A Literature Review of Capacity Frameworks:

Six Features of Comparison

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Abstract

This paper compares capacity definitions and their associated theoretical frameworks using six features of comparison: 1) whether capacity is understood as a condition or a process, 2) the outcomes considered, 3) the measurement of capacity, 4) whether it is understood to exist within communities (endogamous) or outside of communities (exogenous), 5) what levels of analysis are used, and 6) whether capacity outcomes are understood as inherently positive. In each case, variations in the literature are compared to the approach taken in the New Rural Economy Project – a nine-year project investigating capacity in rural Canada. We argue that by locating capacity research with respect to these six features we will be better able to compare capacity frameworks, understand the processes involved, and improve the policies and programs designed to enhance capacity at multiple levels.

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Introduction

'Capacity', 'community capacity', and 'community development' are commonly used terms in academic literature, however, there remains no consensus on their definitions (Cuthill & Fien, 2005). As a result of this ambiguity the differences and similarities between the concepts and their applications remain underdeveloped. In part this is due to the diverse theoretical frameworks and research in which the concepts are used. We find 'capacity' used in health research to discuss the ways that communities can improve personal health. Within forestry research (Parkins et al., 2003; Kusel, 1996) we find community capacity defined as "a measure of how communities respond and create opportunities to improve local wellbeing" (Kusel, 1996: 361). Likewise, we see the concepts of community development and community capacity in research dealing with social and economic development (Flora & Flora, 2004; Green & Haines; 2002; Bryden & Munro, 2000; Stern et al., 1997). Further, these various conceptions of 'capacity' are applied across developing nations (Gibbon et al., 2002) and developed nations (Jackson et al., 2003) and used in research focusing on rural (Tiepoh & Reimer, 2004; Robinson & Wilkinson, 1997) and urban areas (Chaskin, 2001; Gittell et al., 1998). Since they frequently start from diverse frameworks, the value of 'capacity' as an analytical concept has been severely limited even as its strategic and polemical use has increased.

We hope to reintroduce some of the analytical value of the concept by identifying six key features which help to differentiate its use. We argue that by locating particular conceptions of capacity to these six features, we are better able to make comparisons between then, identify

their relative utility for various questions, and increase our understanding of the processes and conditions related to capacity development and outcomes.

These features have emerged as a result of discussion and research within the New Rural Economy Project (NRE) – a multi-discipline, long-term project focusing on rural Canada. The conceptual framework on capacity that has guided our research and collaboration will be used as a point of reference for discussing the differences and similarities by which capacity is discussed in the literature. We first of all provide a brief introduction to the NRE project, followed by an outline of the Capacity Framework[1] we have developed. Next, we situate the NRE framework within other perspectives found in the literature based upon the following six features: 1) whether capacity is understood as a process or not, 2) the types of outcomes considered, 3) how capacity is measured, 4) whether capacity is understood as something that exists within communities (endogamous) or outside of communities (exogenous), 5) the levels of analysis that are used, and 6) whether capacity outcomes are understood as inherently positive. Finally, we will discuss some of the research advantages of the perspective we have taken and identify capacity issues arising for further attention.

The NRE Project

The NRE Project was established in 1997 with three major characteristics. First, it is a network of researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and rural citizens working in a collaborative manner using a national perspective to rural research and education (Reimer, 1996). Second, the project

[1] There is a distinction between frameworks and models. Cuthill & Fien (2005: 69) use Rapoport (1985:256) distinction: "Conceptual frameworks are neither models nor theories … models describe how things work, whereas theories explain phenomena. Conceptual frameworks do neither; rather they help to think about phenomena, to order material, revealing patterns – and pattern recognition typically leads to models and theories. (Cuthill & Fien, 2005: 69)

has developed a number of rural Canadian databases and research materials including census, survey, interview, and documentary information. This material makes it possible to compare rural places on a national level and to do so at a level of specificity that is sensitive to local variation. Using census subdivision data, for example, we have integrated demographic and economic data from 1986, 1991, 1996 and 2001 in order to profile rural Canada on key characteristics. This provides an important basis for grounding our theoretical, strategic, and policy developments. Third, we have established a 'Rural Observatory' of 32 systematically identified rural sites with which we have collaborated over the 8 years of the research (Reimer, 2002).

