

Multiple Capacities, Multiple Outcomes: Delving Deeper into the Meaning of Community Capacity

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Abstract

Although community capacity is widely discussed in policy circles, the links between academic work on the subject and practical applications remain weak. This paper describes a high-generality conceptual model that represents a novel approach to depicting and articulating the concept of community capacity. The model describes four dimensions to community capacity: assets, catalysts, relational spheres, and outcomes. The latter category largely informs this work, since the main question addressed is, The capacity to do what? We also present an innovative visual tool for communicating the results from community capacity studies. The “asset amoebas” we present are graphical snapshots that allow readers to quickly discern a community’s capital base. The intent is to provide a tool useful to both communities and researchers alike.

1.0 Introduction

Rural communities have always had to cope with a variety of exogenous and endogenous stresses. These have ranged from local struggles for survival in

challenging environmental conditions to dealing with effects of globalization, such as shifting investment and labor shedding in traditional industries. Many communities have succeeded and continue to be civically engaged, economically viable, politically connected, and self-reliant. Others have not coped as well and are now little more than faded place-names. Future conditions will undoubtedly remain stressful for many rural communities. Demographic pressures, information technology, environmental concerns, and global economic interests create new and complex contexts, some quite different from the historical contexts in which rural communities developed in the past.

This work fundamentally addresses the question, How do communities get things done? Or alternatively, How or why do they *not* get things done? We understand that communities with a demonstrated track record of getting things done have higher capacity than those that struggle in achieving their goals or have difficulty articulating goals. In this era of government downsizing it is particularly important to have tools to assess community capacity and models to help us understand the various dimensions and dynamics of community capacity. Such tools and models may help us learn from the successes of some communities and transfer some of that knowledge to communities that have enjoyed less success in achieving a high quality of life.

In both developed and developing countries there is significant emphasis on capacity building and sustainability from the local to the national level (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001; Simpson, Wood, & Daws, 2003). Many argue for the need to build capacity in communities in order to achieve sustainability. Rural and agricultural communities have been primary targets for government-sponsored capacity building efforts. Policy makers continue to seek indicators to use in evaluations of sustainability (Goodman, Speers, McLeroy, & Fawcett, 1998). Such indicator approaches are often static and describe only a condition or state but not the process whereby a community achieved such a state (Beckley, Parkins, & Stedman, 2002). The intent of these traditional indicators is to reveal how well or poorly communities are faring and to provide a set of concrete scores for comparison. They give some guidance for determining the most important factors on which to focus. Comparisons may involve a single community over time, community-to-community comparisons at one point in time, or both. A number of sustainability indicators have been identified and are readily available for both public and academic use. However, the link between these sustainability indicators and community capacity is not always clear or direct.

Much of this work, in both policy and academic arenas, struggles to clearly articulate and define community capacity in a simple and accessible manner. There is a substantial body of sociological literature on the subject, but many policy makers continue to ignore it because academic discussions of social capital, network analyses, theories of social change, and collective action are often carried out at high levels of abstraction. Other research on capacity building is often directed to particular audiences, in specific sectoral and geographic contexts, such as capacity building in poor urban neighborhoods (Chaskin, 2001; McKnight & Kretzman, 1996). Our intent is to translate some of the concepts related to community capacity into a model and a tool that are understandable and useful to a broad audience (most notably, policy makers and community members). However, we believe that a clear and relatively simple model for explaining the process of

community capacity building will also help the research community to devise new and innovative ways to engage in research on the subject.

Much of the community development literature has focused on economic outcomes that rely on quantitative indicators (such as employment, income, poverty rates, and population growth to name a few) to measure “success” (Beckley & Burkosky, 1999; Beesley & Russwurm, 1989; Reimer, 2000; Schatan, 1990). Additional scholarly work focuses on social achievement and social organization that enhance positive social gains, such as education attainment, community activeness, and community satisfaction (Brown, 1993; Goudy, 1990). However, we believe that community capacity encompasses a wider range of assets and outcomes. Even more important is to understand how communities can effectively mobilize its varied resources to meet complex, persistent challenges.

The main contribution of this paper is to present a high-generality conceptual model (Constanza, Wainger, Folke, & Maler, 1993) for illustrating concepts and relationships from the literature on community capacity. The take-home message from this work is that community capacity is a multidimensional concept. First, there are multiple components (both structural and relational) that contribute to community capacity. Second, there are multiple types of community capacity and therefore a broad range of capacity outcomes. This article is informed by fieldwork, data, and analysis from an ongoing research project in rural Canada.¹ The paper begins with a review of existing definitions of community capacity and our attempt to extend them. This is followed by a description of our conceptual model and a descriptive measurement/assessment tool.

2.0 Definitions of Community Capacity

2.1 Previous Definitions of Community Capacity

This article deals with community capacity building in the context of rural communities. The use of the term “community capacity” is widespread, both across disciplines and geographically. Despite the centrality of the concept to community development, it appears to be a more popular term in the health and education literatures. There are hundreds of articles, particularly in health literatures that deal directly with definitions and measurement of community capacity (Goodman et al., 1998; Hagland, 1997; McGinty, 2005). Many of these studies take a particular approach, such as mapping community capacity in urban contexts (McKnight & Kretzman, 1996), or describing the relationship between community capacity and urban housing needs (Atkinson & Willis, 2006), or using community capacity as a conceptual tool to enhance biodiversity outcomes on private land (Moore et al., 2006). While there is significant breadth and specificity

¹The New Rural Economy Project (NRE) is a research and education program under way in rural Canada. It is a collaborative undertaking bringing together policy analysts, rural leaders, researchers, the business community, and government agencies at all levels to identify and address vital rural issues. It is conducted at the national level with historical and statistical data analysis, and at the local level with case studies involving community and household surveys. The group has profiled 32 carefully selected rural sites for research and education activities, and organized a network of more than 11 partners, 16 researchers, 12 universities, and six government departments in all provinces and territories of Canada. The NRE is a project of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation. For more information, see <http://www.nre.concordia.ca>

in applications of the term, we are interested in a more general definition and approach, and one that is focused at the community level.

