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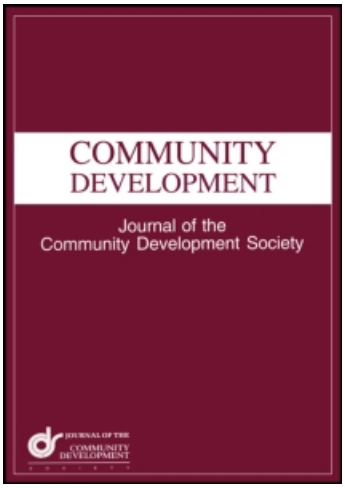

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Assessing community capacity and social capital in rural America: lessons from two rural observatories

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Assessing community capacity and social capital in rural America: lessons from two rural observatories

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This paper reviews the work of two rural observatories: the New Rural Economy project in Canada and the Ventures program in the state of Oregon. These observatories collect data to better understand the assets and liabilities of a selection of rural communities. Both observatories attempt to measure the social capital or capacity of each observed community.After a brief review of the theoretical literature on social capital, community capacity, and development, we draw on publications, reports, and personal communication with the principals of these observatories to review their efforts in measuring social capital and community capacity. Our aim is to look for lessons that can inform the design of a rural observatory to assess community capacity and social capital in rural communities in the United States.

Keywords: community capacity; social capital; community indicators; rural development

1. Introduction

Building community capacity is a central concern of both policymakers and community residents.Many in the policy community have expressed interest in understanding why some communities are more successful in achieving positive social, economic and environmental outcomes and how to increase the capacity of communities to achieve these outcomes. This is particularly true for communities that face the most difficult economic challenges: central cities of large metropolitan areas and remote rural communities. Most attempts to define, assess and build community capacity, however, have been undertaken in urban neighborhoods. While there is much to learn from these studies of urban places, there are distinctive characteristics and dynamics of rural communities that introduce unique challenges to the assessment and building of community capacity.

Two efforts to study rural communities in North America and assess their community capacity are reviewed in this paper: the New Rural Economy (NRE) Rural Observatory of the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, which was most active during the decade 1998–2008, and the social capital community assessments of rural Central Oregon communities in the Ventures Program funded by the Northwest Area Foundation. The NRE Rural Observatory, initiated in 1998,

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was a university-based research effort that involved contractual commitments with 23 rural communities in Canada—selected to represent the diversity of rural places in Canada along several dimensions—to monitor social and economic change and governance in these places. The Ventures Program, initiated in 1999, was a foundation and community partnership program that established long-term (10-year) commitments in five rural areas in the Western United States to encourage poverty-reduction strategies that could yield long-term impact. The project included assessments of community life in each of the participating communities using the Social Capital Community Benchmark Surveys.

This paper reviews literature on community capacity and related concepts, then examines the New Rural Economy Rural Observatory and community social capital assessments of Central Oregon Ventures program for lessons that can inform the design of an observatory in the rural United States. Drawing on publications and reports from these programs and input from the principals, the paper focuses on their criteria for selecting rural communities, local participation in each project's design and data collection, and the measures used to assess community capacity in both projects.

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2. Conceptual background: community capacity and social capital defined

In both observatories, the concepts of community capacity and social capital were central to the underlying theories of community change. These concepts have a rich background in the literature.In the following two sections, we provide a brief overview of what these concepts mean, how they were developed, and how they have been measured in empirical research.

2.1. Community capacity

Robert Chaskin (2001) proposes a widely used definition of community capacity: "the interaction of human capital, organizational resources and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well being of that community." Community capacity, he argues, can "operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort" (Chaskin, 2001). The term 'community capacity' is widely used among those who are concerned about community development or involved in social work and social service delivery.

Lyons and Reimer (2006) examine the different ways that the community capacity concept has developed in various literatures. They find that two perspectives emerge. One is the view that community capacity is a condition—a static resource—to be used as the community wishes. An alternative view is of community capacity as a process. Most definitions of community capacity see it as a dynamic process, with changes in conditions and/or ways in which the community uses its resources. The authors argue that defining community capacity as a condition discourages an examination of the way it works. For example: "If a community is seen to have high levels of leadership and therefore high levels of capacity ... we become insensitive to the way in which that leadership is exercised, including who might be excluded in the process" (Lyons & Reimer, 2006). To understand why some communities succeed and others fail, a dynamic, process-oriented view of community capacity is needed.