All of these elements are integrated in a program of research teams, workshops, conferences, and publications that have enabled us to watch, study, and engage in capacity activities within a systematic comparative structure. It has provided us with the means to elaborate our framework of the capacity process within a context of corroboration that includes multiple methodologies and considerable feedback from local actors.

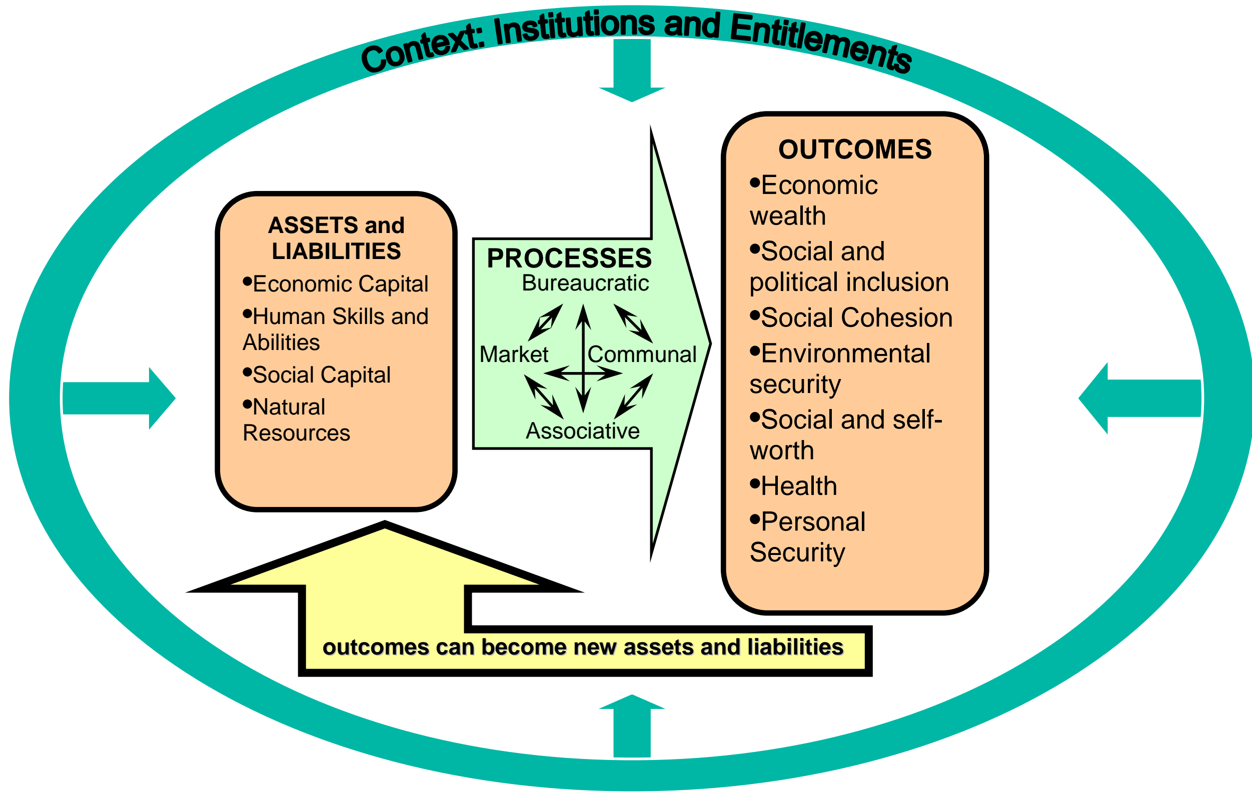
NRE Capacity Model and Framework

Communities are dynamic, changing, and fundamentally based on social relations rather than place (Massey, 1994). Geographical proximity may breed community but it is not inevitable. Geographically bounded areas like rural municipalities often represent disparate and disconnected populations, while strong social, cultural bonds and shared identities may exist across widely dispersed geographic spaces or places. Thus the concept of 'community' remains problematic from both a theoretical and empirical point of view (Amit & Rapport 2002; Bell &

Newby 1973; Lyon 1987). Understandings of place change—with time, contexts, and the people or networks involved (Massey, 1995). So too, does the capacity associated with them. For this reason, we approach the issue of capacity in terms of *social capacity* rather than community capacity and simply use the term ‘capacity’.

