



# A question of capacities? Community resilience and empowerment between assets, abilities and relationships



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## ABSTRACT

The empowerment and resilience of communities in rural contexts is often seen to be linked to their capacities – for example, organisational, infrastructural and personal capacity – and the types of capital – e.g., social, physical, human and financial – that the community can access. While the ‘community capital’ and ‘capacities’ perspectives overlap, they define community characteristics in slightly different ways, with different analytical categories at their disposal. Here, we loosely draw on the capacities perspective and supplement it in a grounded manner with aspects from the community capital literature, to analyse the development of a small rural, dispersed community in Scotland over the course of two years.

Our analysis is based on two sets of qualitative interviews with residents of the community and other relevant actors, conducted around an interval of two years, combined with observation of community events in the interim period. While at the beginning of the study, the community appeared a place where people were cautiously hopeful, with an asset transfer planned that was intended to support empowerment and resilience, the case unfolded – at least temporarily – as an ‘unsuccess story’, due to the failure of the asset transfer. Our analysis elucidates how organisational, infrastructural and personal capacities of the community interacted, and leads to three major findings. First, interactions between capitals and capacities are crucial to a comprehensive understanding of a community’s situation, but tend to be understudied. Second, capacities can not only be ‘low’, they can also be negative (thus not only neutral but outright destructive), and extremely hard to overcome through standard approaches to capacity building. And third, in our study case, ‘social capacities’ that emerged from people’s experiences of social interactions acted as powerful microstructures that constrained individuals’ abilities to engage in community action. To conclude, we discuss these findings in terms of their implications for community empowerment and resilience more broadly.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

Increasing the ‘vibrancy’, resilience and empowerment of local communities in rural contexts has become a key political issue in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2015a) and the wider UK, appearing as an objective in many government policies. This policy direction is seen as essential to halt rural depopulation, to maintain and enhance quality of life in rural areas, as well as to secure the provision of services. The Scottish Government is seeking to fulfil

this objective, not least through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and accompanying action plans. A cornerstone of the Community Empowerment Act is to enable both rural and urban communities to acquire assets, such as community centres and other public buildings, and to run them for and with the community. The passage of the Land Reform (Scotland) Acts of 2003 and 2016 was a significant step in the Scottish institutional framework, aiming to increase resilience and community empowerment through asset-based rural development (Shucksmith, 2010; Skerratt, 2011, 2013; Hoffman, 2013; McKee, 2015). However, such policy is uncritical in its assumption that communities are able to overcome barriers to their development through empowerment (Steiner and Markantoni, 2014). Furthermore, this policy drive can be seen to be embedded in a neoliberal agenda, which is in turn contested and criticised. For example, there are criticisms that it

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does not, as claimed, reduce state control, but that it instead exerts control in ways that puts the onus of delivery on individuals and organisations that are not necessarily equipped for the task (Herbert-Cheshire, 2000; MacKinnon, 2002; Ransome, 2011; Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011). MacKinnon and Derickson (2012) raise concerns that such neoliberal policy has uneven effects, with some communities disadvantaged by the lack of material resources, professional skills and social capital, which are therefore less able to fill-in the gaps created by reduced direct state support and service provision (Cox and Schmuecker, 2010; Fyfe, 2005 in MacKinnon and Derickson, 2012).

Within the broad academic literature on community action, where 'resilience' and 'empowerment' are discussed, we find a diversity of conceptualisations that explain how these critical properties emerge and are fostered. Highly comprehensive reviews and critiques of 'resilience' and 'empowerment' are provided by Skerratt (2013), Berkes and Ross (2013), and Mohan and Stokke (2000), amongst others, therefore it is not necessary to replicate their efforts. Here, we focus on those policy and academic discourses that, in understanding and explaining how communities come to be empowered and resilient, use substantive ideas such as 'community capacity' or 'capitals'. In particular, these constructs are utilised to assess and characterise the factors that help or hinder a community to become empowered and resilient. For example, the Scottish Community Empowerment Action Plan considers community capacity to be the vital "skills, confidence, networks and resources" necessary for empowerment (Scottish Government and COSLA, 2009: 11). Similarly, in the academic realm, and in relation to international development, the different forms of capitals and community capacities are regarded as useful to understand resilience, both at the household and community level (Norris et al., 2008; Callaghan and Colton, 2008; Cassidy and Barnes, 2012), and are seen as necessary (albeit not necessarily sufficient) pre-conditions of resilience (Magis, 2010). Here, we unpick the discourse on community capacities and capitals from a sociological perspective, to contribute to the academic debate around the use of such terms within the field of community<sup>1</sup> development. We empirically examine the roles that capacities and capitals play in the case of a small rural community that, at the beginning of the research process, was seeking to acquire a community asset for development purposes, but had failed to do so two years later.

