



Measuring Civic Capacity

Overview

Community civic capacity is the foundation for many community-based organizations. Borrowing from the concept of community resiliency, the goals of civic capacity have an aim towards decreasing the psychosocial effects of powerlessness, social exclusion, lack of autonomy, and decreased community involvement. Further, enhanced civic capacity helps to expand a narrow public policy agenda that may be representative of the interests of groups that have disproportionate amounts of power and influence.

In summary, research and a growing consensus demonstrate that civic capacity in communities experiencing health inequities has long-term positive impacts via two routes: 1) through the achievement of a more equitable public policy agenda, and 2) by way of improvements in individual and community health.

Building civic capacity has three important results: 1) community members are brought into the process and feel a greater vested interest in successful change, 2) community members can apply new skills to address other social determinants of health, and 3) community members gain skills and a sense of efficacy that can permeate many aspects of their lives and improve broadly life and health outcomes.

Efforts to build civic capacity are up against a wide range of factors that are thought to influence lack of civic engagement:

- People don't care
- People don't have time
- People think it will not matter
- People feel oppressed
- People feel powerless
- People feel like they are prevented from participating.

Indicators of Civic Engagement

Civic capacity in groups is made evident by the display of several characteristics inherent in the community and its goals and strategies.

- **Agency:** Do people see themselves as having civic agency on issues of the day?



- **Knowledge and confidence:** Do people know how to identify and engage local stakeholders in an issue or concern, and show increased confidence in working across cultural and age differences and in public settings of diversity of views, interests and cultures?
- **Conceptual skills:** Are people able to articulate and employ in agile ways civic and political concepts such as citizenship, interests, power, public life, politics, and democracy?
- **Democratic skills:** Is there an increase in other democratic skills: willingness to be accountable for one's actions; public speaking; facility in negotiation, collaboration and reaching agreement; working with differences and conflict; running meetings and setting agendas; researching community goals?
- **Relational networks:** Are people developing a rich multi-layered web of relationships? Is there an increase in people's knowledge of and pride in their community?
- **Culture change:** Are there shifts in institutional and community cultures that evidence increased respect for people's public and civic contributions and that develop professional practice more as coaches, catalysts and energizers than as service providers?
- **Public products:** What is it that is actually changed, created or made by people's actions? What is the impact/benefit to the community or the society and how is that assessed?

To succeed, we must first uncover, assess, and quantify the reasons why people are involved or, conversely, not engaged. This can be done based upon qualitative and quantitative methods that include focus groups and survey instruments to determine the civic capacity of communities.

Measurable Elements of Civic Capacity

The current survey instrument used to measure civic capacity includes the following elements as described below.

Social Capital

Social capital can be defined as resources embedded in a social structure that are accessed and or mobilized in purposive actions. In this case social capital has three ingredients:

1. Resources embedded in a social structure
2. Accessibility to these social resources by individuals
3. Use or mobilization of them by individuals engaged in purposive action



Social capital may have structural [accessibility] elements that examine how communities access collective assets. Further, social capital has action oriented elements [mobilization/use] that consider how communities marshal accessed resources for specific actions.

Political Efficacy and Trust

Political efficacy has an internal and external component. Internal efficacy is based upon people's beliefs about how much say they personally have in politics and about their ability to understand politics. External efficacy is defined in terms of people's beliefs about legislators' interest in their views and whether legislators maintain contact with their constituents. There are also several factors that may cloud or confound measures of political efficacy. These factors must be assessed as well.

Confounding Variables

- Levels of education
- Continuing interest in politics

Collective Self-Efficacy

Collective efficacy refers to a group's shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to attain their goals and accomplish a desired task (Bandura, 1986). Dimensions of collective self- efficacy include:

- Perceived efficacy to take action as a group
- Perceived capability of other community members
- Perceived efficacy to solve problems as a group

Perceived capability of other community members

Refers to members' perceptions of other community members' talents and abilities to do their work within the group or community. The following items can be used for this purpose (adapted for Riggs, et al., 1994, for this report the word, "group" is replaced by the word, community).

Perceived efficacy to solve problems as a group

Refers to the perceived confidence of solving a specific problem or addressing a particular issue at the community level by working together.

Social Cohesion

Social cohesion consists of the forces that act on members of a group or community to remain in, and actively contribute to the group. Dimensions of social cohesiveness include at least six related social and cognitive dimensions:

- Sense of belonging
- Feelings of morale
- Goal consensus
- Trust
- Reciprocity
- Network cohesion



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