Chaskin (2001) offers a particularly insightful critique of the work on community capacity thus far. He writes, “Each of these treatments places a different relative emphasis on various dimensions of community capacity. Some focus largely on organizations, others on individuals, others on affective connections and shared values, and still others on processes of participation and engagement (2001, p. 292).” Chaskin’s goal, which we share, was to refine the concept of community capacity, make it more pragmatic by talking specifically about capacity outcomes, and to present conceptual tools (see Figures 1 and 2) that help both professionals and lay persons to comprehend the elements and relations embedded in this complex process.

The idea that rural communities need to adapt to change and that communities vary in their ability to do so is a common theme in the literature. The assumption is that certain characteristics of communities facilitate or hinder their capacity. Kaufman and Kaufman (1990), for instance, acknowledge that communities are dynamic systems dealing with change. They also note that features such as leadership, citizen participation, and cooperation toward common ends make an important contribution to community stability. Communities are more than passive recipients of changes imposed on them from external factors; they also can take an active role and channel their efforts to attain specific desired outcomes. This power to react and take action is at the heart of the concept of community capacity. Five decades of research and practice in rural and community sociology has focused on process dimensions of community interaction. Authors in this tradition include Bridger and Luloff (1999), Kaufman (1959), and Wilkinson (1991). These scholars describe community as an interactional field and focus their attention on interpersonal relations and their importance in achieving positive outcomes.

Throughout the history of rural sociology other theorists have emphasized structural factors as limiting or enabling communities to succeed. Structural factors include such things as natural resource endowments, local power structures, tax bases, or vertical linkages to other regions and economic sectors (Hunter, 1953; Warren, 1978). Kaufman, Wilkinson, Robinson, and others recognize structural elements as well but place greater importance on the process-based elements, such as leadership and “communion” (shared values and the cohesion it induces) over structural elements in society.

The concept of community capacity has been closely associated with community development. Researchers and policy makers in this area often suggest that communities take a more active role in their development. According to Vachon (1993), communities have an effective and potential capacity to take up the challenges raised in their development by using their local resources, energies, and synergy. This emphasizes two dimensions of community capacity that have recently gained the attention of many scholars from various fields of expertise. These two dimensions—capital stocks, resources, or assets on the one hand and networks, synergy, or social relations that mobilize those assets on the other hand—are also included in the model described in this paper.

Some studies and approaches have focused more on an inventory of community assets. These inventories may include built infrastructure, liquid financial assets, and the like, but also may encompass more socially defined assets, such as

entrepreneurial social infrastructure (Flora, 1998). Additional studies that emphasize inventories of assets include Doak and Kusel (1996), FEMAT (1993), Kusel (1996), and Harris, McLaughlin, and Brown (1998). These assessments of community capacity provide an overview of the main descriptive characteristics of the communities in question. Data collection and analysis is set up to facilitate comparison between communities and generate ideas related to the conditions that enhance or restrict the overall capacity of the communities in question.

Even though the concept of community capacity is central in the arguments of many studies there is no agreement on a common definition. Past efforts to examine community capacity often focused on the contributions from specific elements to community capacity or specific processes that create community capacity. In general, the work on community capacity is preoccupied with long-term benefits to the community; an assumption that communities rely on their capacity to persist over time; an emphasis on the ability to address different types of problems or opportunities; and a focus on the degree to which communities maintain control of their own fate in the face of exogenous or endogenous sources of change (Flora, 1994; Kusel, 1996; Power, 1996).

Although it is possible to point out similar themes in many definitions of community capacity, it is also important to note the use of different scales (i.e., household, neighborhood, municipality, county, region, or watershed). The level of analysis in part determines the methods (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, expert driven, or community self-assessment) for collecting data. It also often influences the analysis. The term *community* is quite literally stretched to its limit and the label is attached to larger jurisdictions (such as counties or regions, or in Canada, amalgamated Rural Municipalities or Regional Municipalities, which span hundreds of square kilometers and incorporate several hamlets and villages; Beckley, 1998). However, we believe that the model presented below is robust enough to reflect the process elements of capacity and capacity development at many scales.

To summarize, to date there have been many useful treatments of community capacity but few that have attempted to present a comprehensive definition or model. The model is an attempt to integrate the important contributions of previous researchers that have emphasized structural factors (called herein capitals or assets), catalysts (threats, opportunities, and challenges), and interactional aspects (called spheres of social relations). We borrow heavily from these past treatments to create a model that illustrates the relationship and interaction between process elements and the capital assets or resources that combine to compose community capacity outcomes. The model attempts not only to describe what capacity is but also to articulate how it works and how it is manifest in outcomes. We have been using variants of the model in policy work, directly with communities and in other academic work for some time (Reimer, 2006). The intent of this paper is to provide a detailed description of the model in plain language.

