

**EXPLORING SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT TO CREATE
A FRAMEWORK FOR
COMMUNITY BUILDING**

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Abstract

Community building is emerging as an increasingly important intervention strategy for neighborhood revitalization efforts across the country. This article proposes a framework that models five components that the author argues comprise the community building process: resident engagement, agenda building, community organizing, community action, and communications and message development. The article is intended to make community building more comprehensible as a field of work and study and more replicable as an intervention strategy.

Introduction

Unlike other contributions to this volume, the discussion that follows does not address youth directly. It focuses, instead, on the fabric of community as the ecological backdrop for youth development and youth participation. In particular, our discussion focuses on community building as the foundation for community-empowered change.

The article is written in the belief that positive youth development is the responsibility of entire communities not just of parents and youth development professionals—and that the phrase community youth development refers to the positive engagement of parents, relatives, friends, neighbors and even passersby in creating the programs, opportunities and supportive neighborhood environments that young people need.

The question, however, is how. How can communities effectively organize and assert themselves to affect positive results for their children, their families and their neighborhoods? To address this question, we propose a framework that we believe will make community building more concrete and comprehensible as an approach to resident-driven community improvement. The framework is put forward in a “generic” form. The processes it outlines can be applied across a variety of community concerns whether matters of safety, housing, policing or traffic patterns. In the context of this volume however, readers are advised to consider both: how this framework might be applied to youth development as a community agenda item, and how youth might be involved as participants in, contributors to, or even as initiators of these processes.

Background

The American Heritage Dictionary defines “citizenship” as: the status of a citizen with its duties, rights and privileges. This paper is written to explore an emerging expression of those duties, rights and privileges as applied in the new change strategies being pursued by increasing numbers of neighborhoods and communities in the U.S. Responding to our decades old and largely failed history of narrowly designed, problem-focused, government sponsored social interventions, communities are increasingly exploring

improvement strategies that are more local, that are more comprehensive, and that encourage the involvement of community residents.

Community building is a term being used to describe this new approach. It is guided by two fundamental beliefs—that the community or neighborhood is the appropriate focus for revitalization efforts; and that enhancing the capacity of communities to engage and support residents is essential to success (Stone, 1996). Community building assumes that associations within a geographic area are important for community well-being; that bringing together a broad spectrum of stakeholders will provide a better understanding of problems; that sustainable solutions are based on knowing the facts, building on assets, and having a shared vision of improvement; and that an independent community-based capacity for analysis, planning and convening is essential for success (Walsh, 1997).

As such, this new “field” of work is supported by the best traditions of democracy and citizenship. The challenge, however, is figuring out how to exercise these beliefs. How does one enhance a community’s ability to engage its residents and sustain their involvement in an effective community improvement effort?

Currently, the approach is to meet communities on their own terms. Initiative sponsors start where the communities are—identifying, and then building upon, the assets and structures that are already there to build new and increased capacities for resident engagement, self-determination and change. This approach respects the organic and unpredictable nature of community processes. But to be successful in the long term, community building needs to establish a framework—a set of axioms, hypotheses or principles that can provide a common language and guide its actual practice.

In the following, we will present such a framework drawing heavily on notions of social capital and civic engagement. More precisely, we will argue: that community building must begin by building relationships between community residents and that the social capital embedded in those relationships can be used to improve the welfare of both residents and the community. Subsequently, we will demonstrate how these relationships can be

channeled for civic purposes and organized and sustained for community efficacy. The social capital construct is our starting point.

Social Capital: What is it? And how is it Created?

Robert Putnam's 1995 article, *Bowling Alone* catapulted the concept of social capital into the mainstream of popular language, public discourse and policy debate. The construct is enjoying immense popularity. It has high face validity. It embodies many of the attributes normally associated with American democracy including trust, and individual and group efficacy. It also has the benefit of political correctness and political expediency: the poor are not powerless to change their circumstances.

With all of this appeal, social capital is increasingly being used as an explanation for almost any positive outcome of individual socialization and socializing behavior. In fact, concern for its over application led Alenjandro Portes to protest that "the point is approaching at which social capital comes to be applied to so many events and in so many different contexts as to lose any distinct meaning (Portes, 1998)." It is important therefore that we clarify what we mean by the term.

