

# No More Howling at the Moon

## The West Virginia Community Collaborative: A Flexible Manufacturing Network for Social Capital?

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April 11, 1994

*The West Virginia Community Collaborative includes representatives of the Benedum Foundation, the Brushy Fork Institute of Berea College, the Center for Economic Options, the West Virginia Development Office, the West Virginia University Extension Service, the West Virginia Governor's Cabinet for Families and Children and the West Virginia Rural Development Council. All of these organizations are involved in leadership and community development in West Virginia. Together, they are actively exploring ways to enhance the effectiveness of their programs through improved communication and coordination.*

A cartoon from the New Yorker Magazine (S. Gross, 1991) shows a pack of wolves howling at the moon. A wolf at the back turns to another and says, "My question is: Are we making an impact?"

Poverty in Appalachia persists despite decades of intervention efforts and billions of dollars invested. There have been changes in the region, such as improved highway systems and better access to health care. Still, per capita income, employment and other measures of prosperity remain well below the national average. Although nearly every program intended to address these problems can point to some successes (at least anecdotally if not statistically), the big picture remains bleak. We might well ask: Are we making an impact, or are we just howling at the moon?

Robert D. Putnam, a Harvard University professor and author of *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, suggests that the key to creating prosperity, to making an impact, lies in the creation of *social capital*. According to Putnam,

*Social capital refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital.*

Putnam's twenty-five year study of regional governments in Italy revealed that the difference between regions that have prospered and those that have not is the quality and the intensity of citizen involvement in the life of their communities: "These communities did not become civic

simply because they were rich. The historical record strongly suggests precisely the opposite: They have become rich because they were civic." According to this understanding, we must create and increase social capital in Appalachia if we hope to build prosperity and truly make an impact on the region.

Social capital cannot be legislated into existence nor can it be poured in like financial capital. It must be built from the ground up. Putnam points out,

*Successful collaboration in one endeavor builds connections and trust—social assets that facilitate future collaboration in other, unrelated tasks. As with conventional capital, those who have social capital tend to accumulate more—them as has, gets. Social capital is what the social philosopher Albert O. Hirschman calls a "moral resource," that is, a resource whose supply increases rather than decreases through use and which (unlike physical capital) becomes depleted if not used.*

Citizens are more likely to become involved when they believe their involvement will make a difference; they are more likely to support the efforts of others if they have some basis for trusting the integrity of the effort; they are more likely to undertake new projects if they have seen projects succeed in the past. The reverse is equally true. Why attend public meetings if you think your voice will not be heard? Why vote if all politicians are seen as corrupt? Why get involved if nothing ever changes? The prospect of building social capital presents a "chicken-or-the-egg" dilemma: in the absence of social capital, how can it be created?

Every community has some store of social capital, some strong organizations, some individuals who have led successful efforts, some exemplary community projects. In communities with very little social capital, these positive examples are isolated—points of light in the darkness. In communities with a wealth of social capital, the organizations and the citizens who activate them overlap and intertwine to form an integrated network that encompasses the life of the community.

If we imagine a "civic continuum"—from communities with minimal social capital to those with active, involved citizenship—then there must be a breakover point where success begins to breed more success; where the number of people with positive experiences of civic involvement reaches critical mass; where the levels of trust, belief, and hope overcome the sense of powerlessness.

Intermediary organizations can help communities reach that breakover point where the civic interactions become self-sustaining. However, no single program or organization is likely to have enough impact to move a community through this transition if the community has very little social capital to begin with. Even very successful programs are likely to fade away when the money runs out, when the sponsoring organization turns its attention elsewhere, or when a key person withdraws. Communities with very little social capital are not able to sustain the effort themselves. However, a series of programs over a period of time can have a cumulative effect, raising the level of social capital to the point where outside initiatives are no longer required.

McDowell County, West Virginia, has high levels of poverty and unemployment, a nearly defunct coal-based economy, and has lost half its population since the 1940's. Even so, it provides examples of successful social capital creation. Numerous outside organizations have run community development programs there, including the Benedum Foundation, Brushy Fork Institute, the Center for Economic Options, the Black Mountain Improvement Association, the Highlander Center and the West Virginia Development Office. None of these can individually claim to have created a civic renaissance in the county, but collectively they have had an impact

that can be seen in terms of increased social capital. Many citizens have taken part in more than one of these programs. They bring others along to participate in subsequent projects. A host of community organizations now exist and network with one another; citizens turn out for public meetings; and participants from some of these programs are beginning to run for public office. Says one, "People didn't vote because they thought there was no one to vote for. Now we've registered forty new voters. Even if we don't win the election, we'll be at every city council meeting. We're concerned citizens—we want to know what's going on." In fact, they managed such a successful write-in campaign in one town that reform candidates were elected to replace the mayor and the entire city council.

The programs that have operated in McDowell County have not been coordinated with one another in any formal way. The cumulative effect has been fortunate, but not efficient. Organizations offering community development programs frequently know too little about other efforts, even those operating in the same community. They may find themselves competing for the time and energy of community volunteers, for funding, for meeting space, or even for media attention. Such competition runs counter to the kind of collaboration needed to create social capital.