2.2 An Alternative Definition of Community Capacity

We define community capacity as the collective ability of a group (the community) to combine various forms of capital within institutional and relational contexts to produce desired results or outcomes. This definition involves distinct but related facets: (a) capital, assets, or resources; (b) catalysts; (c) mobilization of those

resources through social organization and relationships; and (d) end results or outcomes. Presenting community capacity as a phenomenon with multiple facets allows researchers to analyze the dynamic mechanics of community capacity.

3.0 The Capacity to Do What?

Community capacity can be grounded by asking this basic question: The capacity to do what? Such a question can be answered in a multitude of ways, and in part it depends upon who is asking the question. For instance, policy makers and external community analysts often operate from a macro level, where outcomes are described in broad and overarching terms. In their case, positive capacity outcomes may have to do with long-term solutions to issues such as maintaining or enhancing economic vitality, creating a vital civic culture, maintaining human health and access to quality health services, or enhancing environmental integrity. By contrast, community residents may take a more micro approach and describe capacity in terms of shorter-term goals, such as saving a local school or hospital from closing, developing a local tourism infrastructure, winning a regional competition, or raising funds to build a playground or ball field. Obviously, there is overlap. Some local residents will share the broad vision, and some higher-level policy makers will be focused on the delivery of specific programs and thus have a targeted view. The point is that capacity outcomes may be legitimately defined somewhat narrowly, or quite broadly. In the examples above, saving the hospital, or keeping emergency services in an existing hospital, is an example of a short-term goal that ties into the broader objective of maintaining quality health services in the long term.

4.0 A Conceptual Model of Community Capacity

One purpose of models is to simplify reality so that we may better understand some phenomenon. The aspects of reality that one may wish to examine in detail may vary, however, and thus not all models look the same or function in the same way. Costanza et al. (1993) provide an excellent description of a number of types of models and their purposes. These range from high-precision analytical models to high-realism impact-analysis models to high-generality conceptual models. High-precision models sacrifice reality and generality for precise correspondence between data and a model. High-realism models sacrifice precision and generality for realism and are used to map site-specific, contextual phenomena where there is little need or desire to generalize. Finally, high-generality conceptual models sacrifice precision and reality but place emphasis on key relationships and process. Our model of capacity falls into the high-generality conceptual type. We are seeking to name the component parts and highlight interactions between the component parts that lead to community capacity outcomes.

Figure 1 depicts how four forms of capital/resources, catalysts, four overlapping relational spheres of interaction, and capacity outcomes are related. We list seven capacity outcomes by way of example but realize that capacity outcomes are essentially infinite in number and may range from the rather small and mundane (e.g., obtaining a new piece of playground equipment) to large and profound (e.g., the creation of new governance institutions, major infrastructure, and the like). The model also shows how various threats or opportunities serve as catalysts to activate the system toward identifiable outcomes. Varieties of capital or community assets take many forms and include economic capital, social capital, natural capital, and

human capital. All these represent financial resources, talents, skills, natural resource endowments, and social networks that may be mobilized to produce desired outcomes. The spheres of market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal relations are where the organization and mobilization of these assets happen. This mobilization results in capacity outcomes.

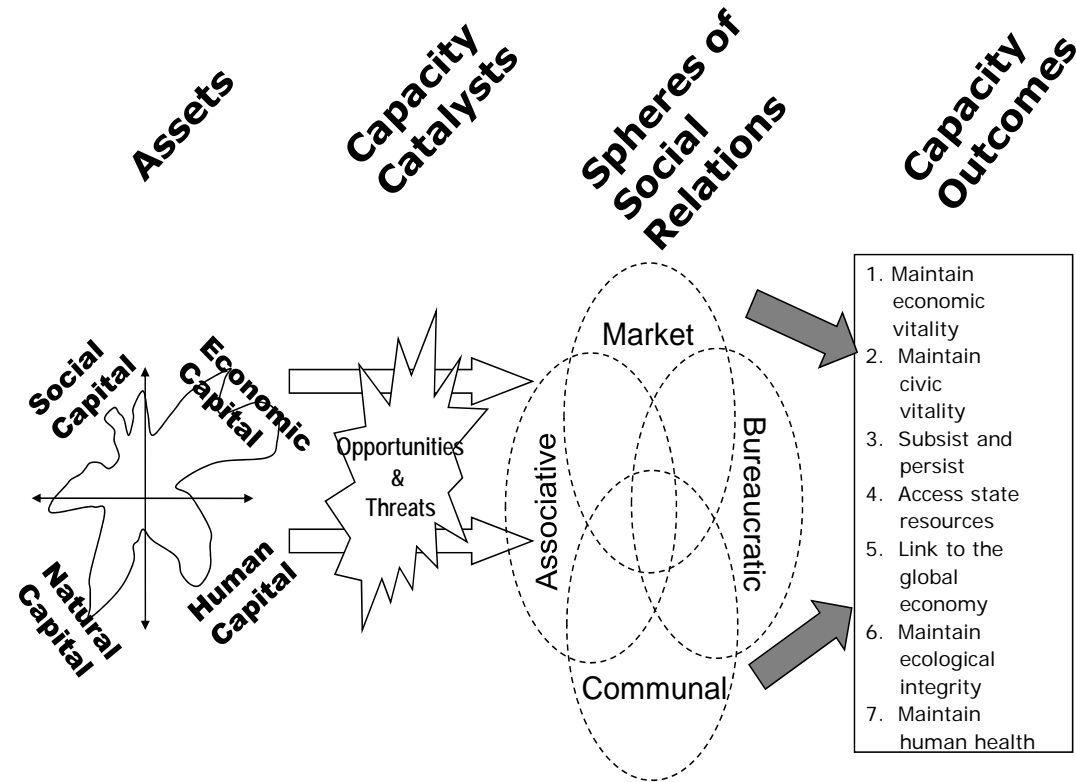


Figure 1. Community capacity model.