The broad concept of community capacity requires a multidimensional set of measures.Chaskin (2001) examines community capacity in four selected metropolitan areas, proposing a model for assessing community capacity that uses measures across a large number of domains. Using key informants and case studies, he develops domains of community capacity related to the sense of community, commitment levels, problem-solving ability and access to resources, engagement in organizations and networks, and community intentions and strategies (Ziembroski et al., 2005, p. 5).

2.2. Social capital

Economists and sociologists interested in local development are less likely to frame their analyses in terms of community capacity, but rather focus on the narrower concepts of social capital and collective efficacy. Economists have entered this arena primarily through their contributions to the discussion of social capital, a concept that builds on and broadens economists' traditional focus on physical and human capital as inputs to production of goods and services (Castle, 2002; Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2006). Social capital has been viewed by economists both as an individual asset (Glaeser, Laibson, & Sacerdote, 2002; Shideler, 2004; Karlan, 2005) and—following Coleman (1990) and Putnam (2002)—as a community asset (Rupasingha, Goetz, & Freshwater, 2006). While the conventional wisdom is that social capital is a benefit to individuals and communities, there may also be costly consequences. Portes (1998) reviews the conceptual development of social capital and delineates the positive and negative functions of social capital possessed by individuals. He also critiques the "logical circularity" in the view of social capital as a community asset, namely that "it leads to positive outcomes, such as economic development and less crime, and its existence is inferred from the same outcomes."

Social capital is often measured with a small set of indicators, and sometimes characterized by a single index constructed from a set of indicators. As noted, it can be considered an individual asset or a community asset, and has been measured at both the individual and the community level.

At the individual level, it is often measured with answers to a set of questions designed to elicit values and attitudes. Data sets commonly used to determine social capital include the General Social Survey (GSS), the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and other household surveys. The GSS for example, has questions related to "trust," "fairness," and "helping" that have been used to measure social capital. Social capital measures derived from these questions were found to be statistically significant determinants of economic growth (Knack & Keefer, 1997), civic involvement (Brehm & Rahn, 1997) and communication infrastructure (Fisman & Khanna, 1999) in cross-country studies. Economists also attempt to assess individual's trust levels with the "Trust Game" (Karlan, 2005). Sometimes the survey results are used to predict individual outcomes (academic performance, use of credit, criminal behavior). At other times, individual data are aggregated to develop a collective (average) measure of social capital for a nation or region (as in Knack & Keefer, 1997), which is then used to predict national or regional outcomes.

Social capital is also measured at the national, state, regional or community level from aggregate measures of structural characteristics (population size, density of

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associations, percentage of population that is native-born or of various races/ethnicities or living in a rural area). These community measures may be used to predict either individual outcomes (Guiso, Sapienza, & Zingales, 2002; Hofferth & Iceland, 1998) or community outcomes (Rupasingha et al., 2000). For example, Rupasingha et al. (2006) use information from a variety of secondary sources to construct a county-level measure of social capital. They use this variable to explain variations in county growth rates (Rupasingha et al., 2000) and changes in poverty (Rupasingha & Goetz, 2003).

3. Applied research on social capital and community capacity in rural communities

Two specific projects shed light on how to measure social capital and community capacity in rural communities: the New Rural Economy (NRE) project pursued by the Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation (CRRF) and the "social capital community benchmark Survey" (SCCBS) assessment in three counties in central Oregon supported by the Northwest Area Foundation (NWAF). Each explores community capacity and social capital in distinctive ways. The NRE project develops an explicit capacity model and considers social capital as one of the important assets in a community that contributes to capacity. The Central Oregon project focuses on social capital and considers collective efficacy as one type of social capital.

