

Social Capital: Creating Connections to Foster Community Innovation

By: Heather Keam*, Sonja Miokovic*

*Associate Director, Deepening Community, Tamarack Institute

*Consulting Director, Community Innovation, Tamarack Institute

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Abstract

Social capital refers to the networks, relationships, and norms that facilitate cooperation and coordination among individuals and groups within a community. When it comes to community innovation, social capital can play a critical role in fostering creativity, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among community members.

Introduction

Collectively, governments, businesses, and not-for-profits at all levels invest significant resources into our communities to build houses, roads, sidewalks, and organizations to serve the community. However, we invest very little in getting to know the people who live, work, and play in our neighborhoods. So, what is social capital, and how can it be used to build community and deepen place-based innovation?

[Social capital](#) is about the value of social networks, bonding similar people, and building bridges between diverse people with norms of reciprocity. It is a concept that refers to the connections, relationships, and networks that exist between individuals, organizations, and groups within a society. It is often used to describe the social support, shared values, and sense of trust that exists within a community or group and the collective benefits that individuals, organizations, and communities can gain from making use of their collective resources. The concept of social capital suggests that by fostering a strong sense of connection and trust between individuals, organizations, and communities, we can create a more vibrant, resilient, and healthy society. Author Lyda Hanifan refers to social capital as “the tangible assets that count in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social interactions among the individuals and families who make up a social unit.” Walden University doctoral candidate Allison Lourash writes that, “Social capital is to think about all the benefits of making friends. Being connected to others, trust, shared resources, and collective action can be segments of social capital. Social capital creates a network when help is needed and is just as important as the opportunity to help your friends when they need help (reciprocity).”

Social capital has the potential to build strong, vibrant communities by connecting people, fostering community collaboration, and creating a sense of belonging. It can help to bridge social divides, create access to resources and opportunities, strengthen local economies, and increase

civic engagement. Research has found that places with higher levels of social capital tend to have more vibrant economies, greater political engagement, and stronger civil society.¹ This lays the foundation for successful community innovation efforts.

In the article entitled, [People, Partnerships, and Human Progress: Building Community Capital](#), Dr. Trevor Hancock outlines how social capital fits within the community:

- **Natural Capital** is about high environmental quality, healthy ecosystems, and sustainable resources.
- **Social Capital** is the glue that holds communities together. It is about how we interact with each other and how we are involved in our communities.
- **Human Capital** is about healthy, skilled, innovative, and creative people who are engaged in their community.
- **Economic Capital** is about economic systems that provide decent jobs and the ability of our economic systems to feed, clothe, care for, and house everyone.

Creating change in our communities requires us to bring together social, ecological, human, and economic capital so that they can equally create a healthy community. Historically there has been a focus on the economic and ecological capital elements of communities. Shifting to incorporating a stronger focus on the human and social parts of community development and innovation will be a catalyst to do this.

One approach that brings together all the above capital, especially social capital, is [Asset Based Community Development](#) (ABCD). ABCD is a holistic approach to community development that focuses on building on the strengths and assets of individuals, organizations, and communities rather than focusing on their needs and problems.

ABCD goes beyond any individual's gifts or a particular group's strengths to consider how these may come together to create broader changes for the common good within a community. It seeks to maximize the resources within a community to create sustainable, meaningful, and equitable outcomes. ABCD is based on the idea that people and communities have the capacity to improve their own lives and that they should be resourced to do so. It emphasizes the importance of developing relationships within a community and encourages collaboration between individuals, organizations, and other players. ABCD believes that every community has a wealth of untapped potential and that by investing in and leveraging the strengths of the community, meaningful and lasting change can be achieved.

In many ways, building social capital lends itself to nurturing local innovation capacity and readiness. It supports successful community innovation by increasing access to resources and expertise, fostering collaboration and collective problem-solving, building trust and cooperation, amplifying impact, and sustaining innovation efforts over time. By prioritizing the development of social capital alongside innovation efforts, communities can create a supportive and collaborative environment that enables the development of new and effective solutions to

community challenges. Social capital provides an essential foundation for place-based community innovation.

Social capital is a relevant factor in community innovation because it provides a framework for strong relationships and trusts between people, which is essential in creating a resilient and connected community. The impact of social capital becomes greater when it is integrated into place-based approaches to community innovation. This means that local governments, businesses, and organizations must collaborate and build relationships with members of the community to create an environment that encourages innovation.

Here are three stories of how communities in what's known today as Canada have leveraged social capital to build innovative solutions to local challenges:

As documented by Angie Dedrick and Christine Hadekel in *Investing in Social Capital Pays off During a Crisis*, in 2013, the City of St. Albert adopted a Social Master Plan to serve as a road map for building a caring, connected, inclusive, and safe community. As a result of the Social Master Plan, the City of St. Albert has a thriving Neighbourhood Connection program. The program supports block parties, little free libraries, Neighbourhood Connection kits, a Neighbourhood Connectors program, and other initiatives aimed at connecting residents. This plan and St. Albert's efforts to cultivate social capital in the years leading up to the pandemic yielded dividends when the crisis hit. Neighbours stepped up to care for one another and ensured fewer people were left behind. Research has shown that connected communities like St. Albert are more resilient and can respond more quickly during emergencies.

