

Civic Capacity Building in COVID-19 Recovery Planning in Rural America

By David Chrislip, David MacPhee, and Patti Schmitt



“(The revival of community) would have to be done not from the outside by the instruction of visiting experts, but from the inside by the ancient rule of neighborliness, by the love of precious things, and by the wish to be at home.” (Wendell Berry, 1990)

This article explores the central role civic capacity building plays in preparing for disasters and then recovering from them. Our discussion focuses on civic capacity in rural communities and what can be done to help communities capitalize on their civic strengths and prepare for future challenges. Those who study how communities work know why some respond better than others to disruptions like the coronavirus: They are more resilient because they have greater civic capacity.

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As the coronavirus continues to devastate communities across the nation in terms of deaths and financial hardship, planning for recovery is taking center stage. Communities are struggling about how to take this next step while simultaneously responding to the ongoing pandemic. Rural areas have not been spared the damage wrought by COVID-19 on families and communities, in no small measure because they have higher percentages of seniors with chronic health conditions coupled with limited access to health care facilities and internet limits on telemedicine (Peters, 2020).

Rural communities struggle to be resilient in the face of the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Resilience is directly related to social capital, the network of relationships that help communities work together. In rural communities, social capital is typically limited due to low rates of charitable giving, lack of professional and labor organizations, and fewer community civic organizations (Peters, 2020). These factors contribute to the civic capacity of rural communities to respond effectively to persistent challenges. Rural areas with low civic capacity are often more dependent on outside entities (like governments and foundations) for their survival and, thus, less resilient in the face of future challenges. Community resilience goes beyond coping with a crisis like the coronavirus and returning to the status quo. It is a dynamic process of reinvention and transformation from within the community.

Here, we focus on the why and how of bolstering rural communities’ civic capacity, based on our work in Colorado. Rural areas are often blessed with social capital in the form of strong family ties, a myriad of informal mental health supports, a strong sense of belonging, and in some cases community governance that is more representative and attuned to local needs (Cox et al., 2011; Hagler et al., 2019; Kitchen et al., 2012; Wright, 2013). These adaptive

capacities contribute to rural communities’ ability to be more resilient in the face of disasters such as COVID-19 (Norris et al., 2008) and are exemplified in aiding struggling neighbors and helping youth continue their education online.

Despite these strengths, research consistently documents the limited availability of community resources to enhance well-being. Support services for families and youth are in short supply (Mohatt et al., 2005). Greater economic stress (Jensen et al., 2003) and a strong sense of self-reliance (Wanless et al., 2010) contribute to higher rates of health problems and family conflict (Spoth & Redmond, 1996). Building rural civic capacity to address these problems at a local level is a priority for recovering from COVID-19.

Over the past two decades, there has been a distinct shift in thinking about where the impetus for adaptation and change should come from in neighborhoods and communities. Perhaps recognizing the limitations of top-down, externally-driven approaches, foundations, government agencies, and other civic actors now support community-driven responses to adaptive challenges such as health, education, housing, policing, and other public crises that require the community to adapt or to be resilient. Three premises inform this thinking about community-driven change:

1. It is more effective in making lasting progress
2. It is more inclusive, therefore more democratic
3. Communities with the capacity for community-driven change are more resilient

Our recent research on community-driven change and civic capacity identified the essential characteristics of communities capable of responding constructively to complex challenges. For example, these communities intentionally confront historic inequities and injustice. They couple an inclusive civic

culture with institutions committed to community engagement. They keep a steady eye on the common good. Many people exercise leadership in different forms at different times. The leadership focus is on purposeful collaboration and mutual learning to make progress on issues of shared concern.

Based on these characteristics, we developed a Civic Capacity Index (CCI) that measures a community's capacity to respond to challenges and disruptions. With the help of this framework, civic actors can take advantage of existing civic capacity, understand where it is lacking, and build their capacity to respond to future challenges.

