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Spiraling Up: Framing Rural Tourism Development within Community Capitals

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Spiraling Up: Framing Rural Tourism Development within Community Capitals

This presentation utilizes Emery and Flora's (2006) Community Capitals Framework (CCF) to illustrate how HandMade's tourism development efforts positively impacted multiple forms of community capital in rural communities. The CCF is a holistic system that encompasses several forms of capital including: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial, and built (Flora, Flora & Fey, 2004). The CCF approach recognizes the integrated way in which these capitals draw and build on each other to shape patterns of community development as well as entrepreneurial activity. In 2006, Emery and Flora observed a "spiraling up" pattern in rural settings, where a positive change in one capital yield positive impacts on others. The overall outcome was a ripple effect of achievement in the community. The purpose of this current research was to document the ripple effect of impacts of HandMade's development efforts and to determine whether they initiated the spiraling up pattern described by Emery and Flora (2006).

A collaborative plan was devised between HandMade's staff and the primary researcher, that qualitative data would be collected in seven towns across the region, each representing a different geographic context, level of tourism development, economy scale, proximity to markets, and longevity of relationship with HandMade. Using the Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, 12 current and previous staff of the organization were interviewed and 117 residents participated in focus groups across seven communities designed to document and "map" the ripple effect of impacts that HandMade had in the region. The AI approach is rooted in a system of positive change management and is comprised of four stages: Discovery, Dream, Design and Destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). In alignment with the use of AI participants were instructed that the interviews and focus groups would follow a positive tone and would be reflective. Rather than focusing on future plans and community "visions," the session would consider the impacts that the organization has made and the reasons why the organization has been successful. During the interviews and focus groups, participants were encouraged to think about how the CCF might apply to their responses. In most instances, participants identified one or more capitals that related to the impacts of HandMade's presence.

All of the focus groups and the interviews were audio-taped. Transcriptions were made in two ways: through a drawing software program that creates flow charts, and verbally by hand into Microsoft Word. The flowcharts depicted the primary, secondary, and tertiary effects of HandMade's efforts whose effects were categorized into one or more of the seven capitals. The effects, the capitals, and the flowcharts were verified by the community participants through a second visit to the communities. Corrections, additions, and deletions to the original flowcharts and tables were made by many of the original interviewees in working sessions around a large table (Please see figure 1 for an example of a final 'flow chart.'). The data were also subjected to content analysis which used the CCF as a coding framework to organize evidence of community capital impacts in HandMade's work. This approach allows for the use of quotes from the interviews and focus groups to illustrate the "spiraling up" phenomenon observed in these rural communities.

