BUILDING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

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COMMUNITY DRIVEN CHANGE AND CIVIC CAPACITY

Powerful social, economic, and demographic forces compel a striking shift toward "bottom-up" approaches to community change. 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, communities, and regions. Recognizing the limitations of top-down, externally-driven approaches, many foundations, governments, and other civic actors now encourage and support community-driven responses to adaptive challenges such as health, education, housing, policing, and other public crises. Three premises inform this thinking about community-driven change:

- It is more effective in making lasting progress. Outcomes have broader legitimacy and are more equitable and stable over time;
- It is more inclusive and egalitarian, therefore more democratic;
- Communities with the capacity for community-driven change are observably more resilient and responsive to disruptions and challenges.

At its heart, 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 *equitable outcomes*, and decision-making processes that are *equitable, authentic, and transparent*. Communities and regions with a high capacity for community-driven change are characterized by:

- a collective and pervasive capacity to exercise leadership for the common good from any part of the community or region;
- a willingness to confront overarching issues such as racism, discrimination, and social injustice that prevent real progress on other, substantive challenges;
- the commitment and support of authority figures and institutions for constructive civic engagement;
- a default civic culture—a sense of collective agency—that encourages civic engagement and the organic creation of coalitions that can work, learn, and act together in pursuit of the common good.

THE CIVIC CAPACITY INDEX (CCI)

The ***Civic Capacity Index*** is a research based measure of a community's civic capacity to respond to challenges and disruptions like the coronavirus. 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 capacity in terms of civic engagement, civic leadership development, and community building. We began with the question: Based on your experience and knowledge, *what would you see (in communities) if community-driven change is occurring?* We worked with the panel to connect and consolidate their knowledge and experience using a concept mapping process. We engaged the panel in brainstorming, sorting, clustering, analyzing, and mapping their responses to create a synthesis. In social science research terms, we were discovering the attributes of community-driven change, a critical aspect of theory-building. Ultimately, the panel identified seven domains and 52 characteristics or descriptors of community-driven change and civic capacity. The CCI asks respondents to assess whether and to what extent these characteristics are present in their communities. The CCI is available in English and in Spanish.

USING THE CCI

The CCI can help communities discover how stakeholders can learn, plan, and act together more effectively. It helps inform, shape, and evaluate intervention strategies from governments, foundations, and other civic actors. With the help of the CCI, civic actors can take advantage of existing civic capacity, understand where it is lacking, and build resilience for the future:

- As *an assessment instrument*, the CCI can help communities assess their collective capacity to respond to current and future challenges as a starting place for building resilience;
- As *a diagnostic tool* the CCI can help policy makers understand the capacity of a community or region to absorb and manage resources directed towards recovery from the impacts of a disruption like the coronavirus;
- As *a framework for community-driven change*, the CCI can be used to design authentic, inclusive, and structured collaborative processes tailored to take advantage of existing civic capacity and building capacity where it is lacking. It can be used to monitor these interventions and refine them as needed to make progress;
- As *a framework for building civic capacity*, the CCI can help community building initiatives develop leadership capacity and collective efficacy;
- As *an evaluation measure*, the CCI provides a common reference for assessing the impact of collaborative problem-solving processes and civic capacity building initiatives;

DEVELOPING THE CCI

Framing the Research

The purpose of this initiative is to:
- Create a broader conceptual understanding of community-driven change and civic capacity by connecting multiple perspectives and interpretations;
- Understand why some communities respond better than others to challenges and disruptions;
- Define the civic capacities communities need to respond to challenges and disruptions and what these capacities look like in practice;

- Develop a diagnostic tool – a civic capacity index – to help inform, shape, and evaluate interventions designed to build civic capacity, respond to challenges and disruptions, develop equitable and sustainable policies, and solve community problems.