To explore new ways to collaborate and to enhance their effectiveness, representatives of several organizations involved in leadership and community development work in West Virginia began to meet on a regular basis during the summer and fall of 1993 under the auspices of the Benedum Foundation. Calling itself the West Virginia Community Collaborative, this group seeks to enhance the kind of cumulative effect evident in McDowell County.

The rationale for this collaboration is grounded in several observations. First, none of the existing programs, by itself, is sufficient to the task of creating social capital on the scale needed for significant and lasting impact on the prosperity of communities. Second, although the essential principles guiding the programs are closely related, each program has a distinct value, reaching a somewhat different constituency or presenting a different focus. Thus, offering a range of programs is more effective than offering a single program more frequently. Third, there is a synergy to the effect of the various programs, so that the overall cumulative impact is greater than the sum of the effects of each of the programs. Finally, collaboration enhances the efficiency of all of the programs by enabling them to eliminate duplication of effort, share information about potential sites for future offerings of each program, and identify contacts and potential participants in communities where one of the programs has already operated.

By increasing the coordination of our efforts while retaining the diversity of our programs, the West Virginia Community Collaborative presents a new model for regional interaction among leadership and community development programs: a *flexible manufacturing network for social capital*. The notion of a flexible manufacturing network is borrowed from the private sector. According to C. Richard Hatch of the Manufacturing Network Project, "A network is a group of firms that cooperate in order to compete—that collaborate to achieve together what each cannot achieve alone." For example, a network might consist of several small manufacturers each of which makes components for a finished product that they jointly design and market.

Flexible manufacturing networks provide significant advantages. Small businesses can gain economies of scale through joint purchasing of materials, supplies and services. Small manufacturers can join together to bid on larger and more complex jobs than any of them could handle individually. Companies can establish training programs together to provide the training and retraining they need to keep up with new technology. Instead of competing for a slice of the pie, collective marketing efforts can create a bigger pie for everyone to share. What sets these networks apart from other types of business associations is the intentional decision of businesses to explore ways to work together, the willingness to do cooperatively some of the

things they had previously done alone or even competitively, and the establishment of some level of organization to facilitate their interaction.

Northern Italy, the same area where Putnam observed the benefits of the creation of social capital, provides some of the best examples of well-developed flexible manufacturing networks. The same kind of cooperation and interaction that builds social capital also fosters collaborative approaches to business. When these lessons are applied not only to communities, but to the work of community development programs, a flexible manufacturing network for social capital is a logical step.

As a flexible manufacturing network for social capital, the West Virginia Community Collaborative is just beginning to realize its potential. The benefits correlate to those found in private sector networks:

### **Marketing**

One of the most difficult elements of any community development program is recruiting participants. The Community Collaborative programs have been able to share participant lists and have encouraged participants to take part in other programs.

### **Market Research**

One of the first activities of the Community Collaborative was to identify ongoing training needed by previous participants from the various programs. This led to the design of a workshop on conflict resolution which was held in November, 1993. Forty-two people attended the day-long workshop which also included sessions on networking opportunities.

### **Joint Production**

The day-long workshop was jointly designed and promoted by the organizations participating in the Collaborative. Each sent fliers to its own mailing list. Community Collaborative members took responsibility for various portions of the workshop agenda. The shared tasks made the planning and execution of the workshop a reasonably simple operation for the Collaborative without overburdening any of the representatives.

### **Training**

The workshop on conflict resolution was a training opportunity for the Collaborative members as well as for the other participants. By pooling our resources we can create training opportunities more frequently.

One of the member organizations has developed substantial experience in training previous program participants to serve as facilitators for subsequent sessions. The Collaborative provides a rich field of opportunity for applying this approach among the programs.

### **Research and Development**

Community Collaborative members continue to share ideas, source materials, workshop techniques and session plans. This interaction helps keep the programs fresh, provides an opportunity to stay current on developments in the field and serves as a forum for ongoing examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the work.

While the immediate benefits of this collaboration are obvious, the long-term results will not be evident overnight. We are setting our sights high. It will not be enough to run successful programs, and to run them efficiently. We must ultimately be able to measure our success in terms of the creation of social capital. We must help communities reach the breakover point where the creation of social capital becomes self-perpetuating. We must see hope and the fruits of hope—citizen participation, entrepreneurship, and local development initiatives. We must begin to see changes in the measures of prosperity—employment, income and investment. Only then will we know that we are making an impact and not just howling at the moon.

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### **About Brushy Fork Institute**

Central Appalachia is an area rich in natural, cultural and human resources, but economic and social forces have led to the erosion of communities and a widespread sense of powerlessness. All too often, traditional power structures have served special interests and personal gain. To overcome these obstacles, local people must be empowered to change their own communities. Our future depends on effective, visionary leadership for the common good.

For over one hundred years, service to the people of Appalachia has been a primary mission of Berea College. The Brushy Fork Institute carries this commitment forward by working to develop strong leadership in the mountains. Working with both existing and emerging leaders, we draw on local understanding and vision to help communities build for tomorrow.

For more information, contact Brushy Fork Institute, CPO 2164 Berea College, Berea, KY 40404; (859) 985-3858; [www.berea.edu/brushyfork](http://www.berea.edu/brushyfork).