Capacity, in the NRE framework, is defined as the ability of people to organize their assets and resources to achieve objectives they consider important. It is represented in Figure 1 in terms of five major elements. First, it includes the assets and liabilities available to a group or community. We have represented these in terms of four types of assets without implying that this list is exclusive or exhaustive. Second, the central part of the Figure represents the various actions or processes that may be taken by individuals or groups to recognize, reorganize, or manage those assets in order to produce outputs. Much of our NRE research has focused on the elaboration of the processes involved – including the identification of four normative systems guiding those processes (Tiepoh & Reimer 2004). Third, our framework highlights the outcomes of the reorganization of assets and liabilities. They may be outcomes that are planned or those that are unintended consequences of those actions. The fourth element is important for the dynamic quality of the framework. It represents how the outcomes at one point in time may become new assets and liabilities in the future. Finally, the framework recognizes the role of contextual features that may constrain, enhance, or modify any of the first four elements. It also acknowledges how the framework is scaleable – finding applications at the level of individuals, communities, regions, nations, or societies.

Figure 1: NRE Capacity Model



Our research focuses on the processes by which rural people produce their valued outcomes from the assets available to them. The framework itself can be applied to any kind of community or group, including those in an urban context, although our primary attention has been directed to rural settings. We emphasize the types of social relationships required to produce specified outcomes and highlight assets such as social capital alongside the more traditional emphasis on natural resources and human capital. In all cases we understand social relations as dynamic and potentially complex. This dynamism includes the power relations which are embedded in all types of social relations (Massey, 1994).

Six Features of Comparison

Capacity as condition or process?

Mendis et al. (2003) identify capacity perspectives in the literature as falling between two extreme poles: those that concentrate on identifying what capacity is and those that focus more on the processes by which capacity is built. The first approach identifies specific characteristics of a community which are assumed to be assets. From this perspective capacity is treated as a condition where capacity is usually understood as static – ready to be used under particular circumstances. The second approach examines how assets are used. In this case, the focus is on the processes of capacity, where capacity is understood as an ongoing, dynamic phenomenon. Most of the capacity literature can be located with respect to these two extremes.

Some authors approach capacity as a condition or quality that a group or community can have, build, and use (Gibbon et al., 2002; Labonte and Laverack, 2001; Kusel, 1996). It is seen as a type of stock that can be augmented or depleted. Although Gibbon et al. (2002) state that they "do not presume that community capacity 'exists' waiting to be discovered", for example, they go on to argue that there are particular characteristics (what they refer to as 'domains of community capacity') that "adequately capture the essential qualities of a 'capable community'" (Gibbon et al., 2002: 486-487). In contrast, others, such as Freudenberg (2004; 1995) and Wilkinson (1989) treat capacity as a process that is more dynamic. Wilkinson (1989), for example, argues that community development is a process and notes that "[a] process is never fully 'developed'; it consists simply of behavior in process" (Wilkinson, 1989: 342).

Other models fall between these two approaches (Cuthill & Fien 2005). Jackson et al. (2003), for example, do not incorporate feedback and they regard capacity as a quality of a community, which leads us to presume that they are treating capacity as a condition. However, they place themselves outside of the literature that assumes capacity "needs to be added or built", thereby implying that capacity is more of a process (Jackson et al., 2003: 347). Likewise, Goodman et al. (1998) conceptualize capacity as complex, dynamic, multi-dimensional, as operating at individual and group levels, and as dependent upon context. The authors do not limit their understanding of capacity to a condition of a group. In contrast, capacity is understood as a process and as something which can be lost as well as gained.

> It is a process as well as an outcome; it includes supportive organizational structures and processes; it is multidimensional and ecological in operating at the individual, group, organizational, community and policy levels…; and it is context specific (Goodman et al, 1998: 260).

