Civic Engagement

Engaging Business

Civic Engagement and Locally Oriented Firms

Charles M. Tolbert, II, Troy C. Blanchard, Michael D. Irwin, Thomas A. Lyson and Alfred R. Nucci

Due largely to Robert Putnam’s seminal work [13,14], civic engagement is once again a popular topic among social scientists. Interaction in the public sphere is viewed as a key source of social capital that accrues to individuals and leads to more responsive and effective community institutions. Social scientists studying rural areas see civic engagement as a potentially important tool for rural development. Engaged communities are in a much better position to have a healthy civic discourse and to succeed at solving local problems. This focus on social interaction is a departure from development approaches that emphasize economic outcomes. Some now write of “social development” [10] or “qualitative growth” [1] and position these concepts as fundamental alternatives to the rational economic development paradigm that has its roots in modernization theory [15].

One theoretical impetus for the rejection of overly economic approaches to development is the “embeddedness” argument of Mark Granovetter [3]. He contends that a purely rational, economic understanding of human behavior will overlook the fact that economic behaviors are embedded in social relationships. The cost/benefit analyses we engage in are not always decided on economic terms. Take the community resident who drives past a giant retailer on the edge of town to get her prescription filled at a locally owned pharmacy on the town square. She probably pays more. Yet, the social capital she builds (or reactivates) while visiting with friends and neighbors in the store outweighs the price concern. Take the owner of a small local manufacturing establishment facing hard times. He bites the bullet and decides not to layoff his friends and neighbors. His overriding concern is clearly the well-being of community members, not the bottom line. In each example, social relationships are given primacy over economic factors. This is the fundamental lesson in the embeddedness critique of economic theory.

As telling as the criticism may be, we think it is important to consider those aspects of the local economy and economic behavior that contribute to social relations. Rather than ignore the local economy scene, we prefer to study its relationship to civic engagement. We believe there is much to be gained by focusing on the intersection of the economic and the social. While we are in sympathy with these broader views of development driven by the new interest in civic engagement, our work takes a middle ground in which we view civic communities as a potential tool to civic engagement.

Community development has always had a keen interest in promoting the involvement of people in addressing issues of importance to community well-being. The so-called “self-help” approach to doing community development is designed to improve the capacity of local people to effectively address the challenges and opportunities that their communities face. It is out of this tradition that land-grant universities have devoted so much of their energies to promoting local leadership development programs in their states.

Despite past investments in capacity-building at the local level, recent studies have suggested that engagement of citizens in the welfare of their communities has been declining. Voter participation is low, few persons are willing to step forward and run for local political office, and membership in many community-minded organizations is declining. These trends are reawakening the concern by many that we must find a way to reconnect local citizens to activities, projects and programs that serve to rebuild the civic vitality of their communities.

This issue of Southern Perspectives focuses on civic engagement. The collection of articles highlighted in this issue explores various dimensions of this topic. Taken together, it is our hope that these articles will offer a refreshing perspective on how we can further promote civic involvement in communities in the South. Certainly, the long-term health of these localities will not be assured without it.
Table 1. Performance of Civic Community Indicators in Statistical Models.

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<th>Median Income</th>
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<td><strong>Civic engagement measures:</strong></td>
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<td>High pct. civic denominations</td>
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N = Small towns in nonmetro counties
M = Small towns in metro counties
U = Indicator performs as expected in statistical models

engagement as operating in concert with a locally oriented business climate to produce what we refer to as civic community [4,7,17,18]. Civic community thus encompasses not only civic engagement, but locally oriented business establishments as well. Whereas Putnam associates individual-level generation of social capital with the structural character of the community, we see civic engagement as one aspect of a structured local social economy. Some local businesses—e.g., cafes, beauty and barber shops, drug stores, pubs—provide venues for interaction. Borrowing the term from Oldenberg [12], we refer to these public gathering spaces as “third places.” Whether their firm provides space for interaction or not, owners and managers of most locally oriented businesses participate in civic affairs. They are key stakeholders not only in the economic vitality of the community, but also in its social development. Our take on civic engagement, then, is something of an embeddedness critique. Civic engagement does not take place in an economic vacuum, but within specific economic and political contexts. When the economic context is composed largely of locally oriented establishments, Mackenzie [9] argues that local capitalism prevails. Where there is local capitalism and there are ample signs of civic engagement, we and others have demonstrated beneficial local outcomes. These local advantages include higher income levels, lower poverty rates, lower unemployment, less out-migration, less crime, less residential segregation, and fewer public health problems [4,5,6,7,8,17,18,19].