Portes (1998) attributes the first systematic contemporary analysis of social capital to Pierre Bourdieu (1985) who defined the concept as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." This definition suggests that social capital has two parts: the relationships that allow individuals access to resources possessed by others, and the amount and quality of the resources themselves.

James Coleman and Robert Putnam are perhaps the two best-known proponents of social capital in the U.S. Coleman's work states, "Social capital is created when relations among people change in ways that facilitate action" (Colman, 1988). Putnam, by contrast, believes that "social capital refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam, 1995).

From these interpretations we can infer several things. The first is that social capital is an asset representing a collection of resources. The second inference is that these resources are embedded in relationships. And the third element is that social capital is directed and purposeful. We will combine these insights into a unifying definition: *Social capital is an asset representing actionable resources that are contained in, and accessible through, a system of relationships.*¹

Civic Engagement as a Precursor to Social Capital

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam explores the role of social capital through discussions of civic engagement in the U.S. As examples of civic engagement, he cites: voter turnout, reading the newspaper, participation in public forums such as PTAs, and in private organizations such as choral societies and bowling leagues. These examples suggest that, to qualify as civic engagement, behaviors neither have to involve others, be organized in any particular way, nor be directed at any particular action, goal or outcome. They can proceed as independent and autonomous behaviors of individuals. Indeed, for Putnam, civic engagement may merely mean the kind of external activity that "gets people off the living room couch."

This formulation suggests that civic engagement is not itself a form of social capital. It requires that, neither relationships, nor intent to act, be in evidence. For example, neither reading the paper nor voting presumes that social capital has been created. Indeed, Putnam's work suggests that social capital grows out of "networks" of this civic engagement—that engagement with others offers a forum for relationship building that facilitates access to social assets.

Civic engagement, then, is a precursor to social capital. We can think of it as analogous to static electricity—inert energy that has not yet been directed into current. Social capital, on the other hand, is created when

¹ We should be clear here that social capital is an asset that can also manifest itself in negative ways. Organized crime, street gangs and the Klu Klux Klan are examples.

this civic engagement is "excited" by some catalytic issue or event and directed toward a particular end or purpose.

Two assumptions are implicit here. The first is that, with regard to the well being of communities, civic engagement is additive across individuals and has positive cumulative impacts. This simply suggests that the welfare of communities increases with increases in the numbers of civically engaged members. The second assumption is that a community's social capital should also be expected to increase with increases in civic engagement. That is, the more inert energy a community has, the easier it may be to harness and deploy. Simply put, social capital presumes and depends upon individual civic engagement as a vehicle for building relationships, and, as it relates to individual and community welfare, the more the better.

Community Building as the New Foundation for Community Change

The community-building paradigm that has emerged in recent decades assumes an ability to harness the relationships and social capital, that result from this civic engagement, into a coherent collective and deploy them through a focused strategy. But these community-building dynamics do not occur on their own. They must be deliberately pursued. Indeed, the actual practice of community building focuses on enhancing the abilities of communities to function in these ways. Yet, because of the social, economic, political and structural differences between and among communities, the question of how to build these capacities through deliberate intervention and investment has so far eluded any general formulation. We will offer one below.

The Community-Building Framework presented here offers a model for how communities can increase and sustain the engagement of residents in a community change process. In doing so, it attempts to address two major questions. How do the concerns of individual residents rise to become foci for community-wide concern and action? And, when they do, how can community resources be marshaled in a sustainable effort to address them? The simple answer is that, the concerns of individual community members must somehow find there way into a "community conversation" so they can resonate with other

community members in a way that can gain their support and provoke them to action. Secondly, to effect change, community members and their allies must come together to act in a collective effort. Starting and maintaining these conversations and organizing the community for action are major community-building challenges.

The Beginnings Of A Framework

Our framework suggests that how this comes about is a very complex process. Indeed, as originally constructed, this framework may be too complex to have practical value to people in the field. In order to make it more comprehensible, we present the detailed framework in Figure 1 superimposing circles to represent five distinct clusters of activity that comprise its major components.

As an overview, Figure 1 suggests a "closed system" wherein civic engagement, is a function of the incentives, human capital, participation costs and hierarchical needs that condition individual "appetites" and preferences for the kinds of "external involvements" that we believe Putnam intends by the term "civic engagement."

