who are suffering. They create a culture of concern and caring. Charitable organizations appeal to individuals who share that concern, recruiting them to help. These community institutions have their roots in the Judeo-Christian imperative of caring for those in need; "caring" and "charity" come from the same Latin root, "caritas."

Resources. Charities raise money from the general public, seeking donations from individuals, from businesses and corporations, from organized philanthropies, and religious institutions. In the 20th century, charities in this country have become secularized. As so-called "public charities," they are recognized by the Internal Revenue Service for serving a public good and are exempted from paying corporate income tax. Almost all public charities have developed fairly sophisticated administrative structures and funding mechanisms.

Skills. In recent decades, at the insistence of supporters, charities became more efficient, borrowing heavily from the techniques of the manufacturing sector and from post-industrial management science. Charitable concern and caring is now institutionalized in the form of nonprofit, tax-exempt "service delivery programs," requiring skilled managers.

Schools

In today's society, schools are major agents of skills and values learning by children and youth. Education is largely a public function supported by local government.

Commitment. Schools reflect the commitment of society to educate the young, and to prepare young people for adult life. What "adult life" means, and what preparation for it is valid, has been the subject of interesting debates in the past two decades. Different parties to these debates wish to commit schools to training our young people for vocational, family, organizational, or community life. Different school systems and curricula reflect these differences in priorities.

Resources. The commitment to public education is substantial; its line in public budgets, especially at the state and county levels, is typically among the largest of all public expenditures.

Skills. Public schools are charged with teaching their students the skills required to play a constructive role in society. How successful they are varies, of course, from school district to school district, depending considerably on the commitment and resources deployed to further this goal.

Churches and other religious institutions

Religious institutions, particularly places of worship, grew out of the natural wish of persons for a place for spiritual communion with a higher power and with each other.

Commitment. While most religious institutions exist for the spiritual and moral development of their congregation, many conduct charitable activities such as soup kitchens, clothes closets, or outreach to isolated people. An increasing number are undertaking or participating as partners in projects such as Habitat for Humanity and other housing or economic development activities.

Resources. Religious congregations have people power. Like neighborhoods (which historically grew up around churches), they have the capacity to mobilize and involve people in issues. They also collect “offerings” or charge dues, a portion of which can be used for charitable or development projects. At the diocesan level and higher (of traditional faiths, at least), there frequently are considerable financial resources in the form of endowments, pension funds, and real estate.

Skills. The skills of religious congregations are largely the skills of their individual members, plus the leadership. When church members decide to do something – and this can be said of most community groups as well – the skills and resources are typically found, often from within.

Government

Government at all levels – national, state, and local – plays a role in the development of community capacity.

Commitment. Government reflects the will of the people through a representational process in which all citizens can participate. “Will” gets reinterpreted as it proceeds up the legislative and policy making ladders and then down through the bureaucratic and regulatory ladders, through the process we call “politics.” It includes ongoing debate about the limits of public responsibility. For example, is it government’s responsibility to provide mental health services or is it the individual’s or family’s concern? If the government is responsible, what level is appropriate – local, state, or federal? If it’s not the government’s responsibility, is it the private sector’s or the independent sector’s responsibility?

Resources. However the debate rates, public sector budgets in the 1990s tend to be fairly large – even gigantic – relative to private and independent sector budgets, though this varies by jurisdiction. Federal, state, municipalities, and special districts (parks, schools) have the power to tax and to issue bonds. How they exercise that power is highly politicized, as is the way budgets are created.

Skills. The process of politics encourages public education and issue awareness efforts, meetings that seek consensus on priorities, and coalition building – all key ingredients of community capacity building.

Small and large businesses

The private or commercial sector exists primarily to create private capacity, not community capacity. Since community vitality often depends on the vitality of the community's business sector there is a close, but complex, connection. By producing goods and services, businesses affect community capacity in a number of ways.

Commitment. In most communities, business leaders have helped to organize constructive responses to stresses that affect community life. From service clubs to recreational and cultural facilities to civic improvement projects, the business sector demonstrates the role it can play in making communities more livable. Business leadership is frequently credited with helping to meet the campaign goals of United Way and other public charities that respond to human needs.