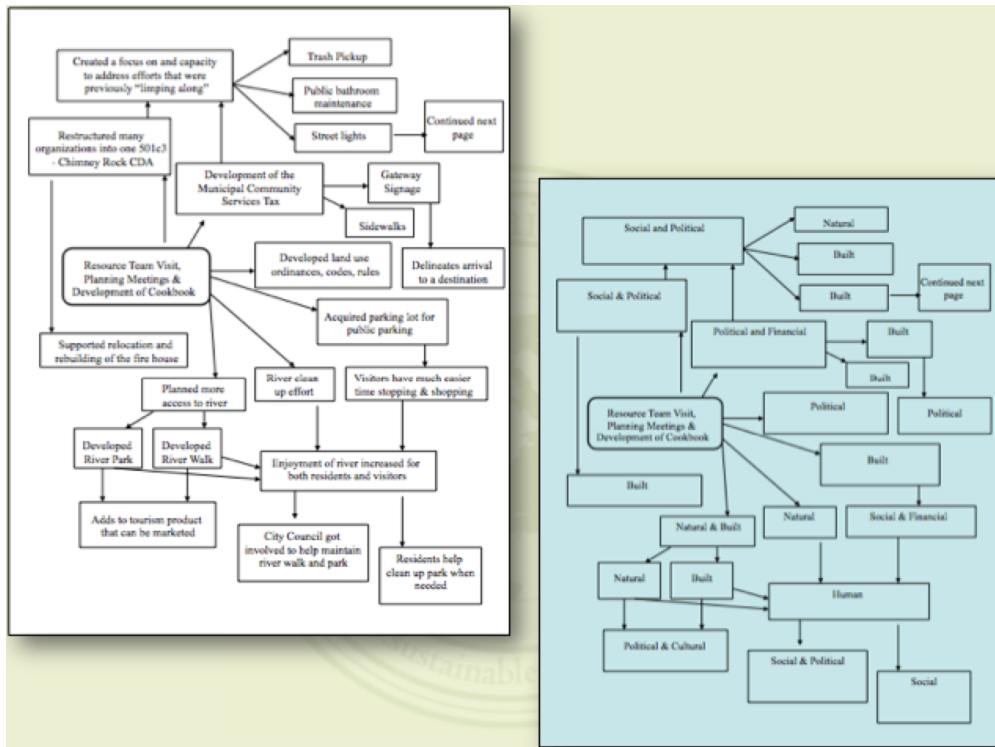


Figure 1. Example of flow chart completed and confirmed by participants

Analysis and Findings

While multiple themes arose, this presentation focuses on the effects of the very earliest efforts of HandMade that laid the groundwork for all of their other programs: The Awakening, The Legitimacy of Craft, and Visioning-Planning-Charettes. It is valuable to explore how HandMade’s success was initiated as this reveals the foundational elements which shaped and supported HandMade’s tourism development projects in rural communities.

The Awakening - Respondents credited HandMade for creating awareness among residents regarding the magnitude of the demographic and economic changes occurring within their western North Carolina region. It was also reported that HandMade created an “awakening” which helped residents realize they would need to collectively direct their own economic survival. This awareness and subsequent action initiated by HandMade illustrates the ripple effects of galvanizing human, social, and political capital within a community. Specifically the respondents mentioned that HandMade’s activities acted as the catalyst which brought members of the community together, led residents in visioning their community’s future, and helped organize plans to achieve such visions. Long before any physical changes were made, funding was received, and visitors were attracted the confidence, motivation, esprit de corps, commitment and enthusiasm of residents (Human Capital) were impacted, followed by a collective sense of focus, self-efficacy, organization, and bonding (Human & Social Capitals). As the towns began to initiate small, visible, and uncontroversial projects their individual and collective confidence and excitement grew, which spurred them to take on additional and larger projects. The towns changed physically and aesthetically, (Built, Natural & Cultural Capitals) which provided a setting for the other capitals to grow. In this way, HandMade

created a total environment that supported tradition craft, tourism, and jobs from within each rural community.

The Legitimacy of Craft - HandMade published *The Economic Impact of Craft* in 1995, a report which attributed \$122 million of direct economic impacts to HandMade's efforts in Western North Carolina. Participants noted that the report was used by other arts agencies to influence policy change, which suggests the report served as an manifestation of Political Capital. That same year HandMade released its first guidebook, *The Craft Heritage Trails of Western North Carolina*, designed to draw visitors to rural mountain communities where they could discover artists and their craft within their source of inspiration. Prior to the creation of the guidebook, HandMade staff invested in local Political Capital by hosting meetings in dozens of towns which brought together artists, education, economic development and business, farmers, elected officials, faith-based and other community leaders to explore the feasibility of a regional, homegrown craft-based initiative designed to increase revenue to artists and to the community. These meetings increased Social Capital. The meetings also resulted in an increased awareness of and responsiveness to regional community and economic needs among local and state agencies (Human & Political Capitals). Collectively, the planning meetings and subsequent publication of the guidebook as well as the release of the report resulted in increased self-esteem (Human Capital) and sense of unity (Social Capital) among local artists. Furthermore the public affirmation of their work gave them a stronger voice in the community (Political Capital).

Visioning, Planning, Charettes - The support of community development organizations within the region's towns was major component of HandMade's efforts. These organizations were designed to allow for a locally controlled and sustained means of obtaining outside resources for community development projects. After gaining 501c3 status, a community development organization was eligible to receive grants (Political & Financial Capitals). HandMade provided tips for running the organization (Social and Human Capitals), and made introductions to potential funders (Political Capital). HandMade also helped the local organizations create a strategic plan and computer-generated charettes, which documented and illustrated the potential development for each community. This process "turned on the switch" for action among local residents (Human Capital). The plans and charettes demonstrated the magnitude of resources needed to revitalize the town but also imbued residents with the confidence and knowledge to initiate changes in their community (Human & Political Capital). The original plans are still referred to and used as guidelines for other plans.

Conclusion

As noted by Emery and Flora (2006) this investment led to positive impacts in other forms of community capital, namely Social and Political. First, a sense of awareness was stirred and awakened among town residents, which came with it a call to action (Human Capital). People's vision was solidified and unified, and their individual and collective will to affect change was strengthened (Political Capital). As the momentum grew, the contribution of individuals and communities to the collective good intensified, and residents felt empowered to direct the destiny of the region (Social Capital). This presentation will demonstrate the evidence of this "spiraling up" found within interviews and focus groups conducted with those impacted by HandMade's efforts.

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- Emery, M. F. & Flora, C. (2006). Spiraling-Up: Mapping Community Transformation with Community Capitals Framework. *Journal of the Community Development Society*, 37 (1), 19-35.
- Flora, C., Flora, J. & Fey, S. F. (2004). *Rural Communities: Legacy and Change (2nd Edition)*. Boulder, CO.: Westview Press.