Below, we show evidence of how civic engagement and a locally oriented business climate contribute to community well-being. Before doing that, we want to dispel the notion that community theory grounded in civic engagement and local capitalism is something new. Almost 150 years ago, Tocqueville [16] observed that American democracy was fueled by town meetings, associations and other visible forms of civic engagement. More than 50 years ago, Goldschmidt [2] and Mills and Ulmer [11] noted the beneficial impact of small- and medium-size business enterprises on the quality of life in communities. Goldschmidt showed that rural communities with small-scale farms were better places to live. Mills and Ulmer demonstrated that communities dominated by small- and medium-size businesses were also better places to live. Though rural social scientists have studied the Goldschmidt small-farm hypothesis extensively over the years, they have not paid the same attention to the Mills and Ulmer small-establishment hypothesis until very recently. Nonetheless, we see ample antecedents for the study of civic community in the works of Tocqueville, Goldschmidt, Mills and Ulmer.

We have published modeling results in several journals that generally support the claim that local capitalism and civic engagement do result in a better quality of life. Table 1 summarizes results from Tolbert et al. [18]. The data are for 4,553 incorporated American small towns with populations of 2,500 to 20,000. The outcomes of interest are taken from 1990 Census data on places. They include local income level (median 1989 family income), poverty rate (percent of persons with incomes below the poverty level), population retention (percent of persons living in same place 1985 and 1990), and unemployment rate for 1990. If local business and civic engagement measures work together as we believe they do, they should be associated with higher income levels, less poverty, more population retention and lower unemployment.

We developed the local capitalism items in Table 1 from 1992 Economic Census microdata and summary files. This work was carried out at the Center for Economic Studies, U.S. Bureau of the Census. We measure local orientation of manufacturing establishments by computing the percent “local” which means a single-establishment firm or an establishment that is part of a local (county) enterprise. “Old” manufacturing establishments are those that have been in the same place for at least 15 years. We surmise that such manufacturing entities are more likely to be embedded in the community and to exhibit a local orientation.
Finally, we compute the percent of all manufacturing establishments in a place that are “small,” by which we mean less than 20 employees. The lowest level of geographic detail at which such data are published is the county. By working with economic census microdata at the Bureau, we were able to generate our own summary measures at the incorporated place level. Also included in the local capitalism items is a count of “nonemployers,” or persons whose businesses are so small that they have no employees. We include this measure to gauge the entrepreneurial climate in a small town, assuming that a strong local capitalism context will mean a thriving entrepreneurial culture. One final measure of local business orientation is whether there is an above average percentage of family farms (as opposed to corporate farms) in the surrounding county. This is taken from the 1992 Census of Agriculture.

As argued above, we view entrepreneurs and owners and managers of locally oriented businesses as key actors in local civic engagement. These business persons must be present, but there must also be local institutions which encourage public interaction among persons from all sectors of the community. We have developed measures of such institutions from economic and church census data. One important engagement institution is the church. The measure we employ here—above average adherents to civic denominations—was developed by Tolbert, Lyson and Irwin [17]. We calculate a measure of places or gathering places in small towns by relying on microdata from the 1992 Census of Services and Census of Retail Trade. The Census of Services also provides us with a count of associations in a locale.

In Tolbert, Irwin, Lyson and Nucci [18] we present multiple regression models that demonstrate the association of the local business and civic engagement indicators. Models are estimated separately for small towns in metro counties and nonmetro counties. The models include a variety of “control variables” which might otherwise be expected to account for outcomes such as income, poverty, nonmigration and unemployment. The results we discuss here hold despite those controls. A check mark in Table 1 indicates that the measure performs as expected. Not all of the variables perform as expected in all cases, but the nonemployer, old manufacturing plant, family farms, civic denomination and third places variables are reasonably consistent for outcomes across metro and nonmetro small towns. The findings of this particular study and the growing body of evidence cited above suggests that researchers should focus on locally oriented businesses, as well as civic engagement.

We would like to see civic engagement be something more than the latest development strategy to be tried and discarded.

What are the implications for development practitioners?

We believe the findings in the civic community tradition are sufficiently robust to suggest several strategies for development specialists. Bear in mind that these suggestions are grounded in research that shows that the whole community benefits from certain types of development activities.

1. Don’t overlook the positive consequences of the smallest of enterprises—even those with absolutely no employees. Nurturing the developing entrepreneur keeps open the possibility that the microenterprise will grow into one that substantially impacts the community by employing others.

2. Attend to the established (“old”) manufacturing facility—the longer it is in the community, the more beneficial to all. Balance the energy expended on attracting new manufacturing establishments with efforts that support those firms that have been present for a long time.

3. Work to sustain family farms—these are clearly locally oriented businesses. While most farms are family farms, our research suggests that areas with above average numbers of family farms enjoy socioeconomic benefits that extend to all, not just the farm sector.

4. Don’t ignore faith communities as engines for civic engagement—socioeconomic conditions are better where religious adherents are predominately from civically engaged denominations.