The framework further suggests that this civic/external engagement can be converted (appropriated or intentionally organized) into social capital as a deliberate response to some catalyst. Civically engaged individuals may decide to come together in response to some issue, event, or need. Their success at coming together creates the social capital that is then directed toward some community action or activity, in an effort to achieve an outcome. Finally, the outcome, in turn, feeds back into the considerations that condition individual appetites for further civic engagement.

As such, the framework is an iterative process. The cycle shown in Figure 1 can be repeated again and again while focusing on a different community issue each time. A neighborhood's concern for police conduct, gang activities, traffic patterns or educational reform might each be a separate focus of this community building process. In the real world, however, it is likely that several neighborhood issues might be pursued simultaneously and

that this process may be occurring independently or in tandem in different parts of the same communities.

We also assume that this framework has cumulative effects on communities—that is, the strength of the community-building effort should increase with every successful iteration. Every positive story arising about residents' experiences and about successful actions should make it easier to organize and sustain community interest in subsequent community actions and activities. Examining Figure 1 cluster by cluster provides a more detailed understanding.

Cluster I: Resident Engagement

Rationale: Community residents have to become more engaged with each other in ways that will facilitate relationships and the exchange of information.

Cluster I is about resident engagement. It attempts to understand what determines whether individuals become externally active in their communities. Figure 1 hypothesizes that individual preferences for civic engagement are influenced by a combination of the incentives, human capital, participation costs, and hierarchical needs facing residents as follows:

Incentives. There are at least two aspects of the incentives issue to consider—one is the expected benefit from engagement. For instance, much of what we choose to do reflects some calculation of an expected return—some net direct benefit that warrants our investment of time and effort. Alternatively, there may be intrinsic interests where we may do something because it is the right thing to do; or because the value we see is in the doing of it and not in a consequent return.

Human Capital. Preferences for resident engagement can also be influenced by one's personal makeup, particularly by issues of self-esteem, confidence and perceptions that one has something of value to contribute.

Participation Costs. Two components of participation costs are worth noting. One relates to costs or "burden." Access to transportation, working hours, and childcare, as examples, can raise significant barriers to participation. The other component is the "opportunity cost" of alternative

uses of leisure time. This component is difficult to parse because of difficulties inherent in assessing valuations of leisure activities. For example, one person may find the opportunity to watch a soap opera on TV just as compelling as another's opportunity to attend a public hearing.

Hierarchical Needs. Finally, there is the issue of the priority people attach to civic involvement in the face of other needs. Residents who are more secure socially and financially may be better positioned to participate in community affairs than lower income residents who may be more preoccupied with issues of daily survival and family maintenance.

Our framework hypothesizes then that these four considerations are among the determinants of individual preferences for civic engagement. There are likely other factors such as upbringing, and parental histories and influences that contribute as well to these preferences.

So, one of the first goals of community building should be to invest in strategies that will encourage more social interaction, engagement and exchange in the neighborhood. Increases in engagement should create more opportunities for residents to form and strengthen relationships. Friendships, kinships and/or acquaintances based on other functional relationships might each be enhanced by more frequent interaction.

Cluster II: Agenda Building

Rationale: Residents must find or create forums for sharing and prioritizing their concerns and their aspirations for the community.

Cluster 2 focuses on the process by which matters important to individuals in the neighborhood become matters of concern for an entire community. Community sentiment is not an easy commodity to arouse. In fact, in our framework, we assume that, given a choice, most individuals, because of economies of time and effort, would prefer to resolve issues by themselves. Working in groups can be stressful because of its uncertainties, inefficiencies and demands for compromise. Consequently, we presume that an individual's first response and preferred course of action, given any catalytic event or issue, is to "go it alone" and just "take care of it." In developing our framework, it is important to speculate about the conditions

under which individuals would choose the less preferred option of involving others in addressing their concerns.

We believe this choice requires that two sets of threshold conditions be met. The first threshold is reached when an individual feels he or she is unlikely to be successful acting alone. This will occur if the person believes:

- that he or she lacks access—that the jurisdiction, or level of authority to which an appeal must be made, lies beyond his/her reach; or
- that he or she lacks clout—that the gravity/complexity of the issue in question is too large to be effected by his/her actions or appeals alone.