3.1. NRE rural observatory

The NRE project, an effort led by CRRF, examined how diverse rural communities in Canada fared in the early 21st century economy. CRRF is a network of rural researchers, policy-makers, and citizens focused on building strong rural economies. As such, it seeks to address the following issues:

(1) the need for jobs and wealth generating activities;
(2) the need for institutional flexibility within the private sector, and within social and governing organizations in rural Canada;
(3) the need for urban and rural people to help each other find ethical, environmental and economic solutions to the problems of sustainability and rural dependence;
(4) the need for continuing learning to enable rural populations to participate actively in the economic life of their country. (Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation, no date)

The NRE project contributed to these aims by providing "data collection and analysis at macro-, meso- and micro-levels; annual conferences and workshops; and the establishment of a research infrastructure across the country" (Reimer, 2004a). More specifically, the primary research objective of the NRE was to explain variations in communities' success in a new economy characterized by "complexity, increased exposure to global trade, volatile economies, and faster, cheaper communication" (Reimer, 2002a). Aiding in the project were 23 institutional partners that made up the research infrastructure, including 11 universities, eight research centers, and various government departments and non-governmental organizations.

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The NRE's research products drew data from a variety of sources, including Census and tax filer data. Reports use data from the census sub-division level to examine rural communities across Canada (see Reimer (1999) as an example). The primary weakness of the census data was that it "exclude[d] a large amount of social, institutional and quality of life information that is critical to assessing the situation in rural areas" (Reimer, 2002a). To remedy this, the NRE project collected data from 32 rural, Canadian communities. Historical data as well as information about formal and informal institutions in each community were collected for each research site. Household data were collected from approximately 2000 households in 20 of the communities. Budget constraints limited the ability of the project to collect data from all 32 communities. As a result of combining these two major categories of data, the NRE project has a database connecting household information to local site characteristics and global processes. It is sufficiently heterogeneous to make cross-community comparisons, but also includes valuable information about the institutions and quality of life in those communities.

A unique aspect of the NRE project is the way it selected communities to observe. The 32 rural, Canadian communities were randomly chosen to ensure comparisons across the following five dimensions: exposure to the global economy, stability of the local economy, adjacency to large metropolitan centers, level of community capacity, and outcomes (Reimer, 2002a). These five dimensions come from an underlying conceptual framework based on previous studies of rural areas.

The first dimension, exposure to the global economy, recognizes how rural communities are increasingly affected by global economic conditions. "For rural areas, this has meant increased exposure to international competition, a decrease in place-specific support programmes and an increase in labour mobility" (Reimer, 2002a). Communities, therefore, are chosen to reflect high to low exposure to the global economy. Local economic stability, the second dimension, was selected because an unstable local economy is likely to make community planning difficult, especially in resource-dependent communities. The third dimension, adjacency to large metropolitan centers, is meant to differentiate communities that have access to urban centers and isolated communities. Reimer (2002a) notes: "Advances in transportation and communication have helped to integrate rural areas with urban centres but, except for outmigration, the major effects are felt only by those communities that are relatively adjacent to those centres." Community capacity, the fourth dimension, acknowledges the role of "skills, abilities, formal and informal social networks; health, education, and service institutions; and an ability to mobilize resources as important conditions for economic and social development" as key to a community's success. The final dimension measures community outcomes to identify leading and lagging communities.

The NRE capacity model

The NRE capacity model is a particularly compelling product of the NRE project (see Figure 1). It is general enough to describe in a dynamic way how communities develop and at the same time provides a sufficiently specific taxonomy of the forces at work in communities over time. Proof of its usefulness and relevance to the rural observatory is how frequently it is referenced in the observatory's diverse research products, i.e., Reimer (2002b, 2004b, 2006) and Lyons and Reimer (2006). This section discusses each element in the capacity model and cites research products

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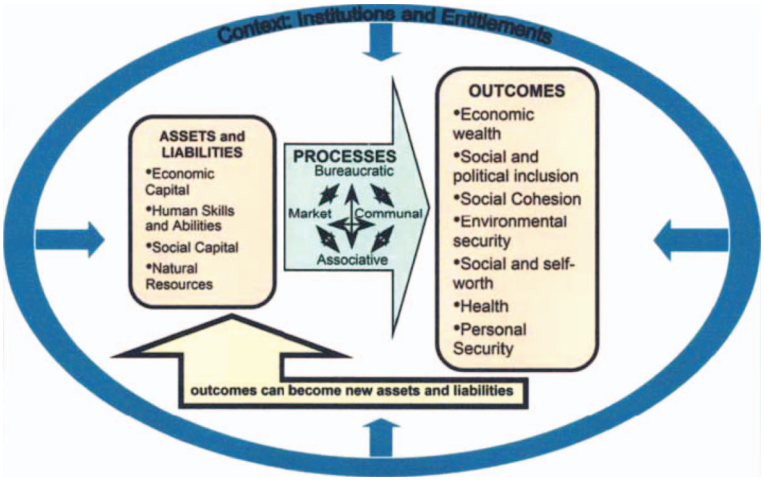

