

Building Capable Communities.

A new approach for building community capacity.

Summary.

Community capacity describes a process that increases the assets and attributes that a community is able to draw upon in order to take more control of and improve the influences on the lives of its members. Interest in community capacity building as a strategy for sustainable skills, resources and commitments in various settings and sectors has developed because of the requirement to prolong programme gains. Whilst there is a broad body of literature in regard to the definition and assessment of community capacity the discussion does not offer a means by which to make this concept operational in a programme context. The purpose of this paper is to introduce a new 'domains approach' for the assessment and strategic planning of community capacity. The domains approach offers a strategy for sustainability that can be applied to many different sectors including health, rural development and natural resources management. The design builds upon previous work^{i, ii, iii, iv, v, vi} to measure the process of community empowerment and to define community capacity^{vii, viii, ix, x}. The approach is presently being used in projects in Canada, New Zealand and the Kyrgyz Republic and was extensively field-tested in Fiji. It will be of particular interest to the funders and practitioners of development programmes that aim to build community capacity.

What is new about the approach?

What is new about the approach is that it provides a pre-determined focus through nine 'operational domains'^{iv}. The approach goes beyond the assessment of community capacity to also provide a focus for strategic planning and action such that the programme:

1. Improves stakeholder participation;
2. Increases problem assessment capacities;
3. Develops local leadership;
4. Builds empowering organisational structures;
5. Improves resource mobilization;
6. Strengthens links to other organisations and people;
7. Enhances stakeholder ability to 'ask why';
8. Increases stakeholder control over programme management;
9. Creates an equitable relationship with outside agents.

The 'operational domains' are the organisational influences of community capacity and provide a link between the inter-personal elements (individual control, social capital and community cohesiveness) and the contextual elements (the political, socio-cultural and economic circumstances) of a programme. They represent those aspects of the process of community capacity that allow individuals and groups to better organise and mobilize

themselves towards gaining greater control of the influences on their lives. For example, the existence of functional leadership, supported by established organisational structures with the participation of its members who have demonstrated the ability to mobilize resources, would indicate a community with strong organisational abilities capable of addressing their own concerns.

The 'operational domains' are robust and collectively capture the essential qualities of a 'capable community'. They have been independently cross-checked against the literature on capacity building to ensure their validity^{xi}.

The design of the approach is based on the understanding that^v:

- The concept of 'community' may be interpreted as heterogeneous individuals and groups who share common interests and needs and who are able to collectively mobilize and organise themselves.
- It is the interpretation of community capacity as a process which provides most insight into the assessment and strategic planning of the skills, competencies and capacities developed toward sustainable programmes.
- The process of community capacity is influenced by both social and organizational areas of influence.
- The design of the approach should be participatory and have clear roles and responsibilities for all participants.
- Capacity building should be an empowering experience and provide a means to translate the information gained from assessment into action through strategic planning.

How is the approach implemented?

Community capacity is viewed as both a means and an end towards greater programme sustainability. However, rather than being a substitute for programme goals or objectives, it creates a separate set of concerns that run 'parallel' to those of specific programmesⁱⁱⁱ. These concerns can be addressed at each stage of the programme cycle: design; setting objectives; strategic approach; implementation; and evaluation. The basic question planners and practitioners need to ask themselves is: How has their particular programme, from its planning through its design, through its implementation, through its evaluation, helped to increase community capacity? And in particular, how has the strategic approach of the programme helped to increase community capacity in each of the nine 'operational domains'?

To address these questions the approach uses four phases: preparation; assessment; strategic planning; and follow-up (see Figure 1) and a participatory workshop (1 or 2 days) format.

Phase 1: Preparation prior to the implementation of the approach.

A period of observation and discussion prior to the assessment of community capacity is important to adapt the approach to the social and cultural

requirements of the participants in the programme. For example, the use of a working definition of community capacity can provide all participants with a more mutual understanding of the programme in which they are involved and toward which they are expected to contribute.

Phase 2: Assessment. Activity 1. An assessment of each operational domain.