Resources. Work creates wealth and other resources. Businesses provide the tax base used by the the public sector, by creating jobs and building facilities that add value to owned property. Individuals with steady employment in positions that pay decently can share in that wealth, allowing them more choices in education, health, recreation, and material pursuits, as well as allowing more time to participate in community activities.

Skills. Many of the skills developed for use on the job, whether manual or managerial, can also be used outside of formal employment in community building activities.

Foundations

Most communities have at least one foundation with the commitment and financial resources dedicated to serving some aspect of community life. The Foundation Center (1992), a national information clearinghouse, lists 8,729 foundations throughout the United States, with concentrations in the major population centers, particularly where wealth is “old” rather than “new.” The purposes of foundations vary widely, though all have been judged by the Internal Revenue Service to be serving a public interest.

Commitment. The extent to which foundations are committed to building community capacity varies widely. Some act from the charitable model in which the foundation’s resources are directed to the relief of suffering in one or more of its various forms. Others are committed to the development model in which the foundation’s resources are directed to the development of some aspect of community capacity. One can detect in their brochures and reports considerable confusion about these two different models and inconsistent practices; this is largely because the development model is still quite new and its principles are emerging.

Resources. The 1992 Foundation Directory reports that the 8,729 foundations control more than \$134 billion in assets. This varies considerably among the four types of foundations: independent foundations, community foundations, company-sponsored foundations, and operating foundations.

So-called independent foundations are by far the largest in number (7,277) and in assets (\$115 billion). The capital generally derives from a single source, such as an individual, a family, or group of individuals, and decisions are made by the donor’s family, its representatives, or an independent board of directors. While the financial resources of foundations are substantial, they are small in comparison to public budgets that exist in the same regions. Even the poorest counties in the country have budgets that address human issues (through both the charitable and development modes) far in excess of the monies available from institutional philanthropy.

Skills. When foundation trustees meet to decide how to distribute the year’s allocation of grantmaking dollars, it is typically in private. Their decisions are informed by a process that may not involve public input, citizen participation, or community involvement.

Some foundations, however, want to operate in a style that is more inclusive of community input and more directed to enhancing community capacity. How much they do this depends on a number of factors, including their type. Community foundations, for example, increasingly have “advisory committees” made up of individuals connected to community groups who are knowledgeable about community issues. With company-

sponsored foundations, decision-making is increasingly advised by committees of employees – a workplace-defined community.

Operating foundations do not give grants, but operate programs themselves –typically research, public education, social service, and community development – and vary as to how much they contribute to gains in community commitment, resources, and skills.

Independent foundations, the largest in number, probably vary the most in how they operate. A small but growing number seek community involvement in the design of programs. Another group, also small but growing, is striving to embrace the development model and keep it distinct from the charity model, intending to expand the capacity of community groups and community building mechanisms to become increasingly productive.

Capacity and the interconnection of community groups

A community group or institution – whether a family, neighborhood group, charity, school, or foundation – gets its capacity from drawing on the commitment, resources, and skills from those within and around it. A group or institution must first develop capacity in and for itself before it can help develop capacity in others.

If parents do not have commitment, resources, and skills in their role as parents, they will have little to impart to their children. The adult(s) in the family has to be ahead of the children incapacity development if the children are to grow.

If local businesses have little capacity, they can offer little to potential employees in productive work, to current employees n opportunities to develop their skills, and to the community in payroll and taxes.

If neighborhood or development groups can't mobilize people, gather resources, and help people learn to work productively, few people and neighborhoods will benefit.

If schools cannot develop a commitment in their students or their students' parents, if they cannot gather the resources required to help students learn productively, and if they cannot induce skills in students, then few students and their present and future families will benefit.

If foundations cannot decide what aspects of community life to support, if they cannot build up their financial resources and allocate them astutely in the service of capacity building, and if they cannot stimulate the growth of community building skills in individuals and institutions, then community life will not directly benefit.

The task of taking on capacity is one of drawing on the commitment, resources, and skills extended by others, and building up one's own group to become stronger and healthier.

It is clear that some community institutions are better adapted or suited to creating capacity than others. Some take on considerably more capacity than they help create elsewhere, whereas others may be highly efficient, creating as much or more capacity in others as in themselves.

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