4.1 Forms of Capital: Assets Underlying Community Capacity

Economic capital. The first and most obvious form of capital is economic capital, of which there are two types, physical capital or infrastructure, also sometimes referred to as fixed assets, and financial capital, or liquid assets. Physical capital consists of a number of resources, including various utilities (e.g., transportation, water, and institutional buildings) and the fixed assets of the business community (e.g., stores, factories, boats, productive machinery, and trucks). Financial capital is the liquid assets of the community (both public and private), including municipal budgets, individual and household savings, and business cash flow and operating funds.

Social capital. Social scientists have debated the definition of social capital for the better part of a decade. Wall, Ferrazzi, and Schryer (1998) point out that it is a “new term for an old idea” that is gaining popularity among policy makers and academics. The concept has been defined in a number of ways. Woolcock (2001)

suggests that social capital is best understood narrowly and in sociological or relational terms as a relationship between two or more individuals. It is understood best as a community-level asset rather than a psychological (individual) or political (institutional/national) phenomenon. Social capital refers to norms and networks that facilitate collective action. In order to meet the traditional meaning of capital, however, we add that these norms and networks must also be used to productive ends. Thus, networks, for example, may or may not become capital, depending on whether they are used to create a collectively defined, desired outcome.

Further useful distinctions have been made between types of social capital, such as “bonding” social capital (relations among family, close friends, and neighbors within a community), “bridging” social capital (relations between loosely connected but demographically similar individuals between communities), and “linking” social capital (alliances with sympathetic individuals in positions of power beyond the community) (Naryan, 1999; Woolcock, 2001).

Natural capital. Natural capital assets remain critical for enhancing positive community capacity outcomes. While wealth generation and employment are less directly linked to natural capital assets in the developed world than they once were (e.g., due to declining employment in forestry, fisheries, agriculture, and mining), these and other natural amenities such as clean air, water, and arable land continue to be significant. Historically, the only natural capital assets that really counted were those that were combined with labor to create commodities. Today, wealth is also generated by combining labor in the form of services with amenity dimensions of natural resources. As well, environmental services provided by natural resources are receiving increased recognition (Collados & Duane, 1999; Power, 1996).

Human capital. The concept of human capital is rooted in economic theory and refers to the education, job experience, acquired skills, and the health of individuals (Johnson & Stallman, 1994). Human capital is developed through formal education and informal learning that occurs within families, communities, or work places (Coleman, 1988). Many scholars note a need to complement education attainment with additional measures that address other dimensions of human capital (i.e., entrepreneurship, leadership, indigenous knowledge, and life experience) (Côté, 2001; Flora, 1994).

These four types of capital form the asset base for any given community and are organized and combined in various ways to produce outcomes. The following section focuses on challenges or catalysts.

4.2 Opportunities and Threats: Capacity Catalysts

Community capacity does not simply happen. Rather it is developed and formed, or diminished and lost through response to changing conditions. Observable community capacity becomes manifest when there is a reason to act or to react. These reasons, or catalysts for action, may be positive or negative and we therefore describe them as opportunities and threats.² It is important to note that one person’s perceived threat is another’s opportunity. For example, massive power outages due to an ice storm, as occurred in central Canada in 1998, challenge most rural residents. The 1998 ice storm created opportunities for individuals who sold

² Our inclusion of capacity catalysts was largely inspired through conversations with Sharmalene Mendis-Millard.

generators, flashlights, and woodstoves. It also threatened the livelihoods of livestock farmers who needed heat and light to sustain their animals. The capacity model we present is a dynamic model, and the challenges of various types set the process into motion.

Opportunities are best characterized as proactive attempts to achieve defined goals and objectives. Opportunities involve positive attempts to define a vision and to marshal the resources and relations necessary to get a job done. Opportunities may have long-term or short-term dimensions, and indeed, different members of a given community could simultaneously view a given situation as a challenge or an opportunity. Threats may also be short term, unanticipated, and catastrophic or long term, expected, and incremental. The nature of the catalyst will largely determine which assets are applicable in seeking solutions. Existing but underutilized assets such as natural resources (natural capital) may be drawn upon in attempting to create a new economic base. New businesses may be recruited or attracted on the basis of the existing skilled labour force (human capital) or infrastructure (economic capital). Catalysts help communities define their desired outcomes and provide reasons for mobilizing assets and relations to produce such outcomes. Again, it is normal that there will not be unanimity in any given community about whether phenomena are opportunities or threats.

4.3 Spheres of Social Relations: Combining Capital to Produce Outcomes

Community capacity outcomes derive from combinations of capital assets or resources as described above. They do not form, however, in social vacuums. Rather, they occur within established social relations. Using categories derived from the social, anthropological, and economic literature (Fiske, 1991; Polanyi, 1944), we have identified four basic types of these relations: market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal. Each is associated with a set of norms, rights, and entitlements that guides the behaviour of those involved and establishes the context for expectations and social control that accompany them.

Market relations. The market sphere encompasses a broad range of exchange transactions that draw from all forms of capital. Labour (human capital), land (natural capital), and capital (financial capital) are the cornerstones of production, according to neoclassical economists. The addition of social capital (networks) acknowledges that humans develop social relations while engaging in activities based on market exchanges.