In addition, they argue that capacity is "a construct that has different meanings in different contexts" and something that changes over time (Goodman et al, 1998: 273). However, they also treat capacity as a condition by identifying nine dimensions that can be used to identify and 'build' assets.

Most authors acknowledge that capacity is dynamic, regardless of whether they treat it as a condition or a process (Jackson et al., 2003; Labonte & Laverack, 2001; Goodman et al., 1998). Labonte and Laverack (2001), for example, criticize formulations that reify 'capacity' and argue that capacity is dynamic, context specific, and not independent of infrastructures. In this article, they examine questions such as: "capacity building for whom, and for what purpose?" (Labonte & Laverack, 2001: 112). These questions are important because capacity efforts and outcomes

are dependent upon contexts. Democratic leadership, for example, is often considered a condition of capacity (Gibbon et al., 2002), yet in certain communities, groups, or situations this type of leadership may inhibit rather than enhance capacity efforts.

If capacity is defined in terms of specific conditions only, such as 'local leadership' or 'resource mobilization' (Gibbon et al., 2002), we are not encouraged to learn about different ways in which capacity efforts are carried out or why some initiatives are successful and other are not. In addition, conceptualizing capacity strictly as a condition results in power dynamics being overshadowed. If a community is seen to have high levels of leadership and therefore high levels of capacity, for example, we become insensitive to the way in which that leadership is exercised, including who might be excluded in the process.

From our point of view, capacity refers to the whole process by which assets are reorganized into outcomes. Communities or groups with high capacity are able to identify the need, plan the reorganization, and accomplish it with greater ease and efficiency than those with lower levels. Similar to Jackson et al. (2003) capacity may be altered by the assets available (e.g., institutions and human capital), but it is also dependent on the dynamics of the social processes and context in which they take place. Capacity operates within the framework of a dynamic, feedback process where individuals or groups reorganize assets to produce outcomes and where those outcomes can in turn become new assets or liabilities.

Outcomes: Capacity for what?

Capacity outcomes range from the specific to very general. Health practitioners, for example, often identify health promotion as an outcome (Labonte & Laverack, 2001; Smith et al., 2001; Goodman, et al., 1998; Hawe et al., 1997; Freudenberg et al., 1995), whereas social and economic improvement (in various forms) are discussed as outcomes within the community development literature (Flora & Flora, 2004; Green & Haines; 2002; Bryden & Munro, 2000; Morrisey, 2000; Stern et al., 1997; McGuire et al., 1994).

Our concern with community capacity has led us to adopt a relatively flexible approach to capacity outcomes. Communities may value a wide range of outcomes depending on local circumstances and researchers may identify others as important to community development objectives. One community may consider health promotion as an outcome of capacity, for example, while another may value the maintenance of their community centre, community radio station, or library as outcomes. These outcomes may also change over time or remain consistent for long periods of time. In our model, therefore, we have listed just a few of the most frequently cited outcomes for which capacity may be desired or needed: economic wealth, social and political inclusions, social cohesion, environmental security, social and self worth, and health.

How is Capacity Measured?

Given the many ways in which capacity is defined and conceptualized, it is no wonder that there is considerable variation in the ways it is measured. To facilitate the evaluation of these approaches, we find that some of the fundamental discussions in measurement theory provide a

useful place to start (Kline 2006; Bollen & Lennox 1991). From this discussion we can understand the measurement of capacity taking one of three basic approaches.

The first is to treat the indicators of capacity as identical with capacity itself. A low value on any of the indicators, therefore, means that a key component of capacity is low or missing, signaling that the level of capacity is diminished. This extreme positivist approach is sometimes reflected in the language of capacity measurement where strict identification of the concept and indicator are implied, but few authors maintain this identification in their more extensive discussions. We can, therefore, assume that for the most part, capacity is treated as a latent concept, requiring a number of operational assumptions for measurement.

The second approach to measurement treats the indicators of capacity as outcomes or consequences closely associated with the underlying concept (capacity). This is the classical reflective (effect indicator) approach. Within this model, the outcome indicators are all considered to be correlated since they are all generated in some way or another wherever capacity is relatively high. If capacity is high, we expect to find all of the indicators present.

