



COMMUNITY CAPACITY WORKING GLOSSARY

Overview

Philanthropy Northwest is committed to advancing philanthropy's role in building community capacity, and this value is incorporated in our refreshed mission statement:

Philanthropy Northwest promotes, facilitates, and drives collaborative action by philanthropic organizations to strengthen communities in our region.

To help shape a common language for this conversation, we have prepared a Working Glossary of terms encountered repeatedly in our discussions. The term we used to launch the discussion and the hub that connects all terms discussed here is **community capacity**:

The complex web of attributes that enable a place-based community to develop and implement solutions to public problems and pursue opportunities to improve community and individual well-being.

The full glossary provides a fuller definition of community capacity, along with closely related terms, including **civic capacity**, **civic agency**, and **community democracy**.

Definition of these core concepts is followed by a brief discussion of the context within which community capacity operates. This section offers definitions of key contextual terms like **civil society**, **democracy**, and the **commons**.

Next, we examine some key ingredients of community capacity, beginning with **civic engagement**, which we illustrate with this observation from Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE): "*First and foremost, democracy depends on participation of the people. Active civic engagement—financial giving, volunteering, voting, and organizing—is the foundation of our political system.*"

Other ingredients of capacity are also defined, including **social capital**, **leadership**, the concepts of a **culture of collaboration** and of **learning communities**.

Finally, we offer a list of other terms that have arisen during our conversations, inviting readers to nominate terms from this list for definition or to provide definitions yourself.

In this spirit, we want to emphasize the "working" dimension of this glossary. We make no pretense at having achieved either a definitive or a comprehensive product. As we continue to talk with our partners, our hope is that these terms will bring greater clarity for all of us. We invite those of you interested in the glossary or in the ongoing conversation to contact us with your thoughts by emailing lgalaites@philanthropynw.org.



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Background

In 2011, Philanthropy Northwest's commitment to advancing philanthropy's role in building community capacity was spelled out in our refreshed mission statement: *Philanthropy Northwest promotes, facilitates, and drives collaborative action by philanthropic organizations to strengthen communities in our region.* At our 2011 conference, Philanthropy Northwest invited members to join in a field-wide conversation about philanthropy and community capacity. As that conversation has proceeded in a number of venues, including several that we have shared with the Intermountain West Funder Network, participants have frequently expressed a desire for greater clarity or precision in the use of key terms.

To help shape a common language for this conversation, we have prepared this ***working glossary*** of terms encountered repeatedly in our discussions. We want to emphasize at the outset the "working" dimension of this document. We make no pretense at having achieved either a definitive or a comprehensive product. We strongly encourage others to suggest better definitions of terms we have treated here, to propose definitions for terms we have listed but have not defined, or to bring forward other terms that you think belong in this glossary.

This interactive dimension of the glossary is especially important because of the diversity of this arena. Each of our conversations has underscored the fact that philanthropists bring a great variety of approaches and emphases to this work. This, of course, is one of the great strengths of the philanthropic field, but it also creates challenges for the kind of ongoing conversation we have been encouraging.

For many of the participants in the conversation, their work focuses on one particular term in this document, and they naturally approach the conversation with that term at the center of their attention. For some it is "democracy," for others "community democracy" or "civic engagement," or "civil society." Depending on which term is focal for you, the other terms tend to be viewed in relation to that key term. For Philanthropy Northwest, the focal phrase has been "community capacity." For that reason, we have chosen to view other key terms with special attention to how they help us understand philanthropy's role in building community capacity. We recognize that for many of our members and colleagues, another term in this glossary lies nearer the center of their work. We encourage you to rearrange and refine these definitions to make this working document even more relevant and helpful to your work.

Wherever appropriate, we have used the glossary as one means of linking to organizations or resources doing good work in this or closely related fields. Here again, we welcome suggestions about how to make the document more useful in those terms.

Core concepts

The term with which we have launched this discussion, and the hub that connects all the terms discussed here, is ***community capacity***. This phrase is intended to capture the complex of attributes that enable a place-based community to develop and implement solutions to public problems and pursue opportunities to improve community and individual well-being. We think of a community as having high capacity if it is generally able to address challenges or opportunities as they arise, bringing to bear either public or private resources as appropriate.

In the course of our discussions, we have occasionally used two other terms that overlap the concept of community capacity so substantially that they may sometimes serve as synonyms.