Bureaucratic relations. Bureaucratic relations are those based on a rationalized division of labour and the structuring of authority through general principles and rules. They represent an ideal type of “rational-legal” relationship originally explored by Weber: impersonal and formal, with the distribution of resources based on status positions rather than productivity. Individuals relate to each other through the roles they are ascribed rather than individual characteristics. In general, the bureaucratic sphere relates to public service institutions in contrast to market institutions, though without question these two overlap.

Associative relations. Associative relations are based on shared interests and activity. Individuals develop associative relations when they come together voluntarily to accomplish goals, to enjoy socializing, and to express interests or take action on items of mutual concern. Clubs, social action groups, spectator events, hobby groups, and charitable organizations are examples of organizations

that embody these relations. They are often characterized by focused objectives, informal structures, and short-term life spans, but they can address more long-term objectives by being transformed into more formal structures.

Communal relations. Communal relations reflect a strong sense of shared identity. Members of a group bound by such characteristics as birth, ethnicity, or location develop communal relations where people are viewed as equivalent but not necessarily equal. That is, there may be uneven power relations within a group, but common attributes and characteristics provide the basis for interaction and mutual obligation as found in families and friendships.

These four types of social relations are not meant to be exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive, since most social interactions could be described as fitting in the intersection of one or more types. For this reason, we depict the spheres as permeable and overlapping in Figure 1. As well, over time, the actions and relations of a group may change according to its changing needs. For example, a local recreational club (associative relation) may need to formalize its structure and procedures (e.g., elect a board, create bylaws, and purchase insurance) in order to access resources from either the municipal or regional level of government (bureaucratic relations). In rural Canada, it is rare that a government would give funds to a very loosely organized, informally constituted group. If such a recreational group chooses to remain informal and resist the temptation to bureaucratize, it may well find itself more actively engaging in small-scale market activities (market relations), such as bake sales, bottle drives, raffles, or other sales of goods in order to raise revenue to achieve its goals. The point is that often multiple relational spheres are at work at one time, even within one activity.

The individual relational spheres of social interaction are not isolated. All four of them operate in many situations, although only one or two may be dominant. Our operating assumption is that communities with abilities to create, maintain, and use relationships effectively in all four spheres will be more likely to succeed. This applies to both intracommunity and intercommunity relations. This assumption will need empirical testing. A particular community may be especially adept at organizing its assets and resources through one of these types of relations, but poor at another.

4.4 Capacity Outcomes

Our description of community capacity outcomes centres on answering the question, The capacity to do what? Figure 1 lists examples of potential capacity outcomes. In fact, an infinite number exist. They may range from very specific and concrete things (e.g., building a skateboard park) to more general categories of outcomes, such as those described below. The point in reviewing the following exemplary (but not exhaustive) list of categories is to demonstrate the diversity of capacity outcomes. Too often community developers and community members themselves think of capacity in narrow terms related to economic performance. However, due to the focus of attention on capacity outcomes in this realm, we begin our discussion here.

The capacity to maintain or enhance economic vitality. Maintaining or enhancing economic vitality is the stuff of traditional community development. Summers (1986) referred to it as development in the community as opposed to development of the community. The outcomes in this area are most associated with activities in

market relations and may be measured with traditional economic indicators related to employment and wealth. Often these indicators involve aggregate individual-level data, such as average income, employment rate, and poverty rate. Other measures might include property values, population growth, number of businesses per capita, business growth, and number of bankruptcies, or the creation of business-related organizations. The tendency among many politicians, community developers, and business leaders has been to focus heavily, if not exclusively, on capacity outcomes in this arena. Positive outcomes in this realm may lead to enhanced quality of life. Strong economic performance and success may come with some costs, however, as has been demonstrated in the extensive literature on boomtowns (Detomasi, 1984; Freudenburg, 1984). As well, a community's lack of performance in this sphere does not necessarily mean that it lacks other forms of capacity or is an undesirable place to live (Den Otter & Beckley, 2002).

The capacity to create or maintain a vital civic culture. The capacity to create a vital civic culture is an outcome closely related with levels of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Communities that exhibit strong civic culture are those where local citizens meet, discuss, exchange, and accomplish tasks in the public sphere. It may be reflected in formal activities, as found in religious worship or local government, or it may be manifested through informal activities, such as sporting events or political action.

Some aspects of civic culture can be easily measured through such things as community involvement in voluntary groups, voting, and participation in community events (Putnam, 2000). Other aspects, however, are more difficult. For instance, it is relatively straightforward to tally the number of voluntary organizations and community events but quite difficult to evaluate how meaningful these activities are for community residents. Measures of civic vitality should consider not only how much activity is going on (e.g., how many groups, how many events) but also what percent of the community is actually engaged. The amount of activity may be considered an issue of breadth, while degree of participation may be considered an issue of depth. How deep into the communities does the activeness reach?

The capacity to subsist or persist. The capacity to subsist or persist may have greater relative importance for people in strained circumstances or among people who make a lifestyle choice to rely less on markets for providing their basic needs. Subsistence skills include making use of networks, trading skills, and direct production of consumable goods. These activities are often referred to as part of the informal economy (Jensen et al., 1995; Tickamyer & Wood, 1998). Skills and activities such as these are important for coping with extreme or dramatic disruption in society. The Dust Bowl in the United States was a long-term disruption compared to the more recent and short-term (1998) ice storm in eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. Both demonstrated differential capacities of various communities to cope with these sorts of stresses. Communities that rely heavily on seasonal or cyclical economies, such as fisheries or mining, can experience similar disruptive periods when employment opportunities are low but subsistence opportunities abound. Time not spent at work in the market economy may become time to spend obtaining firewood, hunting for food, bartering skills for goods, and the like. In other words, people may spend time producing their own means of subsistence. In these and other instances, social support networks, subsistence skills, and the knowledge and ability to do for

oneself prove important. Research in Canada has shown that self-provisioning activities are as much about lifestyle choice as economic need (Teitelbaum & Beckley, 2006). However, self-provisioning skills may serve as an additional safety net regardless of one's existing economic circumstances.