5. Encourage the proliferation of “third places”—locally oriented businesses cultivate civic engagement by providing public spaces for interaction. As naïve and nostalgic as it may sound, there is solid research that suggests we should work to retain the corner café, the drug store and its soda fountain, and all the other storefronts on main street.

We would like to see civic engagement be something more than the latest development strategy to be tried and discarded. A more fruitful perspective may well be one that combines foci on civic engagement and locally oriented businesses in a civic community approach. Our findings (and those of others) suggest that adding these emphases to the usual set of development priorities will lead to broadly beneficial community development. We don’t see these recommendations as contrary to existing approaches or even outside the parameters of traditional economic development practices. In a time when many rural communities are struggling to solve fundamental problems, a different set of priorities may be a great help.

References


Youth: Key Partners in Civic Engagement

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Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development

From a youth development standpoint, civic engagement is a critical strategy. It is a means for young people to develop and exercise leadership while affecting concrete changes in their communities. Likewise, from a community development standpoint, youth participation is a key strategy. Youth participation diversifies and strengthens community collaborations and can foster an ongoing and sustained ethic of civic engagement. There is a growing movement among both community and youth development organizations, including within Cooperative Extension, to capitalize on the power of youth civic engagement. However, there still exist relatively little research and practical tools related to this important strategy [2]. Over the past several years, the Innovation Center has partnered with Extension and other organizations to test, document and share approaches to youth-adult civic engagement. The lessons from this work highlight several key themes.

Youth-adult partnerships

Civic engagement is most powerful when it is intergenerational, but building youth-adult partnerships requires time and effort [1]. Youth and adults may both need to develop new skills in communication, teamwork and coaching. The most effective youth-adult partnerships recognize that being equal does not mean being the same. Adults may have different needs for communication than youth, and youth may seek guidance from adults experienced in implementing community projects.

Organizational collaboration

Civic engagement and youth development practitioners are often like ships passing in the night—the skills and experience that each bring is often not shared. Among community-based organizations and within Extension, youth development programs and community and economic development programs are often separate. Enormous potential exists for information and skill building, and collaboration will be increased by intentional efforts to broaden the historical boundaries of both fields.

A need for practical tools

Putting the theory of youth-adult civic engagement into practice requires tools that address issues from asset mapping to youth-adult partnerships to group facilitation methods. National 4-H Council, the Innovation Center, Extension staff and community organizations have documented the tools and activities used in youth-adult civic engagement efforts in dozens of diverse communities. These tools can be found in two new formats. The At the Table web clearinghouse, www.AtTheTable.org, highlights stories, tools and resources for youth decision-making. The Building Community Toolkit provides tips, activities, handouts and reflections on the various phases of this work—from building readiness to learning to evaluate projects. The Innovation Center and Extension partners are eager to expand this toolkit, incorporating effective practice from additional youth-adult civic engagement efforts. Currently, the Building Community model is being used in the contexts of service-learning programs and Native American communities, and a facilitator training program is being developed to build capacity in using the toolkit.

For more information about youth-adult civic engagement, or to order a copy of the Building Community Toolkit, contact Kristen Spangler, Project Director, at kspangler@theinnovationcenter.org, or contact the Innovation Center at:
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Building Capacities to Develop Adequate, Affordable Housing:
A conceptual framework

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PMG Associates LLC

Many people are turned off by the notion that a conceptual framework needs to structure collective efforts to improve housing for low- and moderate-income populations. Rather, they espouse the Nike approach—Just Do It! The Nike slogan may work for the Air Jordans of this world, but most mortals need a conceptual framework to understand what they are doing and to see how multiple efforts are interrelated.

A conceptual framework is a way of imposing order on disparate things. The order imposed is deliberate but arbitrary in the sense that it reflects a judgment about which distinctions are relevant. When people talk about the heuristic value of a conceptual framework, all they mean is that it provides a useful way to think about a problem.

Reasonable people can and do disagree about the usefulness of alternative conceptual frameworks. These are sometimes called competing paradigms or even world views. The point is not vocabulary but substance. When reasonable people disagree, it calls attention to serious issues that deserve attention. Competing conceptual frameworks can sharpen sensibilities, which in turn can improve programming.

Many people believe that conceptual frameworks are irrelevant and belong in academia. The opposite is the case. To the extent that academics do not implement programs, it hardly matters what conceptual frameworks they espouse. By contrast, to the extent that practitioners intervene in the community, conceptual frameworks provide critical guidelines for intervention and action.

Finally, some people, especially at the base, say: “I just know what to do.” It is definitely the case that some people have an intuitive grasp of the situation and good instincts for action. It is also the case, however, that such people may become even more effective when they become more self-conscientious and deliberate. A self-reflexive stance helps natural leaders articulate their internal conceptual framework and mentor future leaders.

How can relationships be illustrated in a Venn diagram?