- The first of these is “***civic capacity***.” As we have used this term, it would include everything that contributes to community capacity. The difference is that civic capacity is a concept that may be applied, not only to local, place-based communities, but also to larger places like states, or even nations (or something in between like sub-continental regions or eco-regions.)
- The second very closely related term that we have used is “***community democracy***.” Peter Pennekamp has offered this definition of ***community democracy***: “*Grassroots engagement where people uncover, activate, and energize their community's own assets, take responsibility for their formal and informal decision making processes, and further their ability to work constructively with conflict and difference.*” This kind of engagement, for these purposes, would constitute a very substantial contribution to any community's capacity. As defined here, community democracy may be thought of as a particular, highly desirable and effective way of building and deploying community capacity.
- As used by Harry Boyte and George Mehaffy, the term “***civic agency***” combines elements of ***community capacity*** and ***community democracy***. In a 2008 [Concept paper](#) on “The Civic Agency Initiative,” Boyte and Mehaffy explained that “***civic agency*** involves capacities of communities and societies to work collaboratively across differences like partisan ideology, faith traditions, income, geography and ethnicity to address common challenges, solve problems, and create common goods. Civic agency requires individual skills, knowledge, and predispositions. Civic agency also involves questions of institutional design, particularly how to constitute groups and institutions for sustainable collective action.”

The context within which community capacity operates

In our discussions of community capacity, we have often used three terms that seem to identify key components of the context within which community capacity (or civic capacity or community democracy) operate.

- The first of those terms is “**civil society**”. There does not appear to be a standard, universally endorsed definition of civil society. In his book *Civil Society, Philanthropy and the Fate of the Commons*, Bruce Sievers does not attempt a single definition, but instead “draws upon the interconnectedness of a range of definitions” to identify seven key strands of civil society: *the common good, philanthropy, nonprofit and voluntary institutions, the rule of law, individual rights, free expression, and tolerance*. With that cluster of key concepts in mind, we might venture a more traditional definition, which clearly provides a context for the concept of community capacity. When the [BBC World Service](#) wanted to help both its reporters and its listeners understand the term, it offered this definition: “*A civil society is a public space between the state, the market and the ordinary household, in which people can debate and tackle action*”.
- The second key term providing context for community capacity is “**democracy**”. It is possible that the concept of community capacity would be meaningful in non-democratic societies, but in the American context, the concept of democracy surrounds and pervades any discussion of community capacity. As a place to start, we define democracy as “a form of government in which the people exercise power and determine the shared conditions of their lives, either directly or through representative institutions.” The [Kettering Foundation](#) provides a helpful bridge between democracy and the concept of community capacity: “*Our research suggests that when democracy is working as it should, three elements are aligned: citizens who are civically engaged and can make sound choices about their future; communities acting together to address common problems; and institutions with public legitimacy that contribute to strengthening the work of citizens.*”
- Finally, some would argue that the concepts of community or civic capacity or community democracy have little meaning except in the context of a lively appreciation for the value of **the commons**. In his book *Commonwealth*, Harry Boyte speaks of the commons as “*the collective goods and resources over which human communities serve as guardians and caretakers.*” [15] A more expansive definition is provided by the NGO [On the Commons](#): “*The commons is the essential form of wealth that we inherit or create together, and which must be shared in a sustainable and equitable way. Ranging from water to biodiversity to the Internet to community organizations, the commons provides the foundation of our social, cultural, and economic life.*”

Key features of community capacity

When we examine communities that are in fact “able to address challenges or opportunities as they arise,” we very often find certain community characteristics that contribute substantially to that capacity. Here are a few of them, with a brief definition of each:

- **Social capital** is an indispensable component of community capacity. In *Better Together*, Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein refer to social capital in terms of “*networks of relationship that weave individuals into groups and communities.*” [1] They distinguish between **bonding social capital**: “*networks [that] link people who are similar in crucial respects and tend to be inward-looking*” and **bridging social capital**: networks that “*encompass different types of people and tend to be outward-looking.*” [2]
- Another key feature of community capacity is **civic engagement** or **civic participation**. (These two terms are treated as being synonymous here.) There is increasing awareness that the effectiveness of communities is closely related to the breadth and depth of citizen engagement in the governing process. To the extent that we embrace the democratic insight that all of us are smarter than any of us, we can see that a community’s capacity to solve problems might well depend on how committed and effective that community is at involving a broad range of citizens in naming, framing and solving those problems. So, mechanisms for civic participation are important elements of community capacity.
- The term “civic engagement” is sometimes used in such a way that it could include all forms of public life, but for the purposes of this discussion within the field of philanthropy, we suggest using this very helpful snapshot of civic engagement from the affinity group [Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement](#) (PACE): “*First and foremost, democracy depends on participation of the people. Active civic engagement — financial giving, volunteering, voting, and organizing—is the foundation of our political system.*”
- Both social capital and civic engagement draw our attention to another term that is gaining steadily greater currency, and that bears directly on community capacity. The word **governance** reminds us that, while there are some problems or opportunities that a local *government* might address entirely on its own (like wastewater treatment or pothole repair), many of the most challenging or satisfying problems or opportunities are those that can only be effectively addressed by some combination of governmental, nonprofit or business entities. The [Policy Consensus Initiative](#) defines “governance” as “*the process by which public ends and means are identified, agreed upon, and pursued.*” PCI explains that governance “*is different than ‘government,’ which relates to the specific jurisdiction in which authority is exercised. ‘Governance’ is a broader term and encompasses both formal and informal systems of relationships and networks for decision making and problem solving.*” PCI’s particular interest is in what it calls “**collaborative governance**,” which it defines in terms of “*leaders engaging with all sectors—public, private, non-profit, citizens, and others—to develop effective, lasting solutions to public problems that go beyond what any sector could achieve on its own.*” The significance of this kind of governance to community capacity is obvious.