A third approach would be to treat the indicators as causes of capacity as proposed in a formative (causal indicator) model of measurement. In this case, each indicator may or may not be present since they are all potential, but not necessary conditions for high capacity. From this point of view, for example, assets, leadership, or participation may all contribute to high capacity, but any one of them may be low or missing – even under conditions of high capacity. In this case, the

measurement challenge is to determine which of these conditions are most likely to generate high capacity under what circumstances.

A key research objective within the third approach would be to examine the relationship between capacity conditions and outcomes in order to develop sufficient confidence in the nature of capacity inferred. In order to be consistent with the model, this analysis would also have to be done in a longitudinal fashion or using longitudinal proxies. By examining which conditions produce which outcomes, we would then be able to specify a formative index for capacity.

Few of the authors explicitly discuss the measurement of capacity in these terms. This is unfortunate since it makes comparison difficult and glosses many questions that are critical to the understanding of capacity processes themselves. Jackson et al. (2003), for example, provide 'indicators of overall community capacity', by means of a checklist of characteristics and propose that these are strengths upon which a community might build. Likewise, Francisco et al. (2001) identify six 'core competencies' based on the assumption that there are "key factors or components of successful efforts to bring about community change and improvement (e.g., leadership, having a targeted mission, action planning)" (Francisco et al., 2001: 296). It remains unclear, for example, whether all of these characteristics are necessary for capacity (as we would expect in a reflective model) or only some are necessary (as we would expect in a formative approach). If the reflective model is being used, we would conclude that a group or community which is low in manifested leadership, for example, would therefore be low in capacity. On the other hand, if the formative approach was assumed, we would look for other factors that might reflect capacity in the place of leadership or conditions that suppress the manifestations of

leadership. As practitioners or policy-makers, the former approach would lead us to focus our attention on improving the leadership competence of the group or community, while in the latter we may look to take advantage of other factors already sufficiently strong to produce the desired outcomes.

Our approach to the conceptualization and measurement of capacity is of the formative over the reflective type. We understand capacity as a potential quality of a group or community – one that cannot be seen in current conditions alone but as the conjuncture of a number of characteristics. Assets as we have identified them are important, but the absence of one or the other asset is not in itself an indication of low capacity. For this reason, our approach and procedures to measuring levels and types of capacity remain indirect—focusing on the conditions that have contributed to capacity outcomes in the past as a basis for assessing current or future capacity levels. We argue that frameworks which link capacity too closely to specific characteristics are likely to overlook important options for capacity building and action. Our objective is, therefore, to explore the conditions under which capacity is facilitated or impeded.

Is capacity endogamous or exogenous?

Most authors identify capacity as an internal characteristic of communities that is frequently affected by exogenous constraints and/or facilitators. These include Freudenberg (2004), Gibbon et al. (2002), Labonte and Laverack (2001), Kusel (1996) and Warren (1983), who move beyond strictly individual-based understandings of community capacity to an inclusion of what Jackson et al. (2003) call "socioenvironmental conditions" (Jackson et al., 2003: 340).

The most comprehensive example is Jackson et al. (2003) who define community capacity as: “the potential of a community to build on its strengths in order to work towards and achieve its goals and dreams, given both facilitating and barrier conditions coming from inside and outside the community” (Jackson et al., 2003: 345). Specifically, Jackson et al. (2003) argue that it is imperative not to ignore the role that external structures and factors such as institutions and policies have in whether community capacity is facilitated or impeded. Even where a community has an abundance of natural resources, for example, if they do not have the appropriate control over these resources then the resources cannot be used. Similarly, Gibbon et al. (2002) argue that “[t]he capacity of a group is also dependent on the resource opportunities or constraints (ecological, political and environmental), and the conditions in which people and groups live” (Gibbon et al., 2002: 485).