The process of improving housing alternatives for low- and moderate-income people is complex. There are many players, many interests which are both complementary and competing, and many possible outcomes which are more or less satisfactory to stakeholders.

One way to simplify the complex process of housing development is to sort stakeholders into meaningful categories. The conceptual framework advanced here identifies three principal groups:

1) **Individuals/Families**, with low to moderate incomes, who do/do not have unmet housing needs;
2) **Groups**, both secular and faith-based, which represent the interests of those who need safe, affordable housing;
3) **Institutions**, both private and public, that seek to fund adequate and affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families, plus not-for-profit organizations that support housing development efforts.

To represent these principal players, one could draw a Venn diagram that illustrates how parties to the housing development process overlap. Figure 1 is a generic representation. Notice several things.

**Figure 1**

Safe Affordable Housing: The Major Stakeholders

1) Each of the circles has more area outside than inside the overlapping circles. This suggests that the entirety of stakeholder interests are NOT at play with regard to any particular issue, in this case affordable housing. This is exactly why it is difficult to mobilize individuals around housing issues.

2) There are different areas of two-group overlaps among the circles. This suggests that there are distinct areas of commonality that can be developed to build bases of informed collaboration between specific constituencies. This is exactly why a multifaceted program must be implemented.

3) The area in which the three circles overlap is quite small. This suggests that objective bases for collaboration are restricted. Nevertheless, when stakeholders can establish principled bases for collaboration, mutually-beneficial programs are possible. This is exactly why successful housing initiatives to design and implement programs for low- and moderate-income communities are so difficult to organize.

How might this conceptual framework be used in program design and implementation?

There are three principal applications of this conceptual framework: preliminary assessment, programmatic planning and dynamic monitoring.

**Preliminary Assessment**—Each community is unique, with its own constellation of assets and liabilities. One might capture the specificities of each community by drawing slightly different Venn diagrams. Suppose that one showed communities with large numbers of low- to moderate-income families as a large circle. Suppose that this same community had a small number of established social groups that advocated for low- to moderate-income families. Suppose additionally that none of these groups had particular expertise regarding housing. The group circle might be small. Suppose also that this were the county seat, which afforded ready access to private and public funding streams for housing. The institutional circle might be large, with a substantial overlap between groups and institutions. Figure 2 illustrates this constellation.

**Figure 2**

One Preliminary Assessment

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK CONTINUES ON PAGE 6
This constellation has immediate strategic relevance—especially in the individual and group areas. While exploring and developing potential capacities, the strategy would be to build on existing strengths and incorporate a larger proportion of the population. Consider the circle representing individuals. The distribution of people in the community provides a frame of reference to answer questions like: Are groups reflective of community diversity or are certain populations (e.g. the elderly, families with young children, women) under represented? Are programs responsive to a range of needs or are certain needs systematically unaddressed (e.g. universal design housing, multi-purpose community centers)? Are there underlying community rifts (e.g. racial, ethnic and/or class divisions) that need to be addressed and resolved?

Consider the distribution of groups in the community. Collectively, do social groups embrace a wide range of constituencies and reflect community orientations and aspirations (e.g. faith-based, neighborhood-based)? Do they have the organizational capacity to broker community programs to institutions with the power to allocate needed resources? If not, how can such capacities be developed? Realistically, how long with this take?

Finally, consider funding institutions. Lending or granting institutions are resources to be cultivated. If there is to be a serious buy-in to community-initiated plans, institutions with local financial resources are best involved early in the development process. The much-overused concept of networking is critically important. Private sector institutions (e.g. banks, credit unions) and state sector institutions (federal, state and local agencies) need to be courted and cultivated long before a proposal is ready for submission. Not-for-profit agencies that provide technical assistance are also important and frequently underutilized resources.

Consider the restricted targets of opportunity suggested in Figure 2. Suppose, without even increasing the number of social groups, that one expanded their penetration into the community and incorporated a larger proportion of the population. Suppose simultaneously that one sensitized lending/granting agencies to community needs. These changes would shift both the group and institution circles, incorporating more individuals and families with unmet housing needs.

The implications of these changes are dramatic, as Figure 3 illustrates. The very small area of convergent interests visibly increases. This suggests that the probabilities for successful program intervention are correspondingly greater.

**Figure 3**

**One Illustration of Dynamic Change**

Dynamic Monitoring—Housing creation is a complex process, and it can get hung up at many points along the way. The devil is always in the details, so it is sometimes useful to locate the devil’s haunts, thinking in terms of the three overlapping circles. Imagine that developmental emphasis shifts over time. Suppose that it starts with population identification and moves to capacity building with community-based organizations. Suppose that the process stalls at this point. One can ask: Are community groups fairly reflective of the population? Are there organizational in-capacities that need to be remedied? Are both problems present and need to be addressed jointly? Problems at the individual/group interface clearly need to be resolved in order to strengthen the bargaining power of the community vis-a-vis lending and granting agencies that can actually produce the dollars required to implement programs.