## 1.2. Conceptual framework

The concept of 'community capacity' is widely used within the health, urban policy, regeneration and social development literature, and may be defined as: "the set of assets of strength that residents individually and collectively bring to the cause of improving local quality of life" (Easterling, 1998 in Labonte, 1999:430). Key factors among such community capacities are seen to include group ability, skills, knowledge, resources, leadership, participation, norms of trust and reciprocity, social networks, sense of community (including values and history), transparency, efficacy, critical reflection, and community 'power' (Goodman et al., 1998; Labonte, 1999; Laverack, 2001; Gibbon et al., 2002; Middlemiss and Parrish, 2010). These factors underpin the community's ability to identify and act on community concerns and effect positive change (Labonte and Laverack, 2001). Community

capacity is thus both a means and an end of community development (Laverack, 2006), and may be supported through so-called capacity building approaches (Barker, 2005). However, research also highlights that community capacity can be 'depleted' where community and individual resources are exhausted, and demands are unmanageable, with limited resources of time, energy and funding, leading to the failure of community projects (Simpson et al., 2003).

There appear to be many commonalities between the concept of 'community capacity' and the idea of 'community capital' (Labonte, 1999; Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000), and boundaries are, at times, blurred. Community capital can be understood much like household capital in the context of the sustainable livelihoods approach (Gutiérrez-Montes et al., 2009), but relates to the community as an analytical unit rather than to households or individuals. It can be seen to include natural, human, social, cultural, political, financial and built capital (Emery and Flora, 2006; Callaghan and Colton, 2008). However, whilst the term 'capacity' describes an ability and therefore something processual and dynamic (not unlike capabilities as defined by Nussbaum, 2011), going back to the original meaning of the term, community 'capitals' are stocks of assets, even where abstract and symbolic capital is concerned (Bourdieu, 1986) and their assessment therefore tends to be a 'stock take'.

Again, some scholars have shown conceptual and empirical links between these two sets of concepts (Bebbington, 1999), in particular the focus of both conceptual perspectives on strengths rather than needs or deficits (cf. Emery and Flora, 2006). Both sets of concepts lend themselves to a 'check-list' type of analysis that statically assesses a community against a list of different types of capitals or capacities (e.g., Sseguya et al., 2009; Ahmad et al., 2013), with a risk of simplistic conclusions that attribute failure of community processes to missing characteristics on the 'list'. However, we argue here that the usefulness of such conceptual frameworks depends on the way in which they are applied, and that both approaches, the capitals and the capacities lens, can enable dynamic, process-oriented analyses (e.g., Emery and Flora, 2006).

Here, we adopt the framework presented by Middlemiss and Parrish (2010) to organise our data, who suggest four types of community capacity that facilitate or, in their absence, hinder a community's ability to take on responsibility (Table 1).

We acknowledge considerable overlap between this and other frameworks (for example, Emery and Flora, 2006), but as we will see, there are also crucial areas relevant for community empowerment missing from this framework, and we will draw on notions of capital, in particular, social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), to elucidate these. Social capital has been defined in a range of contexts with varying nuances (Poortinga, 2012); here, based on the findings emerging from our analysis, we will concentrate on relationships within the study community, i.e., bonding social capital, and on the role that these relationships play at the collective level (Poortinga, 2012).

However, rather than to compare the strengths and weaknesses of the different frameworks, or to use them as a static framework to identify a lack in capital or capacity, we use these concepts as flexible analytical tools to examine community processes and dynamics. We recognise that such capacities, held by communities, can emerge from factors at different levels. Here, we do not explicitly analyse the influence of structures at the macro-level, determined by national policies and other factors external to the study region. Instead, we focus on capacities arising from structures at the meso-level, for example, the local authority<sup>2</sup> (organisational

<sup>1</sup> Note that this paper does not wish to raise further debate around definitions of community, although these continue to be live debates within Scottish land reform policy development at the time of writing. Here, we adopt the definition contained within the developing policy, i.e. that of community defined by geographical area (Scottish Government, 2015a,b), in accordance with Skerratt (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Scotland has 32 'local authorities', described by Hoffman (2013) as unitary county councils, which serve entire regions.

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