- Even aside from issues of governance, a **culture of collaboration** can be a key component of community capacity. In [Collaboration and Community](#), Scott London captures this concept under two slightly different titles: “**Civic collaboration** is a process of shared decision-making in which all the parties with a stake in a problem constructively explore their differences and develop a joint strategy for action. The **ethic of collaboration** is premised on the belief that politics does not have to be a zero-sum game where one party wins and one party loses, or where both sides settle for a compromise. If the right people are brought together in constructive ways and with the appropriate information they can not only create authentic visions and strategies for addressing their joint problems but also, in many cases, overcome their limited perspectives of what is possible.”
- Highly capable communities are usually **learning communities**. As [Harold Saunders](#) put it in a Kettering Foundation publication with that title, “*Communities learn as citizens interact around opportunities and problems that they together identify as affecting individual and collective interests. Citizens learn together in relationship. ... Each concrete step forward may produce learning that makes possible achievements that were not possible before. ... Power is the capacity to influence the course of events. Citizens can generate the power to accomplish their goals when they discover that they can be capable political actors. As they learn, the community learns.*”
- Another major component of community capacity is **leadership**, both within government and outside it. This is a very complex subject, of course, so we will focus on the kind of leadership that seems most relevant to building, maintaining or calling upon community capacity. In *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, Ron Heifetz invites us to “*imagine the differences in behavior when people operate with the idea that ‘leadership means influencing the community to follow the leader’s vision’ versus ‘leadership means influencing the community to face its problems.’*” [14] The second form of leadership is the one Heifetz examines, and it is the one most relevant to our topic of community capacity.

- Discussions of community capacity often include references to the concept of **agency**. We might roughly define a sense of **individual agency** as confidence in one's ability to play a constructive role in influencing decisions affecting one's circumstances. Clearly, community capacity will hinge substantially on many individuals in the community having a strong sense of individual agency. Beyond that lies the more subtle but perhaps even more important issue of **community agency**. Like individuals, communities can have more or less confidence in their ability to do what needs to be done. The concept is made more concrete in this description by Carol Lewis of a meeting in Missoula where Philanthropy Northwest board members gathered in 2010 to hear from local leaders:

Missoula civic leaders started their story with the ambitious clean-up of the Clark Fork River Basin, arguably one of the most polluted watersheds in the country.... This multi-year, multi-million dollar project demanded extraordinary levels of commitment from government, business, environmentalists, philanthropists, and civic leaders.... But what we learned that day went beyond the inspiring clean-up story. These leaders explained that the experience of successfully working together inspired them to take on new and bigger tasks. They had gotten to know each other in new ways and could capitalize on their new and deeper connections to define new shared visions for Missoula's future. They had discovered confidence in their "civic capacity" to change their community for the better.

- We often find that communities with high capacity also display a strong sense of **community identity**. This is an even more elusive concept than many of the others we have mentioned, but it is a significant enough feature to deserve our attention. While it would be hard to measure in quantitative terms, we know that communities vary in terms of what they would mean by statements like, "This is who we are;" "This is what we value;" "This is what makes us special;" "This is what we're good at." All of this comes into play for the Orton Family Foundation, whose "[Heart and Soul](#)" initiative starts from the assumption that a sense of community identity is a key component of community capacity:

There's something special about every town—the corner barbershop on Main Street, acres of wilderness, busy local shops, hard-working lands and people, or deep-rooted traditions. That character is why people love their towns. It's why they live there. The Heart and Soul Community Planning approach begins by asking as many residents as possible what makes their town special; why they choose to live there; and what makes it stand out from other communities. [A key question for the Foundation is]: "How does a community change while still holding on to its heart and soul, or its unique community identity?"

Related terms

In the course of our conversations, a number of other terms have appeared, some of them quite often. We have not defined these terms at this point, but we welcome your help in

- suggesting which terms should be defined to make this glossary more helpful;
- offering definitions of your own;
- suggesting other terms to add to this list:

resilience
civic health
relationships
public space
citizens (residents?)
 public-private partnerships
nonprofits
conveners
philanthropy
dialogue & deliberation
"dynamics of difference"
community assets
infrastructure
community organizing
community commons
catalyst
types of problems and solutions:
 1) technical
 2) adaptive
community
systems
public
complexity

alignment
convergence
core beliefs & values
community development
community engagement
community building
place-based
common good
public commons
public goods
diversity
association
accountability
good intentions
conversation
partners
intermediaries
evaluation
 metrics
 benchmarks
 feedback
 qualitative
consensus