Civic capacity, in this sense, is a resource. It describes a community's (or region's) capability for collective action to solve local problems and its willingness to energize this capability. It reflects the aspiration for communities and regions to shape responses to challenges in ways that reflect the local culture, context, and needs. At its best, community-driven change can be defined in terms of shared power between decision makers and community members, multiple perspectives on issues, strong participation from diverse people, a focus on the common good, and decision-making processes that are equitable, authentic, and transparent.

To create the CCI, we convened a panel of 34 experts from the U.S. and Canada, with conceptual and experiential expertise related to civic engagement, civic leadership development, and community building. In 2019-20, we worked with the panel to consolidate our knowledge and experience using a concept mapping process. We engaged the panel in brainstorming, sorting, clustering, analyzing, and mapping responses to queries related to the three tasks listed above. We began with the question: Based on your experience and knowledge, what would you see if community-driven change is occurring? Ultimately, the panel helped create the Civic Capacity Index with 52 items organized into seven domains. These dimensions, which align well with the central features of community resilience (Norris et al., 2008), include collective leadership, equity and inclusion, an engaging civic culture, and various facets of coalitions and collaborations.

We are now validating the CCI in communities with varying levels of civic capacity. Our work focuses on three dimensions of validity: discriminant, convergent, and concurrent.

- **Discriminant validity** helps distinguish civic capacity from other factors such as geography, path dependency (historical events/choices shaping current conditions), and the sociopolitical and economic forces that also shape how communities and regions act
- **Convergent validity** helps us determine how well the CCI corresponds with other indicators of community resilience and well-being.
- **Concurrent validity** measures how well the CCI correlates with context and content experts' perceptions of their communities' equity and inclusion as well as collective efficacy, both of which are core elements of community resilience. If the CCI correlates with these core elements, it provides a strong rationale for interventions to confront racism and injustice as one means to promote civic capacity and community resilience.

We envision the CCI being used in the following ways:

- As an assessment instrument to help communities assess their collective capacity to respond to challenges, which could be an important addition to Extension community needs assessments
- As a diagnostic tool to design authentic, inclusive collaborative processes tailored to take advantage of existing civic capacity and building capacity where it is lacking, thus providing a foundation for Extension's strategic planning and doing
- As a framework for leadership development to assist civic leadership development programs that help build social cohesion, community well-being, and collective efficacy
- As an evaluation measure for assessing the impact of Extension's collaborative problem-solving processes and leadership in civic capacity building initiatives
- As a framework for research on community-driven change, to provide insights about why some communities respond more effectively to challenges than others

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The lessons of our research apply equally to rural and urban areas. Civic capacity is the crucial resource for responding to civic challenges and disruptions. Directly engaging the full diversity of the community taps new sources of leadership and the local knowledge of lived experience, allowing systemic inequities to be addressed. Making lasting progress in the civic arena requires moving the focus of leadership from the individual to the community to learn, adapt, and innovate together. Tight links between institutions and communities connect the “grassroots” with the “grasstops,” leading to pragmatic, action-oriented coalitions. Civic intermediary organizations help build civic capacity and facilitate working together. Open, authentic, and structured processes help community members cross boundaries, bridge differences, learn together, solve problems, and get things done.

Just as flattening the curve of the coronavirus in its initial stages took leadership and concerted action, so too does creating a more resilient society. The coronavirus has revealed, not for the first time, many of the staggering issues of inequality in our country. Extension has a role in balancing the scales of justice at the local level, because programs that enhance social capital are a conduit of social justice (Fields & Nathaniel, 2015; Iverson, 2008). If we only mitigate the symptoms of the coronavirus pandemic, we will have missed an opportunity to generate the ideas and political will to build a more just and equitable society. Realizing these aspirations takes civic capacity. Fulfilling them restores confidence in our collective capacity to respond to disruptions and challenges yet to come. *

About the Authors

David Chrislip
Principal
Skillful Means
davidchrislip@gmail.com

David MacPhee
Research Associate
Prevention Research Center
Colorado State University
david.macphee@colostate.edu

Patti Schmitt
Director
Family Leadership Training Institute of Colorado
Colorado State University Extension
patti.schmitt@colostate.edu