Using the nine operational domains (whose meaning can be altered or changed if the context under phase 1 warrants this action), the participants firstly make an assessment of their community's capacity. To do this they are provided with five generic statements for the 'operational domains', each written on a separate sheet. The five statements represent a description of the various levels of capacity related to that domain. Taking one domain at a time the participants are asked to select the statement which most closely describes the present situation in their community. The statements are not numbered or marked in any way and each is read out loud by the participants to encourage group discussion. The descriptions may be amended by the participants or a new description may be provided to describe the situation for a particular domain. In this way the participants make their own assessment for each domain by comparing their experiences and opinions.

Activity 2. Recording the reasons for the assessment.

It is important that the participants record the reasons why the assessment for the domain has been made. First, it assists other people who make the re-assessment and who need to take the previous record into account. Second, it provides some defensible or empirically observable criteria for the selection. The 'reasons why' need to include verifiable examples of the actual experiences of the participants taken from their community to illustrate in more detail the reasoning behind the selection of the statement.

Phase 3: Developing a strategic plan for community capacity.

The assessment in Phase 2 is in itself insufficient to build capacity as this information must be transformed into actions. This is achieved by the promotion of community capacity through strategic planning for positive changes in each of the nine 'operational domains', discussed earlier. The strategic planning for each domain consists of three simple steps: a discussion on how to improve the present situation; the development of a strategy to improve upon the present situation; and the identification of any necessary resources.

Activity 3. A discussion on how to improve the present situation.

Following the assessment of each domain the participants will be asked to decide as a group how this situation can be improved in their community. If more than one statement has been selected the participants should consider how to improve each situation. The purpose is to identify the broader approaches that will improve the present situation and provide a lead into a more detailed strategy. If the participants decide that the present situation

does not require any improvement, no strategy will be developed for that particular domain.

Activity 4. Developing a strategy to improve the present situation.

The participants are next asked to consider how, in practice, the present assessment can be improved. The participants develop a more detailed strategy based on the broader approaches that have already been identified in activity 3 by: Identifying specific activities; Sequencing activities into the correct order to make an improvement; Setting a realistic time frame including any significant benchmarks or targets; and assigning individual responsibilities to complete each activity within the programme time frame.

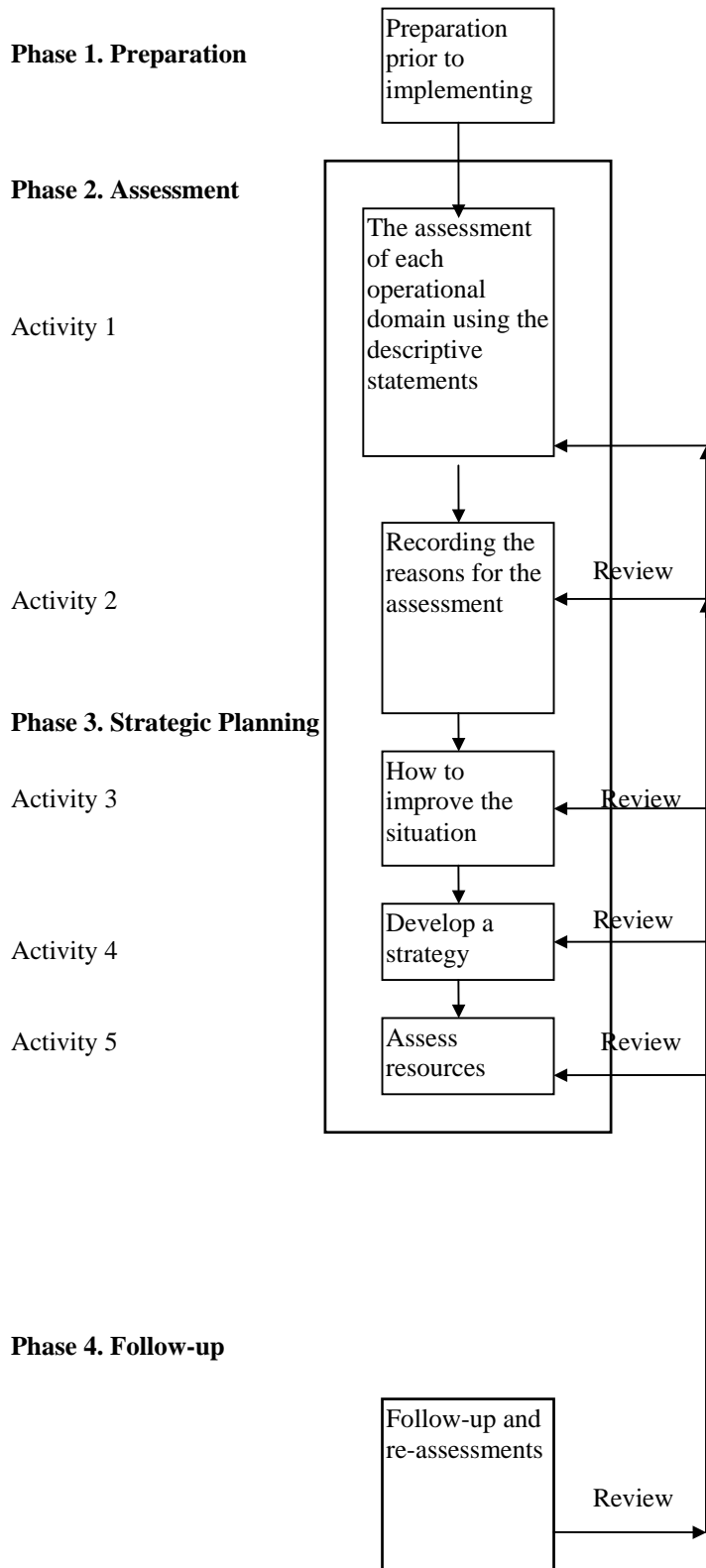
Activity 5. Assessing resources.