Figure 1. The NRE community capacity model.
Source: Reimer (2006, p. 156).

related to each element. It also examines applied research between elements to show how the NRE project relates capacity to community development.

Assets and liabilities

Capacity in the NRE study is defined as "the ability of people to organize their assets and resources to achieve objectives they consider important" (Lyons & Reimer, 2006). This definition seems to agree with the view of capacity as a dynamic process. Figure 1 shows the entire dynamic process. Communities start with assets and liabilities that characterize the resources available for a community to use. Some are easier to measure than others. Economic capital and natural resources seem to be the easiest to quantify, with human skills and abilities and social capital being more difficult. This review focuses on the measurement of social capital.

Social capital

In the NRE project, social capital is defined as:

> [...] one type of asset or resource that can be used to achieve valued outcomes. As *capital*, it is a part of production that is reinvested into future production. As *social* capital it refers to social forms as reflected in organizations, collective activities, networks, and relationships. From this point of view, social capital is a relational, as opposed to an individual characteristic. (Reimer, 2002b)

This definition informs the way the NRE project measures social capital. It looks for evidence of social capital embedded in the processes that exist within a community. These processes are discussed in the next section. As shown in Figure 1, the market, bureaucratic, associative, and communal relationships are "four relatively coherent ways in which people organize their relationships to accomplish tasks, legitimize their actions, distribute resources, and structure their institutions" (Reimer, 2002b).

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Processes

Economic capital, human skills and abilities, social capital, and natural resources are resources available to the community that then undergo "actions or processes that may be taken by individuals or groups to recognize, reorganize, or manage those assets in order to produce outputs" (Lyons & Reimer, 2006). The processes constitute social relationships that are needed to produce outcomes valued by the community.

Table 1 shows the four processes in the NRE model: market, bureaucratic, associative and communal. Market relations are "based on the exchange of goods and services within a relatively free and information-rich context" (Reimer, 2004b). Bureaucratic relations are "rational-legal" relationships that are "impersonal and formal" (Reimer, 2002a). They are related to social capital in that they codify and enforce rights and entitlements in the community. Examples of associative relations include "churches, clubs, social action groups, internet chat rooms, spectator events, hobby groups, and food banks" (Reimer, 2002a). Resources are distributed only if an individual is accepted by the group in question. Finally, communal relations come about from a strong sense of community. Goods or services equally distributed, regardless of status or ability to pay. They require a "high level of trust and loyalty" (Reimer, 2002a).

Lyons and Reimer (2006) distinguish *use* of each of the four processes by individuals and households from *availability* of the process in the community. Household use of market processes, for example, is measured by indicators of whether the household employs people or owns a business and of use of the internet for market transactions. In contrast, community availability of market relations is measured by—among other things—the number of enterprises, or banks or ATM machines, and number of media services available locally.

The NRE project collected data on these four processes to study social exclusion in rural Canada (Reimer, 2004b, 2004c). Rural community members in 20 sites were surveyed about "the types of services they used and who they turned to for social support in times of change" (Reimer, 2004b). Their responses were classified into the four major processes. By studying who people turn to for support, the researchers were able to find the processes at work in a community.

Social capital embedded in processes

The NRE project views social capital as embedded in four types of relationships between individuals: market, bureaucratic, communal and associative. Using survey data collected from 1995 households in 20 rural communities in 2001, the NRE project measured social capital embedded in the aforementioned relationships. As Reimer (2002b) notes, the benefit of having both household-level and site-level data is twofold. "First, researchers frequently use participation and volunteering to measure social capital. These indicators assume that the *use* of particular social resources is equivalent to the *availability* of those resources" (Reimer, 2002b). From a community development standpoint, the existence of social capital that is not currently being exploited is critically important to developing successful community strategies. "Second, using site-level data makes it possible to represent the institutional forms of social capital" (Reimer, 2002b). When surveyed, individuals may not reference local institutions such as schools, hospitals, or food banks, but these institutions are important sources of social capital.