If this threshold is reached, the individual may choose to abandon the cause altogether.² Alternatively, he or she may decide join with others in an effort to affect the desired change. But for this joining option to take place, a second set of conditions must also hold, in particular:

- the catalytic event in question must be deemed significant by some critical mass of other community residents who also see it as beyond their abilities to resolve on their own;³ and,
- some person(s) or entity(ies) must come forward to assume the leadership that will provide a fulcrum for organizing and for channeling community energies and action.

Reaching this second threshold will put an individual's issues on the community agenda. So, a second major goal of community builders should be to foster ongoing opportunities for broad community conversations that will

² For simplicity's sake we do not show this option in Figure 1.

³ At a micro level of application, say an individual's need for intervention with a landlord, this second set of conditions may reduce themselves to convincing another third-party individual (to employ his/her resources) to intercede on one's behalf. At a more macro level, however, we are referring here to a need for community organizing. Either way the goal will be to amass an effective set of relationship resources to deploy.

permit the airing and prioritizing of resident concerns into a community agenda for change.

Cluster III: Community Organizing

Rationale: Residents must organize around trusted and capable leadership taking stock of their social capital and other assets.

Leadership is the first component of our organizing Cluster precisely because community expression needs a center around which to revolve. Someone or something must "stand point" as a receptacle for community sentiments, a fulcrum for community energies, and an interpreter and transmitter of community will. An immediate concern for the success of community building, then, is whether there is an ample supply of competent and approachable leadership around which the community can organize.

James S. Coleman suggested that communities can organize themselves and their resources in either of two ways: through intentional organizing and/or through "appropriable social organization" (Coleman, 1988). Appropriable social organization refers to organizing efforts that rely on the neighborhood's ability to adapt or redirect relationships that may already exist. As such, it raises questions about whether relationships that are grounded in one set of issues or circumstances can be directed to other ends and purposes. So, for instance, a community leader who wants the city to support a summer youth employment program, might attempt to enlist or "appropriate" the support of family and friends or the school PTA in that campaign.

Communities with a wealth of neighborhood groups, volunteer organizations and/or community-based organizations are presumed to have a strong latent capacity for this form of organizing. By contrast, many of the communities of concern to community builders may not. In these lesser-endowed communities, the energy for community-driven change must be intentionally organized. These intentional efforts force us to consider what it takes to strengthen the level of organization in places where relationships are weak or do not exist. It is a deliberate effort to bolster relationships and build capacity for effective action. The distinction between these two forms of

organizing then relates to the presence and to the strength of organizations and relationships in the community. In practice, we might expect most community-driven change efforts to involve some combination of both organizing types.

Cluster 3 highlights the resources that are available to a community once it is organized. These resources reflect the social capital contained in residents relationships as well as other community and organizational assets that can be marshaled and deployed in the community's behalf.

Cluster IV: Community Action

Residents must pool their assets into an action strategy and build bridges to other resources that will be needed for success.

Community building is about enhancing local capacities to act on the issues and concerns that affect community welfare. In this light, one can think of all of the framework's other clusters as processes that support Cluster IV. Indeed, our framework suggests that resident engagement, agenda building and organizing are indispensable components of community-empowered change. But ultimately, a community's success in improving the welfare of its resident families and children will depend on what it actually does and how well it does it. In Cluster IV we focus on issues of resources, planning and the execution of strategies.

Resources: Community building action strategies require attention to both the people and the institutional resources that may be needed. There are two aspects to the people resources question. One is the focus we highlighted earlier on engaging and organizing some critical mass of people to give momentum to a shared community change agenda. Another, however, is enlisting particular persons both within and outside the community who, by virtue of their positions, talent or expertise may be critical to success.

Much of a community's agenda will likely focus on securing a needed service, activity, facility of function. Institutional resources, particularly those of community-based organizations (CBOs), will be important because these institutions will act as vehicles for delivering these fought for benefits. As such, the framework's focus on harnessing the social capital

resources of residents should not preclude capacity-building efforts among local non-profits and entities. Community builders may want to support local nonprofits in their financial, organizational and systems development efforts. They might also seek to create more opportunities for residents to collaborate with CBOs as a means of establishing legitimacy and trust.