The capacity to access resources from the state. Capacity outcomes in this area have to do with state-controlled resources like tax revenue (through programs and infrastructure), property rights in natural resources, and entitlements commonly associated with welfare states. Our interest lies in the extent to which communities gain access to these resources and in the returns to this strategy of community development relative to traditional community economic development outcomes.

Communities competing for access to state resources can adopt several different strategies. In Canada, many natural resources, including fisheries, forests, and minerals, are controlled by the state and licensed or leased to individuals or corporations. Competition for access to these state-controlled resources usually occurs at the individual or firm level; however, community-level lobbying may also result in a given jurisdiction's receiving access to a certain number of commercial fishing licenses, access to public forest land, and the like. Several communities in British Columbia have recently gained access to timber licenses through a competitive call for proposals. Some communities in the competitive process succeeded in accessing resources from the state, while others did not.

Another strategy for gaining access to state resources is through capturing government dollars for infrastructure development. This, in turn, can have compounding effects. For instance, the construction or rerouting of major highways, development of piers or harbors, or the location of government-funded facilities (e.g., prisons, schools, and hospitals) can influence rural development, and many communities opt to direct their community development efforts toward public rather than private investment. Elected representatives, at both the federal and state or provincial level, make it their business to try to bring such opportunities to their home districts and ridings. Electing and re-electing members in the ruling party, therefore, is a strategy whereby rural communities may gain differential access to benefits derived from state services.

4.5 Incorporating Time into the Capacity Model

Figure 1 depicts capacity and the production of capacity outcomes as a linear process. The process begins on the left side of the figure with some sort of asset (e.g., a skill, a network, dollars, infrastructure, or natural resource). Moving right across the model, some opportunity or threat is identified and a decision is taken to attempt to organize the assets—through social processes, described as spheres of social interaction—to produce desired outcomes. There is an implied, but not explicit, temporal dimension to the model. Figure 2 depicts a more dynamic model of community capacity and shows how this process is cyclical in nature. Capacity outcomes may generate greater stocks or new forms of capital. One pass through the capacity building (or reducing) process may also lead to a different social landscape at Time 2.

It is easier to discuss the positive and negative feedbacks through a few examples. Success in accessing resources from the state (e.g., to build a new school or hospital) may result in a new stock of infrastructure capital and simultaneously result in the import of new human capital. New employees may contribute more to

the local tax base. Alternatively, some specific success in maintaining economic vitality, say keeping a mill running that was threatened with closure, may result in more wages paid, or new housing starts, or new business start-ups, which result in the maintenance or expansion of the financial capital base. Success in maintaining civic vitality suggests a group has convened to engage in some activity to achieve shared goals. Through this process, one can assume that there would be a capacity outcome, but an increased stock of social capital may be a residual effect. Therefore, the end point of a threat/opportunity, the collective response, and the capacity outcome is not so much an end in and of itself, but rather a means to produce additional positive outcomes—a new starting place, as it were, at some hypothetical Time 2.