Even as the process of community/organizational capacity-building occurs, there may be a simultaneous need to cultivate institutions that have the financial capacity to loan/grant housing dollars. From a programmatic point of view, the trick is to get the population-group-institutional entities in synch so collectively they can address community needs for adequate and affordable housing. More analytically, the question is: Who is leading whom?

Yes, people experience empowerment. Bottom line, however, empowerment means that individuals/groups lead powerful institutions to implement programs designed by residents to meet local needs. That people should feel personally empowered is a logical consequence of real power and genuine influence over institutions that can help communities enhance their quality of life. Empowerment is reflected in action as well as awareness.

**What can the proposed conceptual framework do for you and your program?**

Conceptual frameworks must be useful. Why might a simple Venn diagram with only three circles help you to assess your situation, outline an appropriate strategy, and fine-tune your activities?

The Venn diagram takes into explicit consideration the reality that there is NOT an identity of interests across stakeholders. It, therefore, anticipates the fact that constituencies are likely to have different agendas and priorities. Understanding that one begins from diversity, program development seeks to build commonalities of interest. The process is necessarily political, implying compromise.

The Venn diagram also has the possibility of capturing the dynamics of program development. There is always a pull toward replicating pass successes, even when the situation or the stage of program development requires new initiatives. The critical perspective fostered by the Venn diagram encourages reflection, evaluation and reconsideration of programmatic activities with the different constituencies that are party to the process.

In conclusion, no Venn diagram will ever be a cure for all programmatic ills. Nevertheless, a useful conceptual framework can help you and your program develop a strategy and keep programming on target. It suggests essentially a strategic context within which you can develop a work plan, monitor its implementation, and recognize both opportunities and problems. This, in turn, can help you explain your program to outside agencies, friendly or hostile—what you do, how you behave and why you do so. Beyond public relations, a conceptual framework that has sense and meaning for you can allow you to join the programmatic Air Jordans of this world and: Just Do It!
Building Blocks to a Successful Community

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A few years ago, two colleagues wrote a most interesting article that spoke about “community disaffection” [3]. In their view, this concept referred to the fragmentation, anomie and alienation felt by members of a local society. One of the unfortunate drawbacks associated with disaffection, they noted, was the tendency of this condition to cripple a community, leaving it ineffective in its ability to address issues of significant importance to its welfare. They argued that ways must be found to reduce disaffection and to facilitate the emergence of “community agency.” Community agency, they noted, represents a capacity to engage in collective action; people who are able to come together to address the variety of challenges and opportunities that exist in their community.

Their call for a rise in community agency is no easy task. In fact, Robert Putnam [5,6] has observed that this type of civic engagement in America has been in serious decline in recent decades. Fewer and fewer people are contributing their time and talents to local voluntary organizations. Voter participation, the very symbol of citizen’s engagement in the democratic process, has undergone significant erosion — be it in national, state or local elections. Rather than uncovering the existence of community agency, what Putnam appears to be documenting is a pervasive condition of disaffection.

How do we begin to turn things around? How do we create an environment where local involvement can be nurtured, where citizens can feel a sense of ownership for the future of their community, and not a future that is beyond their grasp to help shape? A recent book published by the Drucker Foundation titled The Community of the Future outlines a number of key elements that can contribute in a positive way to the recapturing of a civicly-oriented citizenry in the community. The remainder of this article attempts to articulate some key elements for realizing an engaged community.

The effective community will require that people find a way to discuss and deliberate on issues that are likely to shape their common future. New ways to interact, to decide on the issues to be addressed, and to move plans into action, will need to be cultivated.

The five building blocks for creating a successful community

If communities are to be successful in their efforts to devise innovative and effective responses to the challenges that confront them, they must be willing to embrace, and make reality, the following five features of their community [4a].

Increase civic dialogue

The effective community will require that people find a way to discuss and deliberate on issues that are likely to shape their common future. New ways to interact, to decide on the issues to be addressed, and to move plans into action, will need to be cultivated.

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers [7] remind us that the most common mode for engaging in civic discussion today is public meetings. Unfortunately, public meetings are not the answer.

“Most public meetings, although originating from a democratic ideal, serve only to increase our separation from one another. Agendas and processes try to honor our differences but end up increasing our distance. They are “public hearings” where nobody is listening and everyone is demanding airtime. Communities aren’t created from such processes, they are destroyed by the increasing fear and separation that these processes engender.”

Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers suggest that what we need more of today is public listening. It’s a process that involves local people coming together and committing themselves to staying together in dialogue so that the ideas and issues that weigh on the minds of people in the community can be brought to light.