These approaches are similar to our capacity framework where we consider individuals, communities, and groups as well as internal and external conditions that can enhance or inhibit capacity efforts. We treat community or group capacity as independent from those external conditions, however, in order to analyze the relationship between them. We recognize Massey’s argument that "[p]laces are both interconnected and interdependent. Their economic fortunes and general well-being can in no way be completely determined by events or actions within the place itself" (Massey, 1995: 69). This approach allows for a more flexible analysis of capacity than one which includes those external conditions as part of the capacity characteristics of the group or community itself. For instance, it raises the question of the conditions under which local capacity may succeed or fail to produce particular outcomes and highlights the limits of local capacity for community development.

Capacity for Whom?

Capacity is not shared equally among all group or community members. Nor are the outcomes of capacity beneficial for all members. As a result, capacity frameworks that recognize variation in power and privilege are preferred over those that leave these aspects invisible. Part of this involves the identification of the group or community used as the unit of analysis.

Many authors focus on the community-level in their framework of capacity with little room for the analysis of variations within that community (Freudenberg, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003; Labonte & Laverack, 2001; Kusel, 1996; Wilkinson, 1989; Warren, 1983). According to Smith et al. (2001), for example, "[c]apacity building is a process of working with a community to determine what its needs and strengths are, and to develop ways of using those strengths to meet those needs" (31). They focus on community action to facilitate better health for members at the community level and explicitly use "community as a central unit for analysis and action" (Smith et al., 2001: 34). They acknowledge that a community is not homogeneous and that "[t]here are divisions and differences within any community, relationships of power and privilege", yet the analysis remains focused on the 'community' as a whole with little room for an analysis of the ways in which events of capacity impact groups and individuals within the community (Smith et al, 2001: 34). This is also the case in the work of Kusel (1996) where community capacity is defined as "the collective ability of residents in a community to respond (the communal response) to external and internal stresses; to create and take advantage of opportunities; and to meet the needs of residents, diversely defined" (369). Once again, the community is the unit of analysis. They acknowledge that people in a community have different needs, yet the focus

remains on the community without addressing how these diverse needs are met. Goodman et al. (1998) provide an important exception to this pattern, however, by claiming that community capacity "[operates] at the individual, group, organizational, community and policy levels" and following this up with an analysis that reflects all levels (Goodman et al., 1998: 260).

The NRE framework incorporates multiple levels in the analysis – including the individual, group, community, regional, and national. This means the model can be applied at any and all of these levels and that more than one level can be considered for one given event. The level chosen is dependent upon the context of the event of capacity in question and the impacts may be examined at other levels. This is important because an event may have different implications and meanings at different levels. In one of our communities, for example, a small group of citizens proposed to start an All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) tourism business. Despite opposition to this idea from other members of the community the ATV tourism is now established. If one were to interpret this event as a manifestation of community-level capacity it may be seen as a successful example of the actualization of capacity. However, such a view overlooks the tensions within the community (some of them remaining to this day) and would be unlikely to ask why one group was successful and the other was unsuccessful. Invariably, such tensions and explanations for success or failure are rooted within relations of power. Ignoring them is likely to result in overlooking the important exercise and relations of power in of the process of capacity.

Capacity Outcomes as Positive?

Community or group capacity may have both positive and negative outcomes. Most of the literature treats capacity as being inherently beneficial with little recognition of the ways in

which capacity-building may result in undesirable ends. (Flora & Flora, 2004; Jackson et al., 2003; Gibbon et al., 2002; Morrisey, 2000; Goodman et al., 1998; Freudenberg et al., 1995; McGuire, 1994). For example, when Kusel (1996) states that "high community capacity itself is suggestive of higher levels of well-being for residents" he is assuming that capacity can only produce positive impacts for all people in a community (Kusel, 1996: 370). Likewise, Smith et al., (2001) argue that "[c]apacity building is a process of working with a community to determine what its needs and strengths are, and to develop ways of using those strengths to meet those needs" (31). The authors note that although there may be hierarchies within communities and power and privilege, this lies at the level of the community. The outcomes of community capacity are still positive for all involved.

