

Social capital

Stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. These are referred to as “capital,” because like many other forms of capital, they can accumulate and can be drawn upon as an investment for future action. The forms of social capital vary. Some are more robust in terms of generating civic capacity for broad and inclusive public problem solving; others are narrow and may even exacerbate social divisions and inequalities of power and resources. It is thus important to develop strategies and policies that enable the positive benefits, especially for sustainable, resilient, and just communities, while containing negative externalities.

History of the concept

The use of social capital and related concepts has a long history in the United States, but has taken off here and around the world from the late 1980s in various social science disciplines, as well as in policy analysis, community development strategies, and international development agencies.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835) famously called attention to citizen readiness to form associations to address any number of community and social problems, though he did not use the specific term of social capital. The first time this seems to have occurred is with Lyda J. Hanifan, a school superintendent in West Virginia, writing in 1916, who spoke of kinship ties and close friendships in this manner, as well as the attendant good will that could accumulate and then be drawn upon in everyday life and community improvement. Jane Jacobs’ classic work, *The Death and Life of American Cities* (1961), utilized social capital to refer to casual interactions in street life, which can be enhanced by design of streets, sidewalks, porches, and the like.

French theorist Pierre Bourdieu analyzed social capital in his 1986 article, “Forms of Social Capital,” and linked it to one’s rank (military, family pedigree, bureaucratic position) and relative resources (economic capital). James Coleman analyzed it alongside financial, physical, and human capital, and argued that, in the educational system, social capital could be used to help generate human capital.

The breakthrough book that placed social capital solidly on the scholarly agenda was *Making Democracy Work*, by Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam and his colleagues. The book focused on the uneven history of development of regional governance in Italy over centuries that located the key differences in performance between northern and southern provinces in the relatively more robust forms of social capital in the North. The chapter on social capital and institutional success developed the term in greater depth than previously. Putnam soon began applying these lessons to the U.S. in a series of articles, as well as at a meeting of scholars, practitioners, and the Rockefeller Foundation on Cape Cod in 1994. With solid institutional backing and media access, Putnam launched a very successful enterprise as one of America’s leading public intellectuals.

In 2000, Putnam published *Bowling Alone*, which argued that many trends indicated that social capital was on the decline in the U.S. over previous decades. While the book met with important critiques on concepts, methods, and data, it persisted as a robust argument that had to be taken most seriously. Putnam published *Better Together* a few years later to address the question of his not having adequately included civic innovation. In 2020, he published a new addition of *Bowling Alone*, as well as *The Upswing*, which makes an argument about how we can accomplish again what we once did during the Progressive Era: shift our society away from obsessive concern for the “I” toward a workable and ennobling sense of “We.”

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Forms of social capital

The vigorous debate that Putnam's work triggered ranged far and wide across many public issues, fields of study, and regions of the world. One important set of correctives argued for more attention to the political institutions and policy designs at various levels of the federal system in shaping, enabling, or inhibiting the formation and leveraging of social capital for public problem solving. In response, Putnam and many other scholars refined the concept, although some scholars persisted in seeing it as largely irrelevant or even pernicious in helping to address questions of social rights and systemic inequalities of power and resources. To be sure, the concept was never intended to address all social and economic ills or to be utilized separately from other analytic concepts or tools of governance.

One set of distinctions that has come to be stressed in the literature is that of bonding, bridging, and linking forms of social capital:

- *Bonding* social capital draws upon relatively tight-knit relationships, such as a religious congregation where members share a common set of beliefs and rituals, meet regularly in a shared space, often live in the same neighborhood, and typically engage in a range of activities that reinforce reciprocity, such as charity events and children's schools and camps. Ethnically or racially based neighborhoods, clubs, lending societies, and sports teams often generate strong bonding social capital and mutual self-help. The downside of bonding social capital is that it can be quite exclusive of other groups and foster ethnic, religious, and others forms of social conflict, resource hoarding, and power hierarchies.
- *Bridging* social capital are those forms that generate reciprocity, information, and mutual aid across bonded groupings. Thus, an ecumenical religious forum or faith-based community organizing project might bring people of various congregations and denominations together around some common set of beliefs or interests, even though they may have fundamental differences in creed or historical conflicts that linger.
- *Linking* social capital is focused less on horizontal ties, as in the first two forms, and more on how these forms can leverage vertical ties to those networks and institutions with authority and resources upwards in institutional fields and political power structures. Strategies of environmental and health justice in the face of climate change depend critically on leveraging horizontal ties vertically to those with authority and resources in city planning agencies, local corporations, mayors and city councils, national regulatory agencies, and many other kinds of institutions.

There is no one best recipe for configuring these forms of social capital to ensure the most effective and equitable outcomes for sustainable, resilient, and just communities. Political and policy design and strategic field building in each relevant arena are critical, as are broader social policies.