We used two approaches to help us define the dimensions of civic capacity. The first builds on the insights of other scholars exploring community-driven change and civic capacity. The second makes use of the knowledge and experience of the expert panel described earlier. Two studies in particular helped us frame the questions we wanted to explore:
- Briggs, Xavier de Souza (2008), *Democracy as Problem Solving: Civic Capacity in Communities Across the Globe,* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pares, Marc, Sonia M. Ospina and Joan Subirats (2017), *Social Innovation and Democratic Leadership: Communities and Social Change from Below,* Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

As a result of this work, we have a broadly shared conception of civic capacity at its best and what it entails in practice. Radical inclusion prevails. No one is systematically excluded or discriminated against. Enhancing the knowledge and skills of socially excluded groups promotes equality and shared responsibility for decisions and actions. Directly engaging the full diversity of the community taps new sources of leadership and the local knowledge of lived experience. Making lasting progress in the civic arena requires moving the focus of leadership from the individual to the collective to learn, adapt, and innovate. 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 processes help community members cross boundaries, bridge differences, learn together, solve problems, and get things done. Imagining new ways of making more progress challenges the established hierarchy and changes the dominant discourse.

Through this study, we began to understand that civic capacity is the *crucial* resource for neighborhoods, communities, and regions to respond to challenges and disruptions. It reflects the *collective capacity of a social system* to make progress on issues of shared concern. Progress emerges from the interplay of its domains in particular situations on specific challenges. Civic capacity ebbs and flows manifesting differently in different times, situations, places, and on different issues. Each dimension represents a necessary but not sufficient aspect of civic capacity. The whole is greater than the parts. No community can deploy all of these qualities in every situation, though some can do so better than others.

Gathering, Interpreting, and Validating the CCI Data

We are working with a number of Colorado counties and communities to collect the data we need to validate the instrument and conduct a follow-up community conversation. We expect to complete the initial steps in the second quarter of 2021. The purpose of validation is to demonstrate that the CCI accurately assesses what it purports to measure. Our work focuses on three dimensions of validity:
- *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.

The Colorado Department of Health and Environment helped us identify several counties with varying levels of response to COVID-19. We would expect those that responded better would have higher civic capacity and that this difference would be discernible with the CCI. Preliminary data from two counties at the extremes confirms that civic capacity measured with the CCI scores in the county that responded well are about 20 percentage points higher across the seven domains of the assessment than those of the county that responded less well.

The main point is that the CCI is picking up the differences we expected it to pick up. This data can help communities recognize strengths and weaknesses and develop civic capacity building strategies for improving their resilience and responses to disruptions and challenges like COVID-19. The data can also help foundations and agencies develop more targeted strategies for their interventions. For example, health strategies for Weld County might need to be more targeted coupled with more direction and guidance because of lower civic capacity. Similarly, strategies for Eagle County would require less direction and guidance.

Publicizing the Work

Our work continues to garner attention through our recent publications. Here are some examples with links:
- The WIN Network (well-being in the nation) highlighted David Chrislip's paper for the Well-Being Trust and the CDC Foundation "Civic Capacity, Race, and COVID-19" in their December newsletter: https://thriving.us/deep-dive-belonging-civic-muscle/
- Our paper "Civic Capacity Building in COVID-19 Recovery Planning in Rural America" was the cover article of the fall/winter edition of *Rural Connections:* https://www.usu.edu/wrdc/files/news-publications/Schmitt-RC-FA-WIN-2020.pdf
- The International Leadership Association included "Briefing: Civic Capacity and the Coronavirus" as a blog post in July 2020: https://theila.org/briefing-civic-capacity-and-the-coronavirus/

Conducting Experiments

We are now conducting experiments using the CCI and a civic engagement framework derived from it at three levels:
- Building Community Resilience: Experiments that use the CCI assessment as a catalyst for conversations focused on transforming the civic culture at the local, regional, and state level. These conversations help interpret the assessment data and develop initiatives to strengthen civic capacity.
- Building Civic Capacity: Experiments that use the civic engagement framework and leadership practices as scaffolding for civic leadership development curricula.
- Mobilizing Civic Capacity: Experiments that use the framework as a guide for civic engagement addressing specific challenges.