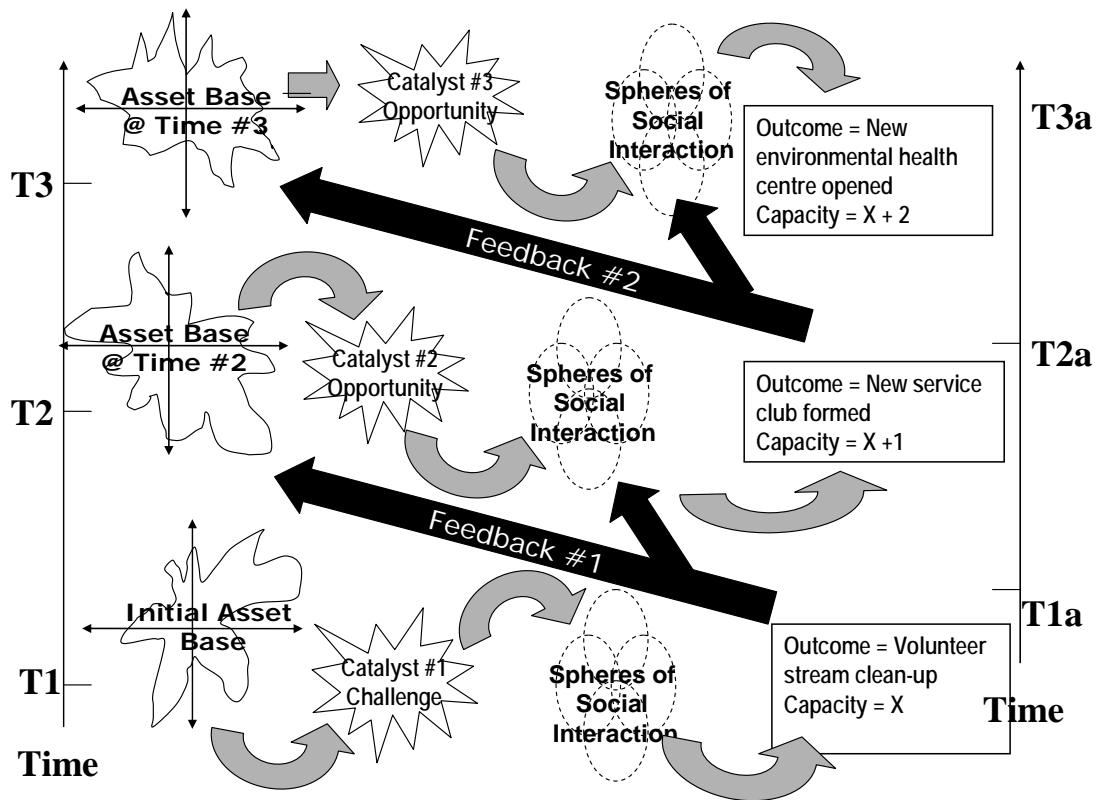


Figure 2. A dynamic model of community capacity with feedback over time.

This cyclical rather than linear interpretation of the model explains in some degree why assessments of community capacity and case studies of successful community development often show the rich getting richer (and not just in financial terms). Success breeds success. Figure 2 represents a positive cyclical process of capacity building over time. However, the reverse case could be true. A common threat to rural communities is the decline of employment in traditional resource industries. If people move away to seek other opportunities, human capital is drained away, the tax base is lowered, and the overall capacity of a community is reduced. The starting point at a hypothetical Time 2 would show a lower amount of total capital stocks available to a community in decline. Positives outcomes, regardless of

whether they produce more cohesive social relations, a more educated populace, healthier or more abundant natural resources, more financial capital, or better infrastructure, result in a stronger asset base from which to build yet more capacity. As well, it is possible that some outcomes will have positive effects on some assets and some social relations and negative effects on other assets and social relations. It is quite likely that the distribution of positive and negative effects will not be evenly distributed across a given community (e.g., two individuals may view the same outcome as positive and negative).

4.6 Assets as Amoebas

To better understand the asset base of a community, some means of measuring the asset base is important. The ability to depict a community's asset base in a form that is both comprehensive and readily understandable may facilitate discussion around strengths and weaknesses as well as desired capacity outcomes. One approach is to use vector diagrams, which have been employed for depicting assessments of human and community health (Smit et al., 1998). These diagrams are usually based on comparisons between the current state and an optimum or desirable condition (Ruitenbeek, 1991). For instance, the Wellness Appraisal Index Graphs (Dever, 1991) combine the scores on 16 different indicators and generate a vector diagram describing patterns of human health for individuals.

A similar technique has been applied as a visual tool for comparing changes in ecosystem health with respect to the relative abundance of species at a specific location within two time points or between ideal and real levels (Latour, Lammers, Reiling, Bal, & Bink, 1995; Smit-Kroes, 1989; ten Brink, 1989). By plotting changes in a representative set of species, a general pattern of species change in the overall ecosystem is provided. This application is called the *amoeba approach* (ten Brink, 1989) because the resulting graphic has an irregularly shaped border (as depicted in Figures 1 and 2). Figure 3 provides a hypothetical example of an asset amoeba. The amoeba approach could use quantitative secondary data (e.g., education attainment, voter participation, or number of businesses) or subjective assessments from experts or local residents (e.g., quality of leadership, amenity value of natural resources, and extent of bartering). Another approach might be to combine subjective and objective indicators into one amoeba as we suggest in Figure 3. The point here is simply to show what asset amoebas with data look like and to demonstrate how they can give a quick impression of the relative asset base of different communities.

Amoeba diagrams can be used to provide a number of different comparisons. Figure 3 illustrates that the asset base of a given community will change over time. The process of capacity building (or loss of capacity) will result in differently configured asset amoebas. Natural capital may be converted into economic capital (e.g., forests completely harvested to generate cash). Conversely, economic capital may be invested in natural capital or human capital (e.g., reforestation or human resource development). Another use of asset amoebas would be to compare two or more communities to one another at the same time. This would involve data collection for the same variables but in different places. Thus, amoebas may be used to compare communities or allow a community to monitor progress against its own objectives over time.

