Tapping into the Past, Present, and Future

Building Capacity for Water Quality Through Community Organizations

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BACKGROUND

This research **examines how community organizations peripherally related to water quality issues in the Red Cedar Watershed contribute to community capacity**.

Community capacity is the collection of attributes that define how a community functions and creates change**. Building community capacity can improve the effectiveness of efforts to address issues and enact positive change.**

"Increasingly, communities are forged less out of geographic propinquity than out of common interests or social activities that bring a group of individuals together over time." Thus, it is crucial to examine how community organizations can build community capacity through their **past, present, and future contributions** (Chaskin 2001).

Source: Banyai 2010

PAST

Organizations contribute **oral histories** from their membership, including stories of lake and community history and tested strategies for organizational longevity, navigation of changing conditions, and successful projects.

"They've done something right. They've been keeping her afloat for 89 years…so there's definitely things we can learn."

Land or financial donations allow individuals to contribute to causes they care about after their death, connecting us with communities from the past. These bequeathed gifts are a **testament to the sense of identity and commitment** members feel as part of an organization.

A **history of past successes and a long presence in a community** contribute to an organization's reputation and increase project effectiveness through the experience and networks built.

Protected land through easements or ownership by organizations connect us to resources from the past.

PRESENT

Participation fosters **a sense of connectedness** among individuals and between individuals and their environment, **leading people to identify themselves as stakeholders** in environmental issues.

"I think the biggest overlap is how people view the world that they live in…trying to get people to think in terms of 'these are complex systems that we influence.'"

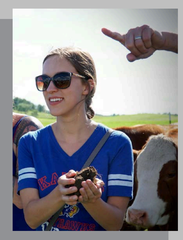
Organizations allow individuals to **feel a sense of belonging and create trust**. Meetings, events, work parties, banquets, etc., build solidarity that can extend beyond the membership. These events **create space for discussing information, asking questions, and learning new knowledge**.

"But at the end of the day, the guys and the gals that are there, it's camaraderie as much as it is the cause. I'm there for the cause but the camaraderie helps keep me there."

Community groups **foster enthusiasm** for causes and provide an outlet for passion projects where individuals feel motivated to stay involved because they are interested and care.

"All the people who stay involved, well they're enthusiastic about wildflowers and birds and insects…They especially like the satisfaction of coming back to a place where they've done some work and now it seems better."

FUTURE



Participation in organizations create a **set of shared goals and vision** for the future.

Land easements and ownership of protected land **preserve resources for future communities** to utilize.

Youth are a key element. Community organizations' engagement with youth builds capacity into future generations through **scholarships, education programming, and encouraging youth leadership.**

"They're the next ones coming through and if we can just get them on board now…"

Involvement at a young age can lead to the **formation of an identity that encompasses a sense of responsibility** to contribute to your community and **an ethic of care** for the environment. Community organizations allow members to demonstrate this in practice.

"I wanted my children to be involved…I think it's important for them to see the role modeling of giving back to your community, in whatever capacity."

"…to make sure that we are creating a generation of kids and people that care…that will also help sustain our work."

Fundraising **builds economic capital** for use in future projects.

Discussion and dissemination of information creates **political will that can influence future policy.**

"There's a lot of power in having a diverse group of people together."

METHODS

- **Reviews of published literature** and past REU research
- **Participant observation** of water quality monitoring; attending city, county, and club meetings
- **Semi-structured, in-depth interviews** with members of community organizations including, Red Cedar Basin Monitoring Group, Pheasants Forever - Red Cedar Chapter, West Wisconsin Land Trust, Dunn County 4-H, Wisconsin Farmer's Union, and The Prairie Enthusiasts
- **Analysis of qualitative data** for themes of how organizations contribute to community capacity

BARRIERS TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

"We as a movement are trying to think of ways to engage citizens. And that doesn't happen very easy."

- Organizations struggle with **how to best disseminate information** and spread the word about their mission and events.
- Obstacles that emerge when **trying to manage memberships** include
  - Fluctuating memberships due to seasonal residents (including students) or busy members
  - Aging memberships
  - Recruiting new members, particularly youth
  - Overworking core members
- Continued involvement of old members and hesitations for new members **concerned about time commitments** is a challenge.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Community organizations allow us to **draw on the past, present and future to build community capacity.**
- Growing and supporting community organizations can lead to **more civic engagement** and **increased community capacity** to enact positive change in the watershed.
- **Media and communications training** for leaders of community organizations can help increase their effectiveness.
- Supporting and **encouraging civic engagement and collaboration across groups can build capacity** to address water quality issues.

Historical photo courtesy of the Dunn County Historical Society

Banyai, Cindy Lyn. 2010. "Community Capacity Building and Local Policy: An Example from Pagudpud, the Philippines." *Asia Pacific World* 1 (2): 83–108. doi:10.3167lapw.2010010206.
Chaskin, Robert J. 2001. *Building Community Capacity*. New York, NY: Transaction Publishers.

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