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Social capital in practice

Various studies examine social capital in the context of specific approaches to public problem solving. To be sure, as with any analytic concept, there exists much scholarly debate on its usefulness, measurement, causality, and application. Here we initially focus on several: healthy communities, disaster resilience, and faith-based community organizing.

Healthy communities

A movement for healthy cities and communities began in the U.S., as well as through the World Health Organization (WHO), in the mid-1980s, though it had a variety of precedents in other community and public health strategies in decades prior.

As planning theorist Jason Corburn and others argue, the healthy communities frame includes the community as co-producer of relevant expertise and avoids the reductionism associated with single behaviors, diseases, and risk factors. It aims to incorporate the full complexity of social, spatial, cultural, economic, and environmental factors that interact to produce population health and illness, as well as the systemic inequalities that impede environmental and health justice. Effective democratic urban governance, including multi-stakeholder partnerships at the neighborhood level, is a key component of the healthy city frame.

Social capital can play an important role in healthy community strategies. Some ways in which this can happen are the following:

- *social support*: networks of care that extend to neighborhoods, congregations, self-help groups, youth organizations, and other groups.

- *information*: flows of timely, relevant, and trustworthy information through such networks, which can include medical information, but also environmental harms, such as environmental sources of asthma, lead poisoning, and other toxics. The use of *promotoras* (community health workers) to ensure two-way information flows, as well as community-generated stories, murals, photos, maps, and street surveys are part of rich meaning making.
- *norms of healthy behavior*: social networks that encourage specific activities, such as walking and biking, and discourage others, such as smoking and excessive use of alcohol.
- *community action*: to change the built environment through bicycle and pedestrian associations; to organize against environmental and health injustices.
- *collaborative governance*: to develop multi-stakeholder strategies among a broad array of local associations, such as affordable housing, public safety, community gardening, parks, ethnic, youth, senior, and other groups (bridging social capital), in conjunction with departments of environment, public health, transportation and other relevant agencies (linking social capital). Such governance strategies can expand to include bridging and linking networks across a larger region.

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Disaster resilience and recovery

The study of disasters predates climate change, but the latter has focused attention on how communities can engage in ways that reduce risks and enhance resistance, resilience and recovery in the face of hurricanes, floods, wildfires, sea level rise, and other disasters. Social capital and related concepts have become increasingly central to academic studies as well as policy prescriptions, local planning, and agency practice. Of course, there are many other types of factors, such as building codes and land development in flood prone areas, and disaster resilience indicator tools, while varied, attempt to classify these in ways that are most usable.

Social capital can play an important role in disaster resilience. Some ways in which this can happen are the following:

- *information*: timely, reliable, place-based and street- and building-level flows of information can help in search and rescue, locate those most in need, identify those such as seniors who may be missing or holed up in their apartments (as during the Chicago 1995 heat wave), and help direct people to emergency food and shelter.
- *loans and gifts*: for property repair and immediate needs.
- *neighborhood, faith-based, youth, senior, and other civic organizations*: can collaborate with city and county agencies to develop resilience plans and monitor implementation; they can help mobilize volunteers to “build back better.” Civic networks can often move more quickly and steer around bureaucratic hurdles to get recovery efforts going. Diverse types of associations and nonprofits can form Community Organizations Active in Disasters (COADs) or Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters (VOADs). The latter now have a national association, [National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disasters](#).
- *boater networks*: boaters spontaneously organized a massive boatlift to evacuate people from lower Manhattan during the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, as well as a “Cajun Navy” to rescue people from the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina.
- *professional networks*: nurses, building contractors, firefighters from other communities, and others with critical skills can mobilize their networks and work with neighborhood, faith-based, and other civic organizations.
- *faith-based organizations*: in addition to their many other roles in mobilizing support, faith groups can help people process grief, channel anger, and generate hope, thus enriching social capital with cultural capital. Of course, they can also interpret disaster as the “hand of God” in ways that divert from more robust social and political responses.

Disasters can also shatter some of the networks that exist in communities, disperse residents (especially poorer ones in substandard housing) in ways that they cannot easily utilize civic and neighborhood ties. Disasters can pit some groups against others in the competition for resources needed for recovery and rebuilding. Income, gender, race, and disability make some groups significantly more vulnerable than others, although they also can generate resilient forms of social capital.

Policy and planning, as well as advocacy and movement mobilization, are often required to check such tendencies and compensate for unequal access to social, financial, political and other forms of capital.

Studies also indicate organizational culture and policy design factors that are important in leveraging social capital for disaster resilience. Relevant agencies can appreciate how community groups and other nongovernmental networks can contribute, incorporate them into planning and response, and develop cultures of nonhierarchical teamwork that enable public agency staff to work effectively with community groups, including those most vulnerable and lacking significant economic and political resources. A participatory and inclusive planning process is critical.