Find new ways to organize community work

When discussions center on how things get done in a community, and who is best positioned to influence local decisions, it is not uncommon to focus attention on the structure of local leadership. The social science literature offers ample evidence that the nature of a person’s influence in the local community is closely linked to the individual’s location in the leadership hierarchy. That hierarchy is commonly conceptualized as a pyramid. Those at the pinnacle of the pyramid are few in numbers, but constitute the most powerful and influential people in the locality. The bottom tier of the hierarchy, on the other hand, contains the lion share of citizens, large numbers of persons who are removed from most key decisions occurring in the community.

If the local community is to truly realize its full potential, the process by which decisions are made and actions planned will rely less on a pyramidal type of organization, and more on a series of interrelated circles. Visualize for a moment how this changes things.

The restructuring from a pyramid to linked circles implies that people, organizations and government are on equal footing. Their interactions don’t occur in a vertical manner — where some people are located above or below one another — but horizontally, where leadership is shared. This type of horizontal arrangement, notes Stephen Bass [1], helps generate a network of trust, a pooling of resources and good governance. In addition, it builds local solidarity, a sense that we are all in this together.

Make community life accessible to all

A successful community works hard to ensure that no segment of the community is left behind or denied access to the total benefits of the community because of race, gender, age or neighborhood of residence. Effective communities are committed to understanding and accommodating cultural differences, and to finding ways of providing all residents with fair access to local services. For example, in this type of community, welfare
recipients who are seeking employment in order to become self-sufficient, would not be
denied such an opportunity because of the
lack of access to transportation or child care
services. Or the quality of schools available
to the youth of the community would not be
linked to the geographic area of the commu-
nity in which one resides. In essence, the most
capable community finds a way to facilitate
the engagement of its citizens in the complete
life of the community.

Create new avenues for leadership
We noted earlier that the manner in which the work of the community is being
carried out should be less reliant on a py-
ramidal structure, and more on one involv-
ing interrelated circles. Of course, real-
izing this type of community activity is de-
pendent, in no small way, on the presence
of a broad pool of leaders. In addition, it
is dependent on leaders who reject a cen-
tralized mode of decision making (i.e.,
where decisions are made by individuals
who hold key positions of authority), and
who subscribe to a polycentric approach,
one that involves many centers of leader-
ship operating from an interrelated fash-
ion. An important feature of a polycen-
tric model is that local goals are addressed
by the community’s many constituencies
working together, and not solely by a single
group (for example, health needs of the
community being tackled by those em-
ployed in the health sector, or education
by those sitting on the local board of edu-
cation). In essence, a wide range of lead-
ers embraces community goals.

Moving to a polycentric mode of deci-
sion making requires access to leadership
opportunities for many citizens who have
little history of engagement in local affairs.
No doubt, the underpinning for achieving
this element of a successful community
will be the delivery of leadership develop-
ment programs that are targeted to a broad
spectrum of local people. Such programs
will become the conduit for helping people
become more actively engaged in the civic
work of their community.

Focus action on the next
generation
Effective communities are less interested
in quick fixes and more concerned about
long-term well-being. As Hesselbein notes,
piecemeal, tentative efforts that seek to ad-
dress only the symptoms of critical com-

munity needs are simply unworkable [2].
What is necessary is a systematic, careful
analysis of the causes, and subsequent in-
vestments in solutions that hold promise.
Successful communities think less about
their deficiencies, and more about local as-
ets that they can build on for the future.

Forward thinking communities, for ex-
ample, invest their resources in youth,
knowing that they will be the leaders of
their community in the future. They seek
to attract decent industry to the commu-
nity, knowing that the economic well-be-
ing of workers is dependent on good
wages, and the quality of the environment
is affected by the type of industries re-
cruited to the locality. In sum, such com-

munities focus their vision on the future,
and take actions that help pave the road to
that future.

Conclusion
The building blocks to a successful com-
munity, outlined in this article, are not im-
possible goals, but they do demand a signif-
cant shift in how things get done in a community.
It means that local elites are no longer at the
helm of decision making. Rather, all segments
are actively engaged in guiding the future of
their community. And new and expanded
leadership is not thwarted, but is overtly em-
braced. Communities that subscribe to these
principles will find themselves alive and vi-
brant, positioned to address the challenges that
await them. And in the process, they will have
mobilized one of their most critical assets —
their citizens — in taking responsibility for
addressing the long-term well-being of their
neighborhoods and communities.

Endnote
[a] Our discussion draws heavily from the
chapter by Suzanne W. Morse titled, “Five
Building Blocks for Successful Communities,”
included in the edited volume by Hesselbein
and others titled, The Community of the Future,
published as part of the Drucker Foundation
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Community, Democracy and Rural Development:

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Community, without a doubt, is the building block of any democratic society. Generally, terms such as social capital, community field, entrepreneurial social infrastructure, structural pluralism, local capitalism, civic society and community agency have been used to describe the powerful impact that community can have in promoting democratic civic engagement — engagement that can do much to improve the well being of individuals and local places.

