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The Road to Recovery #6: Evaluating Virtual Strategies to Build Community Capacity and Resilience[1]

Cody Gusto, Colby Silvert, John Diaz, and Glenn Israel[2]

This sixth publication in the *Road to Recovery* series provides tips and strategies for Extension professionals interested in evaluating efforts to promote community capacity building and community resilience using virtual platforms.

Introduction

There is a growing interest among Extension professionals in facilitating community capacity building and community resilience as an effective disaster mitigation and response strategy (Fawcett et al., 2020; University of Wisconsin, 2020). Resilience, which has been defined and conceptualized differently across multiple disciplines, can be understood in community development and disaster response contexts as "the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events" (Koliou et al., 2018, p. 3; National Research Council, 2012, Summary). A related concept, community capacity building is broadly recognized as an essential precursor step in the promotion of community resilience, involving a community's acquisition, expansion, and retention of the skills, knowledge, tools, or equipment they may need to improve their own quality of life (Gusto et al., 2020; Mitrofanova, 2004).

While interest in these concepts preceded the COVID-19 outbreak, the pandemic has accelerated the need for collaborative engagement with local communities and stakeholder groups. The third publication in this series, *Facilitating Community Resilience for Effective Pandemic Response*, documents this emerging pivot toward community capacity building and highlights techniques and strategies professionals may use to engage stakeholders virtually, given physical distancing requirements that have affected traditional programming (Gusto et al., 2020). That document provided a series of recommendations for virtual community-capacity-building outreach, including the strategic use of platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Discord, Slack, etc. and the application of certain features within prominent videoconferencing services (e.g., Zoom, Skype) to facilitate participation in virtual stakeholder meeting. However, given there is little information to date on how to evaluate the impact and efficacy of these strategies, several barriers remain for Extension professionals interested in evaluating virtual community outreach. These barriers include the following:

- The inherent complexity and time-consuming nature of assessing conventionally applied community-capacity-building efforts (Hargreaves et al., 2020).
- The reality that many agents and their clientele experience low confidence and self-efficacy in their use of virtual platforms and digital technologies. Pandemic-related constraints have further contributed to growing interest in the concepts of digital natives and digital immigrants (Hoffmann et al., 2014; Prensky, 2009).

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2. Cody Gusto, graduate student; Colby Silvert, graduate assistant; John Diaz, assistant professor and Extension specialist; and Glenn Israel, professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

- A volume of techniques and tools that may be overwhelming for agents to learn and adopt without targeted guidance. This includes guidance on which platforms and methods to use for a given activity as well as guidance on how to rate and compare platforms based on metrics such as utility, accessibility, and feedback.
- A lack of preexisting data on clientele use preferences for technology-based tools and virtual platforms prevalence (i.e., use preferences for programming engagement through mobile phones, tablets, or computers, as well as for platforms, tools, and services).

Tips and Strategies

There is growing recognition of the importance in providing guidance for Extension professionals to evaluate community-capacity and resilience promotion efforts, as well as in assessing social impact in programming generally (Borron et al., 2019; Monaghan et al., 2018; Sattanno et al., 2017). There is perhaps less emphasis currently for evaluation of *virtual* capacity-building and resilience promotion efforts, which introduce the added complexities of navigating digital tools and platforms that both agents and clients may have limited experience with. Thankfully, there are select resources that can provide a starting point for agents. Offering guidance for general community-development work, Chapter 38 of the Community Toolbox includes ten sections introducing distinct methods agents can apply to evaluate comprehensive community-capacity-building initiatives. Many of these operations (e.g., collecting archival data and information) involve the navigation of online or virtual platforms (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.).

More relevant to disaster preparation, mitigation and response initiatives, the publication *Measuring Community Resilience Using Online Toolkits* provides an overview of a series of online toolkits designed to measure community resilience according to a variety of indicators and intended outcomes (Monaghan et al., 2018). While the publication—which assesses the usefulness of each toolkit relative to its area of focus (e.g., hurricane recovery) or intended audience (e.g., health planners)—highlights strategies and techniques that may be relevant to evaluating virtual capacity-building engagement during pandemic scenarios, certain toolkits may have limited transferability.

The resources introduced above feature a variety of techniques and operations for evaluating community capacity building. It is important to recognize that improving a community's social well-being involves accounting for the whole community system and not only its individual elements (McGovern, 2013; Wilkinson, 1991). While community capacity can be broadly understood as a measure of a community's development and activation of networked knowledge, skills, and resources, it has also been conceptualized as a cumulative measure of relationship and network building across five phases of community action: *initiation, organization, decision-making, resource acquisition,* and *implementation* (Israel et al., 2001; Wilkinson, 1991). These stages facilitate both addressing issues and bringing community members closer together for a more holistic effort (Brenan & Berardi, 2020). Two techniques in facilitating community capacity building salient across the five phases are mapping existing assets and identifying goals for action (Romanini, 2012). Both actions can be achieved and evaluated through virtual forums. Below, we provide tips, strategies, and considerations for the evaluation of virtual capacity-building efforts relevant for current and future pandemic scenarios. These recommendations provide a starting point for improving agents' confidence in evaluating virtual community outreach and should be supplemented by related resources.