Planning and Execution: Perhaps most central question in any local change effort is: What can and will a community actually do? Community actions can range from a one-time showing of sentiments and solidarity to more sustained efforts at lobbying, authoring legislative proposals and/or launching political campaigns and more. The important point is that the action that is ultimately taken be driven by a strategy and guided by some kind of plan—preferably a plan characterized by clearly stated goals, a preferred set of outcomes, criteria for what constitutes success and some mechanism for accountability.

The effective execution of a community strategy boils down to accountability and competence. Do people do what they are supposed to do, and do they do it well? If so, we can assume that we have maximized our potential for impact, given the resources and strategies that were deployed. But good execution will not, by itself, assure success. Misaligned and/or ineffectual resources deployed through an ill-conceived plan will likely not produce positive results no matter how well the action is executed. So, investors in community-building efforts may wish to provide resources for planning and technical assistance to enhance the likelihood that action strategies will have desired impacts.

Cluster V: Communication and Message Development

Community builders will need to keep an open line of communications with residents and their community partners about all aspects of the change effort but particularly as it relates to developing and communicating positive messages about progress and results.

Communications are an integral part of any community-building effort. How an initiative describes itself, how it positions the issues, how it recruits participants, how it publicizes events, and how it disseminates

results, are all important to encouraging and maintaining resident energy and engagement. Skilful communication strategies can also help energize and engage funders, policy makers and other important audiences whose cooperation may be needed for community efforts to succeed.

Indeed, communications is important at every stage of community building. At a very basic level, sharing information about what's going on is a fundamental responsibility of the leadership. But communication about methods, operations and progress can also contribute to long-term learning and the accumulation of "best practices."

In Cluster V, however, the focus is specifically on communicating about outcomes. This narrower discussion is particularly important because of the pivotal connections between those outcomes, how they are received by residents, and the initiative's ability to maintain itself as a community-driven change effort. The focus here is on the potential for using communications strategies to nurture and sustain community-building momentum.

Indeed, sustainability is perhaps the most difficult challenge facing community-building initiatives—how to keep resident interest going so that they continue their engagement with the affairs of the neighborhood. Intuitively, we suspect that residents will continue being engaged as long as they can see some benefit both for themselves and for their neighborhoods. Being clear about these direct and neighborhood benefits, and communicating progress toward their attainment, is of critical importance to maintaining engagement. Our tendency however is often to neglect one in favor of the other.

Most of what we regard as outcomes from community-led movements consists of an issue-oriented scoreboard of wins and losses. From this perspective, the bottom is whether—and how well—an action worked. Substantive results are critically important to resident-driven initiatives, and rightly so. After all, the principal driver of this new paradigm is the promise that community building will bring greater success in dealing with persistent social problems than did earlier approaches. Developing and communicating messages about the success of an event can help maintain residents' commitment and keep the momentum going.

But equally important to sustainability may be the extent to which community building provides real and valued rewards to the individual residents who participate. For example, it can be argued that a primary goal of community building should be enhancing the *human* capital of residents—increasing their skills, abilities and confidence in dealing with the issues that effect their families and neighborhoods. Leadership training for example can be transformative in these regards. So, in addition to communicating “wins” on community issues, community-building initiatives should seek opportunities to tell stories about benefits to individual residents and to their personal development through participation.

The intent is to use communications strategies to sustain the community-building effort—to influence how residents assess their appetites for community engagement and encourage them to get involved. Achieving a broad recognition that members of the community have benefited personally and been successful in securing benefits for the neighborhood is the best marketing strategy for the initiative’s continuation.