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Table 1. Processes in the NRE capacity model.

	Characterization	Examples Where Type Dominates	Basis of Distribution	Indicators of Household Use and Community Availability
Market	Free exchange of goods or services	Farmers market; stock exchange	Supply and demand; prices	*Use:* Access to market relations - employ or own business; Use internet for market relations' market public services used; *Availability:* number of market participation groups; income from market sources; total market supports
Bureaucratic	Relations structured by general rules and principles; division of labor	Governments; legal systems; corporations	Objectives; formal structures of status	*Use:* Use internet for bureaucratic relations; bureaucratic public services used; *Availability:* number of bureaucratic actions taken; income from bureaucratic sources; total bureaucratic supports
Associative	Shared interests	Clubs; churches; recreation groups; social action groups	Shared interest	*Use:* Use internet for associative relations; associative public services used; *Availability:* number of associative participation groups; number of associative actions taken; total associative supports
Communal	Common identity	Family; close friendship groups; churches; gangs; clans	Common identity and need	*Use:* Use internet for communal relations; *Availability:*total types of sharing from family and friends; total communal supports

Source: Reimer (2004b).

Table 2 shows how Reimer (2002b) assessed social capital availability in the 20 rural Canadian communities. This approach creates indicators of the comparative amounts of social capital in the 20 communities as well as the distribution of that social capital between the four types of relations.

Table 2. Measurement of social capital availability.

Embedded in ...	
Market Relations	Total number of enterprises in the site (within 30 min. of travel) Total of: banks, credit unions, ATM machines, micro-financing groups, insurance offices in the site (within 30 min. of travel) Total of: cable TV, Internet, public access terminals, local newspaper, regional newspaper, national newspaper, community newsletter, local radio station, number of available radio stations Rating of commercial services in the following way: (1) minimum convenience center (gas and basic groceries) (2) full convenience center (minimum plus some general merchandise, full grocery store, implement dealers) (3) partial shopping center (above plus selected merchandise - small malls) (4) complete shopping center (above plus extensive retail merchandise - large malls) (5) secondary wholesale retail center (above plus some wholesale) (6) primary wholesale retail center (above plus central wholesale outlets)
Bureaucratic Relations	Total of the following organizations (within 30 min. of travel): elementary school, high school, CEGEP or community college, university, continuing education or extension courses, other educational institutions, hospital, blood/urine test facility, X-ray facility, baby delivery facility, nursing home, doctor, nurse, dentist, dental surgeon, optometrist, home care/visits, Victorian Order of Nurses, social worker, pharmacy, ambulance, emergency services, public health nurse, physiotherapist, speech therapist, occupational therapist, police, fire department, 911 emergency line, lawyer, notary, citizenship court, employment insurance office, Revenue Canada office, provincial automobile license office, welfare office, town hall, band council, post office, bus, passenger train, freight train, airport, heliport, boat, taxi service Total of: Internet, public access terminals, national newspaper
Associative Relations	Total of the following organizations (within 30 min. of travel): Credit Union, micro-financing group, food bank, clothing exchange or depot, second-hand stores, drop-in center, half-way house, personal aid services, curling rink, municipal swimming pool, municipal skating rink, community playing field, community gym, community center, YMCA/YWCA, athletic club, theatre, cinema, museum, library, park Total of: Internet, public access terminals, local newspaper, regional newspaper, national newspaper, community newsletter, local radio station, number of radio stations available in the site, community bulletin boards, community 'welcome' sign, community flag, community symbol
Communal Relations	Average size of census families in the site Number of daycares and senior citizens retirement homes (within 30 min. of travel) Number of churches or other religious organizations in the site Number of community integration events in the site

Source: Reimer (2002b).

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Additionally, Reimer (2002b) examines the question of how much community members use the social capital available to them. Reimer (2002b) gives indicators of the use of social capital, again broken down by relationship type. Statistically significant correlation coefficients between the available level of social capital and the level of used social capital are reported in Table 3.

