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Measuring Success in Communities: The Community Capitals Framework

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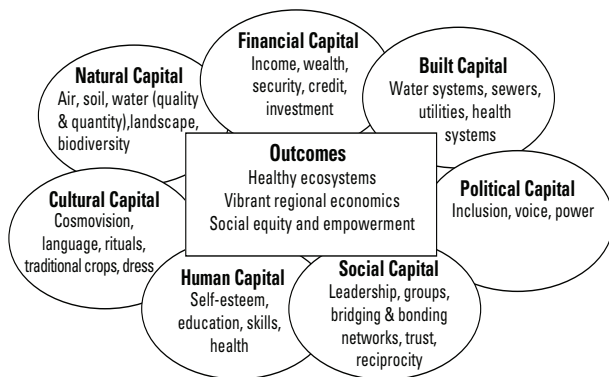
INTRODUCTION

The community capitals framework reveals the interactions between different parts of a community. Communities are systems that have inflows and outflows, ups and downs, progression and regression.

For example, when money is invested in a new factory in the community, the system is affected either positively or negatively; more jobs, increased populations, increased pollution, decrease in unemployment, new housing developments, increased crime rates, and new immigrant populations are just a few of the new issues to be dealt with. From an economic development perspective, bringing a new factory to town seems like a great solution, but it must be understood that the factory will affect other facets of the community.

Communities actively looking to the future can use community capitals to measure current resources and identify the potential for improvements. Researchers have listed seven types of community capital that can be used as a gauge of how community resources are being used (fig. 1):

- 1. Natural Capital** – The environment, natural beauty, lakes, rivers and streams, forests, wildlife, soil, the local landscape.
- 2. Cultural Capital** – Ethnicity, generations, stories and traditions, spirituality, habits, and heritage.
- 3. Human Capital** – All the skills and abilities of people, leadership, knowledge, and the ability to access resources.
- 4. Social Capital** – Groups, organizations, networks in the community, the sense of belonging, bonds between people.
- 5. Political Capital** – Connections to people in power, access to resources, leverage, and influence to achieve goals.
- 6. Built Capital** – Buildings and infrastructure—schools, roads, water and sewer systems, and main streets—in a community.
- 7. Financial Capital** – Money, charitable giving, grants, access to funding, and wealth.



Olson, David P. 2006. *Factors Contributing to the Growth of a Small Town*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Rural Sociology, South Dakota State University, Brookings, SD. Adapted from Cornelia Flora's presentation slides (2005)

Figure 1. Seven types of community capital

UNDERSTANDING THE COMMUNITY CAPITALS

One way to understand the capitals in a community is to think of them as a community bank with

seven accounts (fig. 2). Each bank account holds the strengths, skills, and opportunities available to and residing within community members. The contents of each account may be spent, invested, squandered, or used up, depending on how people choose to use these resources.

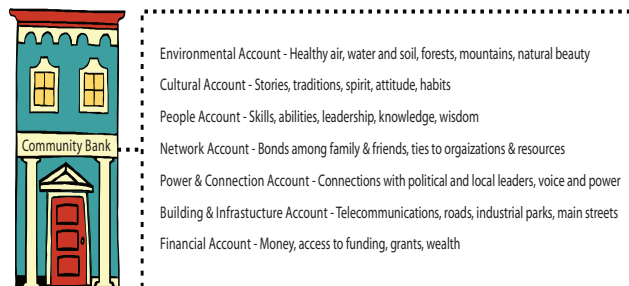


Figure 2. Community capitals “accounts”

INVESTING IN COMMUNITIES

While the capitals are separated into seven separate categories, each of them has a connection with each other. If a community wants to build a new swimming pool, for example, it must be able to invest several of the community capitals to reach their goal. Here’s how it could work:

Interested community members form a “Build Our Pool” group to work on the project, and they partner with several local civic clubs to hold fundraisers (this utilizes *human, social* and *financial capital*). The mayor and city council agree to support the project with funding and an available vacant lot with access to the city water system (this utilizes *political, built,* and *financial capital*). The community pool project becomes a success!

Five of the seven capitals were needed in this example to reach the goal, and the two remaining capitals could easily be added to the equation. For instance, *cultural capital* could be included by holding

fundraisers that promote the local heritage or traditions, such as a German supper or a Native American wacipi. *Natural capital* could be added by including improvement of the local landscape, where the vacant lot that was once an eyesore can become welcoming and attractive by adding trees and grassy areas around the pool.

HOW DOES YOUR COMMUNITY MEASURE UP?

Once you have identified the capitals in your community, you can use them as a tool for planning for the future. You find where your strengths are. You can identify where you need assistance and where to develop partnerships if community capitals are lacking. To learn more, read about each of the seven community capitals in the Community Capitals Series of Extension Extras:

- ExEx16006, Natural Capital
- ExEx16007, Cultural Capital
- ExEx16008, Human Capital
- ExEx16009, Social Capital
- ExEx16010, Political Capital
- ExEx16011, Built Capital
- ExEx16012, Financial Capital

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