The assumption in these approaches is that capacity outcomes always have positive effects across contexts. Capacity is treated as one dimensional and as having beneficial impacts on every person. We see this throughout the capacity literature, even within frameworks that acknowledge internal and external impediments (Freudenberg, 2004; Wilkinson, 1989). Jackson et al. (2003), for example, argue that "capacity recognizes the challenges as part of the community's action plan to address barriers and explicitly incorporates the concept that the community can be proactive towards achieving its goals" (348). Despite acknowledging obstacles communities face, the outcomes of capacity remain understood as something that is always beneficial for all members of the community.

Labonte and Laverack (2001) provide one of the few examples which recognize that capacity outcomes have possible negative effects. They state:

> There are groups whose capacity (or empowerment, or development, or social capital/cohesion) is created primarily by denying the same to others: racists, xenophobes, sexists, totalitarians, and it can be advanced [by] private (individual or corporate) economic decisions that fail to consider their effects on distributive justice or environmental sustainability (Labonte & Laverack, 2001: 125).

This approach provides credibility for the more complex analysis of the ATV example above. According to those who argue that "Community development is simply the action taken with positive purpose" (Wilkinson, 1989: 341) the establishment of the ATV trail and support would most likely be seen as an example of successful community development. But what about the dissenting group? They also had a positive purpose by opposing this form of tourism which they felt would be harmful to their community. We must look for ways in which these dynamics can be better integrated into our models and understandings of capacity development in a community context.

Using a perspective where the outcomes of capacity are understood as inherently positive results in overlooking the group of people who were in opposition and the tensions generated by this venture. Also overlooked are the relations between the two opposing groups. People do not necessarily have the same interests and desires and any community "is composed of diverse community groups that compete among themselves both for resources and influence" (Shirlow & Murtagh, 2004: 61). Likewise, Edwards (1997: 832) argues:

> "The idea that a spatial community can be empowered in any significant way assumes the existence of a unitary set of values and interests. That is not plausible. Even in socially and ethnically homogeneous housing estates, it would be naive to assume that everyone's interests were common and it certainly would not be plausible in an ethnically and racially mixed area. In such a case, the empowerment of some may be at the expense of others"

By defining capacity outcomes as positive, the community-focused relations of power are overshadowed and left unexamined. The analysis of why and how one group was successful over another, what conditions may have enhanced or inhibited the relative success of the groups, or the impacts of the outcome on individuals, the community, and the regional levels are all left unexplored. Instead, we are given the impression of high community capacity while glossing over the ways in which this high capacity may rest on the suppression of capacity for others – either within or outside the community.

Conclusion

We have outlined the NRE capacity framework using six criteria in order to gain a better understanding of our approach and those presented in the literature. We found that the NRE approach diverges from much of the literature in three significant ways. First, we have formulated our framework to make it scaleable, rather than limit its application to the community level alone. This has provided us with the means to investigate how the amount and nature of capacity at the community level have been affected by those at the regional level and vice-versa. As health care assets have been regionalized, for example, regional councils have increased their capacity to allocate services, while the capacities of the related communities to access those services have been differentially affected according to their transportation assets.

Second, we have left open the possibility that capacity outcomes may be negative rather than limit them to positive results. This has justified and encouraged the investigation of the conditions under which the outcomes are positive or negative as well as the ways in which the same capacity outcomes may be positive for one group while being negative for another. Our

empirical research demonstrates, for example, that increased capacity in communities that are remote from metropolitan centres tends to increase household incomes, whereas the same type of capacity increase in metro-adjacent sites have very little effect on those incomes.

Third, we have explicitly proposed a measurement model as part of our definition for capacity. This model identifies capacity as a latent concept and treats the empirical indicators within a formative model. This model has served us well with the analysis of our research data. It has guided our exploration of the variety of capacity processes that are suggested by our conceptual framework and facilitated the integration of findings from a wide variety of instruments and data sources.

In general, our intention is not to propose a single model for the conceptualization and application of capacity analysis. The details and processes involved in capacity building are much too complex for such an objective. Rather, we have proposed six important aspects of capacity conceptualization that should be considered in any analysis of capacity. By clarifying where each capacity framework stands with respect to each of these aspects, we will be in a better position to compare among them, gain a greater understanding of capacity processes, and provide more justifiable and robust frameworks for policy proposals and programs relating to capacity development.

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