There is a positive relationship between availability of social capital in a community and household use of social capital generally. Although statistically significant, the correlation between use and availability is not particularly strong, ranging between 0.27 and 0.42. Availability and use are more strongly associated for associative-based (AB) and communal-based (CB) social capital than for market-based (MB) or bureaucratic-based (BB) social capital. Higher levels of use and availability of AB and CB social capital are generally related to lower levels of use of other forms of social capital but with higher levels of use of total social capital. Higher levels of MB social capital (both use and availability) are generally associated with lower levels of use of the other forms and of social capital overall. Finally, BB social capital is weakly, or not at all, related to the use or availability of other forms of social capital.

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Social capital and income

The NRE project found evidence that social capital is related to community development. Tiepoh, Nah, and Reimer (2004) use household survey data from the NRE project to examine the relationship between social capital and income in rural Canada. They propose the following two hypotheses: (1) that "social capacity, defined as the ability of people to organize and use their social capital, does influence their level of income," and (2) the reason for the aforementioned hypothesis is that "social capital use facilitates the flow of income-related knowledge and information between economic agents" (Tiepoh, Nah, & Reimer, 2004) . Again, reference is made to the four processes in which social capital is embedded.

Tiepoh, Nah, and Reimer (2004) find that "overall there is an important relationship between household social capital use and household income" and that all four types of social capital use are significantly related to household income. They conclude that "increasing the level of household involvement in any type of social relations has an important income affect." When they examined the relationship

Table 3. Available social capital by used social capital.

	Available Social Capital				
Used Social Capital	Market-based	Bureaucratic-based	Associative-based	Communal-based	Total
Market-based	.37**		−.20**	−.20**	−.35**
Bureaucratic-based		.27**	−.12**		
Associative- based	−.21**	−.21**	.42**	−.12**	.28**
Communal-based	−.20**		−.11**	.40**	.22**
Total	−.35**	−.17**	.27**	.21**	.40**

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
Source: Reimer (2006).

between community income and the availability of social capital at the community level, however, they did not find statistically significant relationships between income and social capital availability for any of the four types of social capital. They conclude that there is "an important gap between the availability of social capital and its use ... [which] cautions those policies that focus on increasing the availability of social capital alone" (Tiepoh, Nah, & Reimer, 2004).

3.2. Central Oregon SCCBS project

The Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey (SCCBS) "was designed to study the health of American communities" (Rahn, no date). With funding from the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University, the Ford Foundation, and other foundation groups, a survey instrument was designed and implemented "the results of which were intended to provide foundations and researchers with information on the social connections, attitudes, and dispositions of people living in geographically defined places" (Rahn, no date). During the summer and fall of 2000, the Northwest Area Foundation sponsored surveys in central Oregon, including Deschutes, Jefferson, and Crook counties. The NWAF also sponsored surveys in Yakima County and Seattle, WA; Bismarck, ND; Southeast SD; Minneapolis, MN; and the neighborhood of North Minneapolis. The purpose of the study was to assess the health of communities in this region using the concept of social capital.

SCCBS is a survey-based approach to measuring social capital. Rahn (no date) references the work of Robert Putnam, whose work "on the decline of social capital in America has captured the attention of those who are concerned about and involved in making communities places in which their denizens can lead healthy, happy, and productive lives." According to Rahn (no date), social capital is derived from the relationships individuals have with others, and is used by a group to achieve and objective. She divides social capital into four different types: civic engagement, trust, government social capital, and collective efficacy. Civic engagement seeks to measure how diverse and deep individuals' socio-political connections are in their local community. General and social trust is important in reducing uncertainty between individuals' interactions. Therefore, the level of trust in a community is a key component of social capital. Government social capital reflects the trust that community members have in their government institutions, while collective efficacy is "residents' beliefs that they can come together to realize common goals" (Rahn, no date). In the survey locations, community members were asked questions designed to measure each of these forms of social capital. These subjects are shown in Table 4.