In *Harvesting Local Gifts and Assets through community gardening*, Brandon Agnew, Erin Riseing, Caleb Ratzlaff, and Dan Ritchie describe the Centennial community garden in the Queenston neighborhood St. Catharines, Ontario. They note that community gardens are places that promote physical and mental wellness and connect neighbors with each other and with the natural world around them. Community gardens are also a source of low or no-cost food and an opportunity for citizens, organizations, and municipalities to work together to provide low-barrier opportunities in public spaces driven by resident leadership. The Centennial community garden coordinator recruited and reached out to various gardeners who expressed interest in leadership roles. Gardeners have built a space that is reflective of their local neighborhood. And at Centennial, one of the gardeners has been involved since the beginning of the community garden as a local historian and has a wealth of knowledge on the lands.

For many, COVID-19 brought about a cultural shift in how people spent time; many people spent more energy learning new skills and talents. Stores reported shortages of craft supplies, baking ingredients, and lumber, as people learned or relearned hands-on skills. This led to the opening of new community spaces, such as private homes for community activities. In [Crafting Social Capital One Home at a Time](#), Jessie Crabill, Allie Sue Leenhouts, and Dan Ritchie tell the story of 'Life.School.House' in Nova Scotia, an example of an initiative that has been using social capital as a way to address complex issues such as social isolation.

The community members profiled in these three stories paused and took notice of local assets that already existed. They recognized existing strengths, and then they connected them together to be used to build activities and programs for their communities.

There are four areas that social capital can help to support community innovation:

1. **Developing trust:** Community work moves at the speed of trust and relationships. When an understanding of people's gifts and assets is heard, connected people will feel valued. When people trust one another, they are more likely to share their ideas, take risks, and work together to achieve shared goals. Trust can be built through social connections, shared values, and norms and can be strengthened over time through ongoing interactions and collaborations.
2. **Facilitating cooperation and collaboration:** Learning about a community's strengths and connecting assets helps to align activities and understand responsibilities. When people are connected to a strong social network, they are more likely to work together to achieve shared goals, pooling their resources and expertise. Collaboration can lead to the creation of new products, services, and technologies that may not have been possible without the collective efforts of multiple individuals or groups.
3. **Knowledge sharing:** When individuals are connected to a strong social network, they are more likely to have access to diverse perspectives and ideas, which can help spark innovative thinking and problem-solving. This sharing of knowledge can occur through various means, such as social events, workshops, and online forums, where community members can learn from one another and share their experiences.
4. **Resource mobilization and resilience:** When gifts and assets are recognized and utilized, it increases the sustainability of local efforts. People who are connected to a strong social network are more likely to access resources and be able to mobilize them to support innovation initiatives. This can include crowdfunding campaigns, volunteer efforts, and partnerships with local businesses and organizations.

How can you build social capital for community innovation?

- **As an individual:** Go out, meet your neighbors, and make friends! Being active in your neighborhood and getting involved with groups that have similar interests, and connecting others to your community are ways to build social capital.
- **Find and support community connectors:** St. Albert has a thriving Neighbourhood Connection program that supports a wide variety of initiatives aimed at building connections among residents, including block parties, little free libraries, Neighbourhood Connection kits, and a Neighbourhood Connectors program. There are many [community connector programs](#) across Canada.
- **Asset mapping:** Asset mapping is a vehicle for communities to identify, discover, and connect with each other. [Abundant Community Edmonton](#), AB, used asset mapping to

create more connections among neighbours through shared activities and interests. These connections increased relational networks, grew the neighborhood's sense of community, and increased neighbors' ability to work together towards common goals. [Lakeview Harbourside](#), ON, used asset mapping to find two and a half pages of gifts and assets in the neighbourhood that people wanted to learn and could share to create resident lead programming for their community center.

- **Provide spaces for sharing:** [LifeSchoolHouse](#) folk school in Nova Scotia, Canada, is piloting adult folk school programming in urban and rural venues. A crowd of neighbours and strangers gather at homes for a Maker's Swap, a monthly gathering where people trade what they have made for items others have created.

It has been said that human ingenuity and creativity in the face of adversity is an innate characteristic of our species. In every community, there are so many gifts and assets that people possess that, when connected, they can work together to find solutions that are implemented and sustained by the community. This is a useful reminder to community innovation practitioners because it acknowledges the importance of standing still and noticing the importance of individuals and what already exists – the strengths and assets – within a community that can be mobilized and sustained. It also emphasizes the importance of engaging the unique wisdom and contributions that are only held by those with lived and living experience of the issue we are seeking innovative solutions for and encourages us to remain humble as we work alongside community members.

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