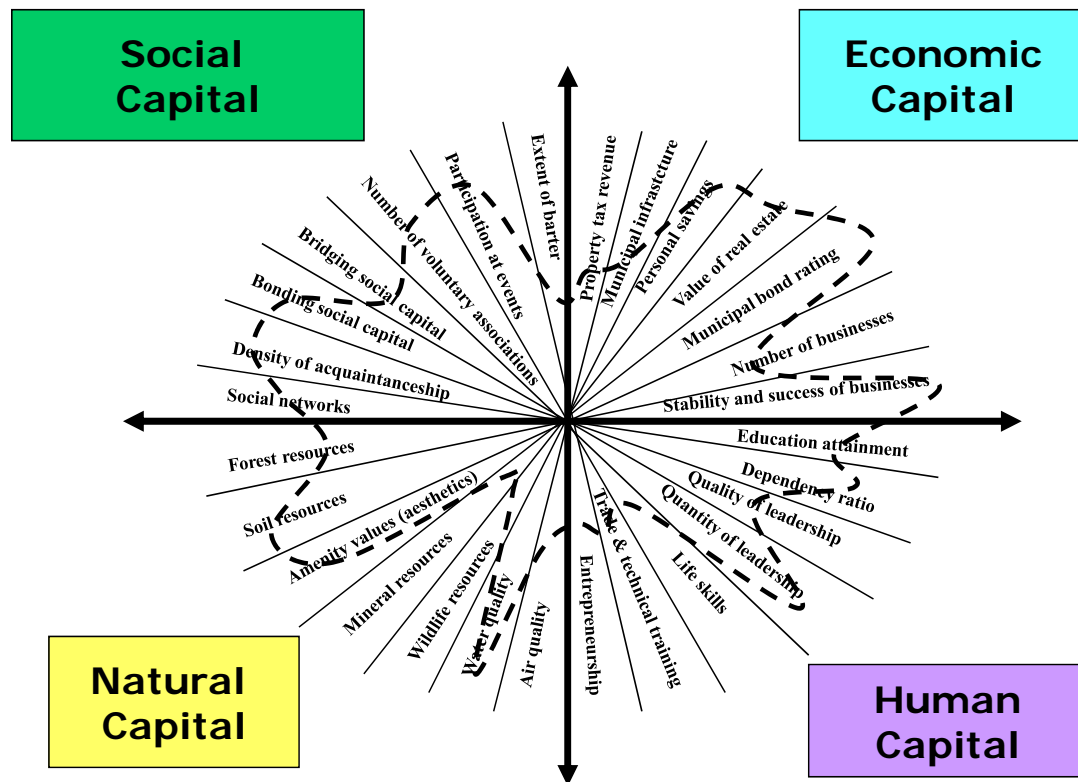


Figure 3. A hypothetical asset amoeba.

Whatever the comparison, these amoebas are useful for integrating different kinds of measures (e.g., economic and social) in the same graphic without having to reduce them all to the same unit of measurement. As well, the public with minimal discussion and interpretation readily grasps the idea of an amoeba. The device allows for a rapid assessment of where communities' strengths and weaknesses lie. It is also very effective for communicating that communities have different starting places based on their particular assets at a given time. In many respects, capacity building is about bolstering one's asset base in areas that have been identified as lacking.

We do not expect to find many communities whose asset amoeba looks like a perfect circle because most communities will have varying strengths and weaknesses relative to different outcomes.

5.0 Discussion and Conclusion: Multiple Capacities, Multiple Outcomes

Very often the focus of attention on rural communities and rural community development has to do with building economic capacity or achieving positive economic outcomes (e.g., high incomes, healthy tax base, and balanced budgets). In our capacity model (see Figure 1), these issues are identified as only one type of

possible outcome: economic vitality. There are, however, many different outcomes for rural places, just as there are many stresses and pressures.

The model also highlights the fact that capacity is not always a protective or reactive phenomenon. It is not only evident when dealing with some sort of threat or challenge, and it does not always tend toward maintaining the status quo. Rather, it is also manifest in proactive initiatives that emerge as a result of changing conditions. An example of such a change is a rural-community focus on attracting retirees as either tourists or residents. They are taking advantage of changing demographic conditions, and trying to use this change to their advantage. Other contemporary examples of such changes include the globalization of markets, government downsizing of services, and devolution of responsibility to local governments. By making use of associative capacity, for example, local communities may develop market opportunities in creative ways. In one of our research sites, for example, a small hobby group with an interest in lilacs expanded their interest into a community tourist opportunity through the use of international contacts and Internet development. In the Prairie Provinces of Canada, Hutterite colonies make effective use of communal capacity to produce market outcomes. The model encourages us to look at the important contribution that nonmarket capacity might make for market outcomes, or how market capacity might be used to enhance civic culture and social cohesion (e.g., bake sales and car washes). The model also highlights an important strategic option for rural communities. Since uncertainty and risk are two of the most difficult challenges facing contemporary rural communities it is wise to develop and maintain some level of competence in a number of these different types of capacity. Strong associative and market capacity would be useful if a mill shuts down, while associative and communal capacity may be most valuable to deal with severe weather events or natural disasters like floods or fire (bureaucratic capacity becomes more important in the aftermath). Therefore the emphasis on building economic capacity alone is somewhat misplaced. Even if an extremely economically successful community (e.g., with full employment and a large tax base) could buy its way out of most of its problems, we are not convinced that that would be desirable. There are significant quality-of-life benefits that stem from the quality of relationships, self-reliance, and other outcomes that are encompassed in our community capacity outcomes.

In this paper we have presented a high-generality conceptual model of community capacity and a visual tool (asset amoebas) for depicting levels of community capital. It is a dynamic model that addresses flux in the components of capacity over time. The intent has been to build on existing community capacity analysis. Many of the components of capacity that we describe have been articulated by others elsewhere, but we have attempted to reorganize and extend some of that existing work. Our goal is to present a model that is robust enough to use for future empirical analysis across a wide range of applications but that is also fairly simple and intuitive. We want it to make sense and be usable for people in the business of community development.

This model of community capacity explicitly contains four elements—capital stocks or assets, catalysts, social relations (through which assets and resources are organized), and capacity outcomes. We have characterized a number of different types of capacity outcomes. The model is a simplified version of what occurs in the real world. It is an ideal type, and a conceptual model. Empirical applications of the model may take several approaches, but again, we believe the model is

robust enough to be populated with qualitative, quantitative, and combined data sets. The model presents a range of possible resources, social interaction, and outcomes. The main focus of this work is on the latter category, capacity outcomes. We feel strongly that capacity is best discussed and measured in terms of what it achieves or how it contributes to quality of life.

We discuss the mechanics of the model in some detail. The main goal of this work is to describe the relationships conveyed in the model and how capacity building is a dynamic, temporal process. While we believe that we have made some forward progress in the articulation of community capacity, this model will undoubtedly continue to develop. We invite other researchers to use and refine the model, and to test it in their own empirical research.

6.0 References

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