From this perspective, community can prove relevant for promoting rural development. The term community, however, is a multifaceted concept that has been misunderstood often in the context of developing effective rural policy. Thus, to overcome this problem of misinterpretation, it is important to establish a common understanding of community so that policy makers and practitioners alike can better understand how it can be used as the foundation for building locally based democratic civic engagement.

Democratic civic engagement is an important attribute of a community's structural features, and less so a characteristic of an individual. The actions of individuals are often shaped by the structure of the community in which they are situated. And when the relationship between the local structure and individual actions is placed in a time frame, two important elements of the community take hold, namely, its character and its tradition. The former refers to the characteristics of a community at a given point in time; the latter to the experience gained by that community throughout time. These two elements, in combination, allow a community to develop those highly distinct characteristics that make it what it is.

The character of a community can be linked to four major dimensions: (1) local economy, (2) local civic infrastructure, (3) local society and (4) the local spatial identity. The local economy refers to the economic structure determining the extent to which local residents have access to economic resources in terms of employment and income. Economic opportunity provides incentives for improving individual human resources as well as local social resources. Further, it creates a condition whereby race, class and gender relations are key elements for promoting a diverse economy in the local community. In such conditions, individuals across various groups develop a long-term vested interest in their local community. The local civic infrastructure refers to places where people can meet and discuss local issues. These places can be planned or unplanned. Examples of planned places are malls, squares and city parks. Barber shops, coffee shops, convenience stores and the like are a few examples of unplanned places. In both cases, they provide “focal points” for people to come together. The local society refers to the social structure determining the extent to which local residents have access to social resources in terms of networks and channels of communication. It is through access to networks of individuals and channels of communications that local interactions are established. As a result of these local interactions, people develop a common interest. Cultivating collective interest is vital to the mobilization of local resources that are designed to promote collective responses to locally oriented issues. Finally, spatial identity refers to the geographic location of a community. Based on its geographic location, a community can be classified as either metro or non-metro, or urban or rural. In both cases, however, its an ecological characteristic of the community based on two population attributes: density and size. Density has sociological implications because it determines the extent to which people can interact on a daily basis. Size, on the other hand, has economic implications because it determines the community's ability to develop economies of scale and interjurisdictional relations.

The four major dimensions of community all play a key role in promoting democratic and civic engagement. Policy makers and rural development advocates cannot promote active civic engagement without addressing the four dimensions of community noted above. It is important to give attention to an improved local economy, to the enhancement of local human resources, to the expansion of the local civic infrastructure, and to addressing the structural barriers imposed by geographic location. If communities take seriously the need to attend to these four dimensions of community, then the evolution of locally active citizens who care deeply about the long-term well-being of their locality will be realized.
SRDC Research Suggests

Rural South faces challenge attracting high-quality jobs

Allison Matthews
Southern Rural Development Center

More adults in the South are reaching a higher educational status than in past years and job numbers have increased significantly over the past decade, but rural citizens may be less likely to see the same economic improvements that are occurring in metropolitan areas.

A report in Rural America, the journal of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Economic Research Service, said the education and work skills of rural people are inadequate compared to their urban counterparts. Even people living in rural America who do have valuable skills and higher educational levels often have difficulty finding jobs that pay as high wages or salaries as they could earn in larger cities. While job numbers have increased, job quality has not improved.

The article states that employers locate in urban areas much more often than choosing a rural setting for their company or business.

“Good jobs that require an educated workforce and offer excellent pay continue to bypass rural places for the richer pool of human, financial and physical resources found in urban areas,” it says.

The article was authored by researchers at the Southern Rural Development Center. Housed at Mississippi State University, the Center serves the Southern region and its 29 land-grant institutions. Its primary focus is to address issues that affect the rural South by linking the research and Extension capacities of land-grant universities to small communities that can utilize technical assistance in educational outreach programs.

“The South has a higher ratio of educated adults in its urban areas than it does in rural communities,” said Bo Beaulieu, SRDC director and lead author of the Rural America report. “This is also true for many rural areas across the nation.”

While one in four adults in the metro South have a college education, only one in seven adults in rural areas have been to college. Beaulieu said statistics vary by race, but people are more likely to have higher education levels, regardless of their race or ethnic background, if they live in metro regions.

“There is no question that the South already plays a vital role in the American and global economies,” Beaulieu said. “But rural areas are at a disadvantage when it comes to attracting high-quality jobs that employ well-educated workers.”

Encouraging evidence indicates that the South as a region is doing well, but Beaulieu said individual areas within the South may fall further behind. One major challenge for the region is the low education levels among minorities, which are projected to be the fastest growing population.