To measure civic engagement in Central Oregon, the NWAF project asked questions about the "variety and depth of individuals' socio-political connections ... [for example,] whether they were involved in a number of different kinds of voluntary organizations, how often they did certain kinds of activities, such as entertaining friends at home or attending town meetings, and whether they were registered to vote and had voted in the 1996 presidential election" (Rahn, no date). Using factor analysis a score was calculated for each individual surveyed reflecting their level of community involvement. Averages across scores were taken in ten dimensions: cyber, arts, sports, youth, vets-seniors, reform politics, voting, informal socializing, faith-based and civic activism, as well as general civic engagement. Comparing these levels with the national sample reveals statistically significant differences in the voting, faith-based and civic activism types of civic engagement. Central Oregon showed higher levels of civic

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engagement in the voting and civic activism categories and a lower level of civic engagement in the faith-based category.

The next form of social capital that Rahn (no date) investigates is general and specific trust. "Trust is an important lubricant of social life because we can never know others as well as we know ourselves. Social interaction, therefore, always involves some degree of uncertainty." By measuring how much people in communities trust each other, Rahn (no date) can compare communities for this type of social capital. The NWAF project asked how much individuals trusted particular groups: neighbors, co-workers, people at place of worship, people who work in stores, local news media, police, White people, African-Americans/Blacks, Asians, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans. Results from those who responded "a lot" or "some" are shown in Table 5.

There is a statistically significant difference between the Central Oregon and national samples for neighbors, co-workers, people at place of worship, people who work in stores, White people, African-Americans/Blacks, Asians, Hispanics/Latinos, and Native Americans. In all cases, central Oregon respondents were more trusting than the national sample, indicating a higher level of social capital compared to the nation in the general and specific trust category.

Next, Rahn (no date) examines the level of trust in local authorities. Government is an important player in the development of social capital. "Government can support the efforts of nongovernmental actors to build social capital by, for example,

Table 4. NWAF social capital definitions.

Civic Engagement	involvement in voluntary organizations; frequency of entertaining friends at home or attending town meetings; voter registration and participation
Trust	trust "most people" as well as trust in specific groups (neighbors, co-workers, people at place of worship, people who work in stores, local news media, police, white people African-Americans/Blacks, Asians, Hispanics/Latinos, Native Americans)
Government	trust in local authorities; community leaders care about individuals
Collective Efficacy	cooperation of the community if "public officials asked everyone to conserve water or electricity because of some emergency"

Source: Rahn (no date).

Table 5. Proportion reporting trust group members "a lot" or "some".

	Central Oregon	National Sample
Neighbors*	86.7%	82.4%
Co-workers*	90.4	83.9
People at Place of Worship*	94.5	92.5
People Who Work in Stores*	84.5	75.9
Local News Media	59.9	58.6
Police	86.2	82.3
White People*	93.9	86.2
African-Americans/Blacks*	90.0	84.2
Asians*	90.3	82.9
Hispanics/Latinos*	86.6	81.4
Native Americans*	92.2	85.7

*indicates a statistically significant difference between the Central Oregon and national samples.
Source: Rahn (no date).

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using its taxing and spending authority to subsidize the costs of information, communication, and transportation" (Rahn, no date). In addition, civil society and government "are mutually supportive of each other," because "when people trust their public authorities, they take greater pride in being a member of a particular community and they are more likely to feel that they are respected members of that community" (Rahn, no date). When asked how much they trust local political authorities, 55.7% of central Oregon respondents answered "some of the time" or "hardly ever" compared to 56.7% for the national sample. With regard to "whether community leaders care about what happens to them," 63.5% disagreed with the statement "the people running my community don't really care much what happens to me" (Rahn, no date). Again, this result was not significantly different from the national sample.

Collective efficacy, the final form of social capital, is based on the notion that "the viability of any community depends on its residents' beliefs that they can come together to realize common goals" (Rahn, no date). Rahn (no date) quotes the work of social psychologist Albert Bandura who originated the concept:

> The strength of groups, organizations, and even nations lies partly in people's sense of collective efficacy that they can solve their problems and improve their lives through concerted effort. Perceived collective efficacy will influence what people choose to do as a group, how much effort they put into it, and their staying power when group efforts fail to produce results. (Bandura, 1982, p. 143)

The NWAF attempted to measure collective efficacy with this question: "If public officials asked everyone to conserve water or electricity because of some emergency, how likely is it that people in your community would cooperate—would you say it is very likely, likely, unlikely, or very unlikely?" (Rahn, n.d.).

