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Community Capitals: Human Capital

Cheryl Jacobs, *Extension community development educator*

INTRODUCTION

Investments in people are just as important, if not more important, than investments in the other community capitals: “Human Capital includes those attributes of individuals that contribute to their ability to earn a living, strengthen community, and otherwise contribute to community organizations, to their families, and to self-improvement” (Flora et al. 2004).

LEADERSHIP AND EDUCATION

One of the greatest forms of *human capital* a community possesses is leadership. Leadership can be either natural or earned. Like any skill, the more it is practiced the better it gets.

Too often, communities suffer from “STP Syndrome,” or the “same ten people,” where a core group seems to be the only entity working for community change. The supply of leaders needs to be developed by both adding new people and enhancing the skills of existing leaders.

Additional human capital in communities exists in the form of educational attainment, both formal and informal. There is great wealth in tapping into the skills, abilities, and knowledge of community members. Communities that have abundant human capital have people who value lifelong learning and who are always willing to try new ways of thinking. *Creativity*—the ability to think in a new way—and possessing the knowledge and skills to solve problems are forms of human capital.

Human capital also includes the ability to access outside knowledge. Community members can build their human capital by taking leadership-development

courses in schools and in adult-education programs. They can explore local resources at their Extension office or community college. There are several ways to build human capital:

- Learning—from others, working in groups
- Education—formal and informal, accessing information at the library or on the Internet
- Experiences—knowledge that creates wisdom
- Leadership development—reading, training, practicing skills

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING

Attitude can also be a powerful force in communities. Community members in Eureka, S.D., found a unique way to deal with the negative attitudes that were a barrier to community change by holding a “funeral.” Community members were asked to write down the negative attitudes that had held them back in the past. Then the comments were burned, placed in an urn, and buried. The headstone at the grave reads, “Here lies the past.” This symbolic gesture helped community members build their human capital by allowing them to move forward with a fresh perspective.

Human capital can be gained by being resourceful and looking for opportunities to do things differently. Every town has early adopters, or those people who are the first to latch on to a new idea. Communities also have what are jokingly referred to as “CAVE people,” or “citizens against virtually everything.” The best way to deal with CAVE people is to discover what skills and abilities they possess and use their strengths to entice them to become a part of the project.

People are the heart of a community, and often the pursuit of one idea can demonstrate the interrelation of community capitals (fig. 1):

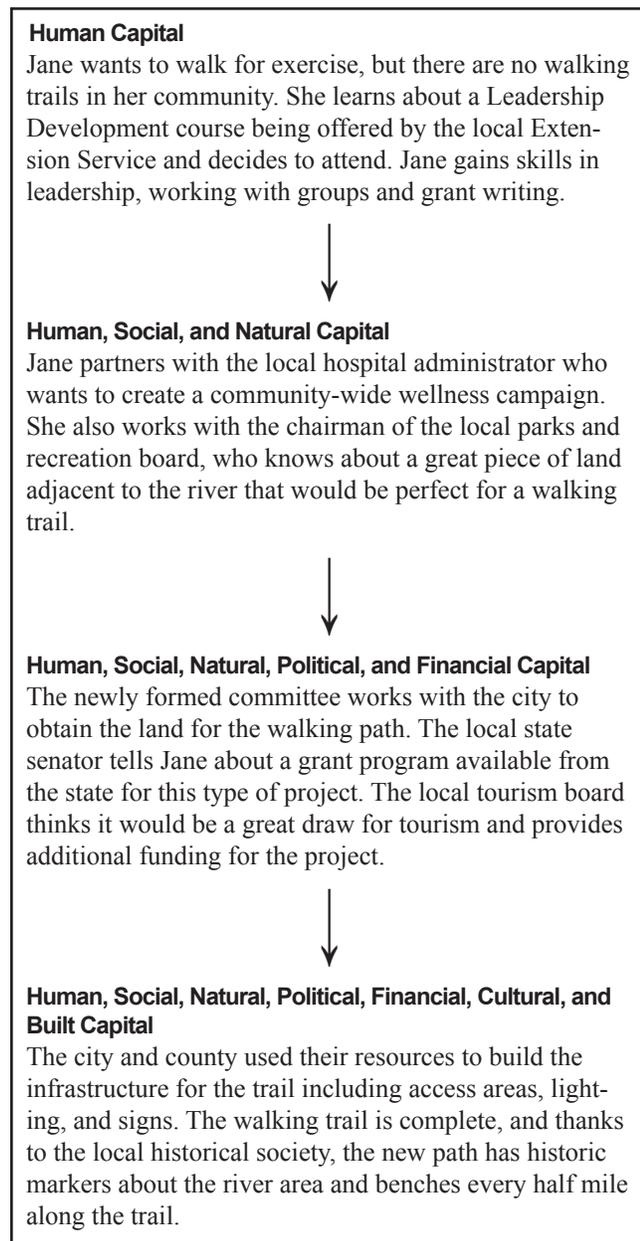


Figure 1. Community capital interrelation



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DISCOVERING HUMAN CAPITAL IN COMMUNITIES

Success in communities depends on using every available asset to its fullest potential. Too often, communities don't realize the treasure of skills, knowledge, and abilities that community members possess. Volunteer recruitment and leadership development are important things for communities to invest time in. Once individual assets are discovered, they need to be matched with issues and needs to discover solutions to common community problems.

Human capital has one of the strongest ties to each of the other capitals, because it is community members who get things done. Ideas, attitudes, willingness to participate, gumption, and the power of working together is how human capital affects a community. Mixing individual capacities and identifying, using, and combining resources can benefit both the individual and the community.

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