“While blacks are graduating from high school in increasing numbers, relatively few are moving on to four-year colleges,” the article states. Education levels among Hispanic residents are also very low. Beaulieu said the percentage of white, black and Hispanic residents with bachelor’s degrees or higher is two to three times greater in the metro South than in the nonmetro South.

“Creating enough high-paying, quality jobs in rural towns is the key factor in making these appealing areas for educated adults to live and work. This also is important for attracting young adults back to their rural hometowns after they have finished college,” Melissa Barfield, SRDC graduate assistant and co-author, said.

The article describes how long-term strategies to improve work skills and raise education levels in Southern rural areas are crucial to advancing economic development opportunities in these areas. Barfield said raising standards in schools to challenge students and set high aspirations regarding educational and career plans will help advance rural regions’ chances to attract quality jobs.

“With increased educational levels, rural citizens will not only have better career options, but this will also lead to an improved quality of life,” Barfield said.

The article also emphasizes the important roles of families in encouraging educational and occupational achievements. Beaulieu said an important task for improving education levels and work skills is to raise parental aspirations for their children’s long-term educational and occupational choices.

“Students’ goals, attitudes and dedication toward achievement are greatly influenced by family support, encouragement and expectations. When parents expect success from their children, children are more likely to work toward success for themselves,” he said.

Beaulieu said rural citizens can also improve the economic situations in their communities through diversification and building on skills and talents that already exist.

“Local talents may lead to home-based and other businesses that strengthen the local economy and minimize an area’s dependence on income from a limited number of employers,” Beaulieu said. “These are strategies to stop the increasing wage gap between metro and nonmetro employees. Although more rural citizens have become employed, they continue to earn less than their urban counterparts.”

For more information, the article is available online at http://www.crs.usda.gov/publications/ruralamerica/ra154/ra154d.pdf.
Southern Perspectives

Get ready for
Strengthening Communities:
Enhancing Extension’s Role

February 24-27, 2002 ◆ Orlando Airport Marriott Hotel

The CRED Base Program Strategic Team and the four Regional Rural Development Centers invite you to participate in the first national Cooperative Extension conference titled Strengthening Communities: Enhancing Extension’s Role. This conference seeks to bring together Extension professionals from across the system to share resources, curriculum, information and experiences related to community resources and economic development programming. The program will focus specifically on building our collective and individual “toolboxes” as we seek to meet the educational needs of our diverse communities.

Hurry to secure your participation in this conference, as it is limited to the first 300 paid registrants.

The conference will take place at the Orlando Airport Marriott, 7499 Augusta National Drive, Orlando, Florida. Rooms can be reserved by calling the hotel directly at (407) 851-9000 or by calling the Marriott Central Reservations at 1-800-766-6752 and making reservations in the name of SOUTHERN RURAL DEVELOPMENT CENTER. Rates are $119 single or double and must be reserved before February 2, 2002, to get the conference rate.

If you must cancel your registration, please call the Southern Rural Development Center at (662) 325-3207. Substitutions can be made without penalty; however, refunds will be made if we receive word no later than February 20, 2002.

To view the conference agenda and obtain registration information, visit the SRDC website at http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc/calendar/events.htm. Professionals interested in the conference can register online or print a form to fax or mail to the SRDC. For more information, please call (662) 325-3207.

Names in the NEWS

J. Charles Lee has been named Mississippi State University’s interim president.

Lee was named to lead the Starkville institution until a replacement can be named for MSU President Malcolm Portera, who departs Dec. 31 to become chancellor of the University of Alabama System.

Since 1999, Lee has served as MSU vice president for agriculture, forestry and veterinary medicine, and, since 2000, as dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. From 1978-83, he was dean of forest resources and associate director of the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station.

During the intervening years, he held several major leadership positions in the Texas A&M University System, among them interim A&M executive vice president and provost during 1994 and 1995. He was vice chancellor for research, planning and continuing education during the four years prior to returning to MSU.

Lee holds bachelor’s and doctoral degrees from North Carolina State University.

Vance H. Watson, director of the Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experiment Station, has been named interim vice president of the Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine and interim dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Mississippi State University. The appointment is effective Jan. 1, 2002.

Watson will carry out responsibilities of the vice president and dean during the period that J. Charles Lee, current DAFVM vice president and CALS dean, serves as the university’s interim president. In addition, Watson will sustain his current responsibilities as MAFES director, with full authority for decision making, resource allocation, and general management of the unit.

In making the appointment, Lee said, “Dr. Watson has a broad understanding of the issues and opportunities facing the Division, the state and federal legislative processes, and the role of the Division in serving the needs of our state. I am confident that he can provide the leadership needed during this interim period.”
The Southern Rural Development Center does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability or veteran status.