Results from this survey question are shown in Table 6. More Central Oregon respondents said "very likely" (55.4%) than the national sample (43.9%), while fewer responded "likely" (39.4% versus 47.6%). This totals to 94.8% of central Oregon respondents saying their community would be "very likely" or "likely" to cooperate versus 91.5% for the national sample.

4. Lessons in assessing social capital and community capacity for a US rural observatory

There is a rich literature, particularly in the discipline of sociology, identifying characteristics of a community—in addition to human and physical capital—that

Table 6. Perceptions of collective efficacy in Central Oregon and the nation.

	Central Oregon	National Sample
Very likely	55.4%	43.9%
Likely	39.4	47.6
Unlikely	1.7	4.9
Very Unlikely	2.9	2.1

Question text: If public officials asked everyone to conserve water or electricity because of some emergency, how likely is it that people in your community would cooperate - would you say it is very likely, likely, unlikely, or very unlikely?
Source: Rahn (no date).

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produce positive economic outcomes. The challenge is finding ways to measure particular aspects of the system, including the more readily observable, such as physical or economic capital and economic outcomes, as well as those ideas that are more difficult to observe, such as social capital and social cohesion. This paper was motivated by the desire to learn how to assess social capital and community capacity in rural communities in order to provide guidance for development of a national rural observatory.

Three important lessons emerged from this review for the development of social capital and community capacity assessment projects in the rural US:

(1) *Have an explicit model of community change that specifies how community capacity and social capital are related to a community's desired goals.*
Having a unifying model of how a community develops helps to place each piece of research from the project in the larger context of community development. For researchers, using an explicitly stated model may suggest new relationships between factors affecting development and may help to incorporate ideas from other disciplines. For example, the specification of a relationship between assets, processes and outcomes in the NRE model allows researchers to examine how particular types of processes affect development and policymakers to use this information in setting policy priorities. Having such a model also provides a structured way of interacting with community leaders about their own perceptions of community change and about conditions and processes that they may want to change. Since the NRE model views capacity as a dynamic process, with outcomes affecting assets, the model implies an assessment system that requires revisiting rural communities over time.

(2) *Involve a diverse set of communities to enable useful comparisons*
Research sites should be recruited to involve a broad range of rural communities that differ across a number of important dimensions. The NRE project selected their communities for study carefully so that they would be different across a set of characteristics representing the external forces affecting community vitality and growth.

(3) *Involve the communities in the development of the indicators of capacity and in the statement of community goals.*
If the effort is to be useful to selected communities, community leaders need to be involved in the entire process of model development, indicator selection, survey design, data collection and interpretation of results. Acquiring data that is useful to communities will almost certainly involve some primary data collection. Interpreting the results of the analysis will require interaction with community leaders who understand the community's context. These leaders, in turn, can benefit from researchers' structured thinking and analysis. Involving communities in these ways may add considerably to the cost and complexity of the research process.

Strengths of the NRE project include its diverse research products and range of partners in the research enterprise. For researchers, the project provides a useful dataset of both primary and secondary data that have been used to examine questions springing from the conceptual model. Findings about the relationship between social capital and economic outcomes, for example, provide important insights into the development process. For community members, the NRE project

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provides easy-to-read assessments of their community and comparisons with other communities. These products allow communities to assess their assets, processes and outcomes and use that information when making decisions.

Assessing community capacity is an important step in developing community strategies for reaching community goals. The small size, fragility and remoteness of rural communities introduce unique challenges to those who would study capacity in these places. At the same time, the human scale and rich social interaction in rural communities makes the assessment of capacity in such places particularly fruitful and rewarding. The NRE Rural Observatory and Central Oregon SCCBS provide excellent examples of assessment models and techniques that take advantage of the opportunities and address the challenges of rural social capital and community capacity assessment. Particularly important to the success of the NRE was the explicit model of community change, careful selection of communities that participated in the Rural Observatory, and involvement of community leaders in all phases of the project. Attempts to assess community capacity in rural America should learn from these efforts.

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