The participants assess the internal and external resources that are necessary and available to improve the present situation, for example, technical assistance, equipment, land, finance, training. This includes a review of locally available resources and any resources provided by an outside agent.

Phase 4: Follow-up and re-assessments.

The approach uses a simplified version of the logical framework system of project planning to provide a 'matrix' that summarizes the assessment and strategic plan for each 'operational domains'. The matrix is the basis for further discussion, planning and action by the participants who must meet to review their assessment and strategic plan for building community capacity, every three to six months.

Figure 1. Outline of the approach for the assessment and strategic planning of community capacity.



Experiences of using the approach.

1. The approach was extensively field-tested in rural communities in Fiji between 1998-1999 as a part of doctoral research. This work was supported by the Fiji Tri-lateral Health Promotion Project and AusAID. The matrix that was developed provided an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of community capacity. This was used by a number of rural communities to develop proposals to attract outside funding to address their concerns, such as training for local leaders and conflict resolution strategies between different clan groups.
2. The approach is presently being implemented by the 'In Motion Community Alliance for Health Research', University of Saskatchewan, sponsored by the Canadian Institute for Health Research, the major federal health research funding body. The purpose of the project is to test that a community capacity building approach to active living will not only improve physical activity levels, but will also improve health by increasing generic capacities in the nine 'operational domains'. The 'operational domains' are used to evaluate the extent to which the programme is actually addressing community capacity.
3. The approach is presently being implemented by the 'First Nation's Health Development Project', University of Regina, also sponsored by the Canadian Institute for Health Research. The purpose of the project is to develop a culturally appropriate indicators framework to assess changes in community health and capacity. The project uses the 9 operational domains to develop a better understanding within the community of how health and human services can be used to build capacity. The capacity objectives are developed as a 'parallel track' alongside the broader health objectives of the evaluative framework of the project.
4. The approach is presently being implemented by the 'Sustainable livelihoods for Livestock Producing Communities Project' in the Kyrgyz Republic funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID). The project aims to develop self-help capacities at community level through participation and strategic planning.
5. The nine 'operational domains' are being used as part of the 'Community Development Indicators Framework', New Zealand Ministry of Health. The Framework uses a 'parallel track' approach to measuring health and capacity building indicators with specific reference to First Nation and Pacific People's projects.

References

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If you are interested in learning more about the application of the approach discussed in this paper please contact Dr. Glenn Laverack on <laverack2002@yahoo.co.uk>.