A community asset is any resource (e.g., a person, a physical structure or place, a service) that can be used to improve the quality of community life (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d., Chapter 3, Section 8). Mapping existing assets, which may also be thought of as an assessment of a community's existing social capital (i.e., the resources and networks which produce value and enable trust and reciprocity in a community), involves a systematic collection of data. In addition to compiling information from a local Chamber of Commerce, a city or county government's website, or a community coalition's digital newsletter, agents can leverage data from existing organizations and coalition stakeholders directly through virtual meetings (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d., Chapter 3, Section 1). Agents should consider the following when assessing these virtual asset mapping strategies:

- If I am using existing third-party data (e.g., archival records) to identify community resources and assets, am I documenting both *process* measures (e.g., criteria used to determine relevant resources) and *outcome* measures (e.g., data produced based on identified indicators)?
- Have I created an event log to monitor and track asset-mapping progress? Is this log organized in such a way that it is easily shareable and understandable for stakeholders?

- For agents unfamiliar with the asset-mapping process, the following figure provides an example of a virtual asset map end-product (Simmons, 2018).

- Identifying goals and objectives for action involves transforming the needs of the community into specific, targeted, and actionable steps that community can take to bridge gaps and resolve issues (Romanini, 2012). During pandemic scenarios (and natural disaster scenarios broadly), these goals for action can build a community's capacity to be resilient and to respond to adverse impacts more effectively. Agents should consider the following when evaluating the goal-formation process:
  - Was the process of goal-setting and objective identification actionable and transparent?
    - While goals are generally defined as broad statements of intended outcomes, objectives are designed to be specific and measureable (Rossi, Lipsey & Freeman, 2004). You can assess objectives documented from a meeting using the SMART acronym to determine if set objectives are *specific, measurable, achievable, relevant*, and *time* bound (Civitella, 2017). If participants' objectives are not practical or measurable, they are less likely to lead to real actions, and facilitation should be adjusted to better structure objective formulation in future meetings. Additionally, participants should have access to objectives produced in their meeting (e.g., emailed in a postmeeting report or minutes or recording).
  - When hosting a virtual meeting with a community coalition or various stakeholder organizations, have I ensured that all participants are familiar with the platform, tool, or service prior to meeting? Is this tool conducive to the promotion of a collaborative environment?
    - Beyond videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom or Skype, agents may consider the integration of interactive services such as JamBoard, Mural, and Loomio to encourage participation and collaboration.
  - Have I provided stakeholder participants an opportunity to provide constructive feedback on the structure of the meetings and the accessibility of the platforms, tools, or services used?
    - Chapter 38, Section 4 of the Community Toolbox highlights techniques a facilitator can use to assess participant satisfaction with virtual meetings, planning sessions, and all other outreach and engagement services (Center for Community Health and Development, n.d.).

Conclusion

As addressed in the third publication in this series, Extension can provide critical facilitation support in disaster mitigation and response efforts by helping to build community capacity and localized resilience (Gusto et al., 2020). Given the already complex and time-consuming nature of standard community-capacity-building engagement, the forced mass transition to virtual platforms from the COVID-19 pandemic creates additional challenges for agents interested in assisting recovery and response efforts. As agents across the country are well aware, the pandemic has forced adaptations to the methods, strategies, and forums conventionally used to facilitate the interactive and participatory type of community engagement so critical to disaster response efforts. Due to social distancing guidelines, for example, physical gatherings such as face-to-face stakeholder coalition meetings or town-hall-style planning assemblies have not been possible. As agents have had to pivot toward the virtual delivery of capacity-building programming, they must also consider required changes on how they evaluate those efforts. As we have demonstrated in this publication, one of the most critical features across each stage of the community-capacity-building process is the presence of a highly interactive, participatory environment. Despite certain forced adaptations, we believe providing such an environment is still achievable (and evaluable) through virtual platforms, tools, and services. We hope the tips, strategies, and considerations offered here provide agents a useful starting point for evaluating virtual capacity-building efforts during unique and challenging times.

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Appendix: *The Road to Recovery* Series Overview

The COVID-19 pandemic created the need for this *Road to Recovery* series of EDIS publications. Six publications are included, covering topics to assist Extension professionals and State specialists in addressing client needs and evaluating techniques for virtual engagement. Brief summaries of each publication in the series are provided below.

The Road to Recovery #1: Introduction
Summarizes the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on Extension professionals' operations and presents necessary adaptations and key considerations to safely improve delivery and impact.

The Road to Recovery #2: Building Physical and Emotional Trust When Engaging with Extension Clientele
Provides information and recommendations to address emotional and physical trust gaps clientele may experience in the face of a pandemic by using intentional, strategic efforts when engaging in the field or via virtual platforms.

The Road to Recovery #3: Facilitating Community Resilience for Effective Pandemic Response
Considers challenges posed by the pandemic and the importance of community-led initiatives and provides alternative strategies for facilitating building resiliency, capacity, and social capital involving community stakeholders and clients.

The Road to Recovery #4: Evaluating Virtual Techniques to Reach Clientele and Promote Equity
Offers guidance on how to effectively assess which audiences are being reached through virtual engagement and which audiences may be "falling through the cracks;" includes information on leveraging social media and virtual platform analytics, applying audience segmentation, and using online surveys and polls.

The Road to Recovery #5: Self-Assessment of Virtual Facilitation to Build Trust
Provides information on how educators can self-assess their efforts to facilitate trust through remote learning and virtual engagement, especially important during a pandemic; considers users' concerns about cybersecurity and common anxieties, discomfort, and competency gaps using online platforms.

The Road to Recovery #6: Evaluating Virtual Strategies to Build Community Capacity and Resilience
Offers support for agents interested in evaluating their use of virtual strategies to promote participatory engagement and community capacity building; provides recommendations for agents to better assess whether virtual techniques improve users' perceptions of collective efficacy and community capacity during pandemic scenarios.