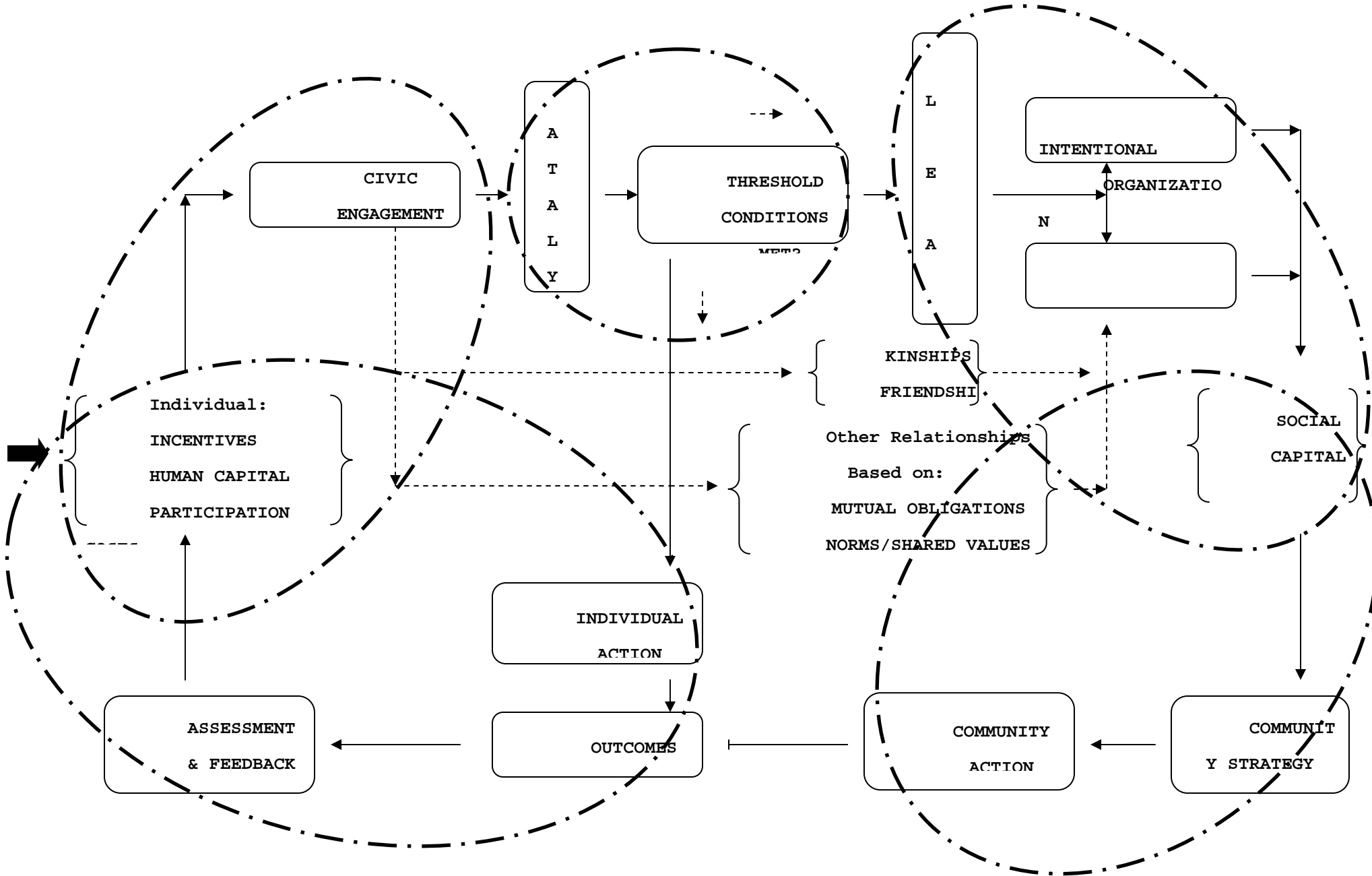
As such, our framework is indeed recursive—beginning with a concern for individual behaviors and the need encourage individual residents to become engaged with their communities and ending with strategies to affect those behaviors and offer further encouragement.

Conclusion

As an emerging expression of citizenship and American democracy, community building is becoming an increasingly popular approach to addressing social welfare in the U.S. Intuition tells us that comprehensive, locally focused interventions, that are informed and guided by the people they are intended to serve, may indeed hold more promise than earlier approaches. But to prove itself as a replicable intervention strategy, community building needs to become more disciplined. It needs to clarify the principles and processes that constitute its practice. And it needs to document them as practiced in communities in order to evolve as a field of work and study.

This paper is offered as fodder for that goal.

FIGURE 1
 COMMUNITY BUILDING PROCESS
 FRAMEWORK



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