The mobilization of social capital to enhance resilience is not designed to simply accommodate disasters in an age of climate change, of course, but to build back better, fairer, and stronger where possible, retreat and locate to thriving, participatory, and just communities where necessary, and live to fight another day in reducing climate and environmental hazard and injustice.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) convened a national dialogue through meetings and conferences that resulted in recommendations in 2011 for a Whole Community approach that placed much stress on community engagement in its diverse, complex, and inclusive forms. It urged recognizing community needs and assets, in addition to aligning the work of actors in all sectors. Building trust and partnerships is essential to this approach.

Were a national civic capacity building initiative launched, as proposed in [CivicGreen Policy](#) by Carmen Sirianni, “[The Civics of Federal Climate Policy](#): Designing and Investing for Community Empowerment and Public Participation,” the FEMA Whole Community approach would provide an administrative framework, and grants to COADs and VOADs would provide an organizational channel for investing.

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Faith-based community organizing

While faith-based community organizing (FBCO) does not typically focus on environmental issues, it provides a rich illustration of the use of social capital in various forms to enhance power for public ends in less advantaged communities, including many communities of color. It has tended to focus on such issues as housing, school reform, job training, water and street infrastructure, health care, immigration reform, community safety, criminal justice reform, and racial equity across all these issues. Given the increasing relevance of environmental justice and community resilience in the face of climate threats, FBCO is likely to develop further environmental emphases.

Issues and styles vary across the more than 200 or so FBCO coalitions nationwide, which are typically made up of several dozen Catholic and Protestant churches, synagogues and mosques, as well as other organizations, such as community development corporations (CDCs), citywide networks of CDCs, community health centers, and local unions. It is often referred to as institution-based organizing because it is the institutions that are the members of the coalition.

The major networks that employ the faith-based model of the type described here are the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the PICO National Network, the Gamaliel Foundation, and the Direct Action and Research Center (DART).

Local organizations have a variety of names, such as the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS, in San Antonio, and its sister organization, Metro Alliance), Oakland Community Organizations (OCO), Metropolitan Organizing Strategy for Enabling Strength (MOSES, in Detroit), and East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC) in New York City.

Using the three-fold classification (above), FBCO generates and mobilizes social capital in a variety of ways and according to a template that professional “organizers” from the major federations help to teach through extensive mentoring and the development of “leaders” from the member organizations:

- *bonding social capital*: FBCO builds upon already existing relationships, shared norms, trust, and cultural narratives (e.g. Biblical stories) within specific congregations. It leverages these internally by systematic campaigns among congregants who meet in “one-on-ones” to share their stories and their deep commitments to social justice and public good.

When a critical mass of congregants, as well as clerical leadership (typically a pastor), agree to join a larger organizing project and to utilize its template for leadership development, the congregation pays dues and becomes an official member. The dues support the hiring of a professional organizer (lead organizer), and perhaps one or two others, who primarily work to help member organizations to leverage bonding social capital into bridging and linking forms.

- *bridging social capital*: this is developed by systematic one-on-one campaigns across congregational, denominational, and other organizational boundaries. Thus, members of a largely Latino Catholic church might meet with those of a Black Protestant congregation, a Jewish synagogue, and/or a Muslim mosque, to explore common religious and cultural motives to work for community improvement. Nondenominational language, such as “we are all children of God,” is favored, but large meetings might begin and conclude with prayers and clergy resonate with specific traditions.

Wealthier or suburban congregation members meet with working class and inner-city congregations to create bridges and often leverage their greater financial resources and professional skills and networks. A wealthier congregation, for instance, might guarantee a loan for state affordable housing development (\$500,000 was the goal for such congregations in GBIO), as well as utilize a member’s professional relationships among local banks to collaborate in community lending.

Organizing projects develop issue campaigns after extensive one-on-ones, as well as house meetings, and the core leadership group among the member organizations settles on priorities. House meetings are democratically deliberative but also mobilize social capital to share stories and generate participation more broadly in communities.

School reform campaigns might use “walks for success” as a way for a team to knock on doors and talk to neighbors and parents. Within schools, organizing might expand one-on-ones and deliberative problem solving among teachers, administrators, school nurses and school safety officers.

- *linking social capital*: since the aim of FBCO is to generate “power with” through bonding and bridging, organizing projects focus on ways of linking to sources of authority and resources upwards in local and state fields of practice. This process can utilize contentious methods (e.g. against a bank or a mayor), but with the aim of developing a partnership based on trust and shared interests.

Partnerships are developed with a range of institutions: school systems, banks, housing agencies, health systems, and community colleges.

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Last revised: 10/17/20