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## ►► Well-Woven or Frayed? Community Ties Across Saskatchewan

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### ►► Introduction: Relationships and Trust are Critical for Prosperity

One of the most pressing issues we have in the Province of Saskatchewan is to increase the number and quality of our connections with each other. In an August 2024 *JSGS Policy Brief* "[Reviving Civil Society is Key to Good Government](#)," Dale Eisler challenged us to consider the role that social capital plays in delivering the kinds of growth and sense of community that Saskatchewan needs. In simple terms, physical capital is constituted by the raw resources, tools and machinery needed to produce things, while human capital is reflected in the skills people have to make use of those resources. Social capital adds another facet – the dynamics of our relationships and the degree of trust that exists in those relationships. As Eisler notes, these relationships can be strengthened (bonding capital) and extended (bridging capital).

From a policy standpoint, the degree of trust we place in institutions reflects our confidence in things like health care, elected governments, police services, and education. Eisler reminds us that this public or institutional trust has been declining in Canada and with it, the effectiveness and value we place on the common goods that they represent.

One of the reasons this is particularly important for Saskatchewan is the role that raw population growth may or may not play in our future. We are tempted to think that huge public investments in things like transportation infrastructure or education, or improved healthcare or attraction of a major industry will save the day. These investments are, doubtless, important. They are not, however, sufficient and where they take on an "all or nothing" aura, it may lead to further erosion of public trust when they fail or fail to materialize.

## ► Consider Three Concrete Examples

There is a tendency to pay less attention to social capital and social resources because they are less tangible than physical assets, are more difficult to measure, and seem less manageable in many ways. In light of that, I would like to ground what follows through some direct examples to strengthen the case for paying closer attention to social capital dynamics in Saskatchewan communities.

In the first example, University of Chicago business professor Sean Safford studied two rust-belt cities in the U.S. that suffered serious decline after changes in the steel industry greatly reduced their primary industry. The two geographically separated cities were of similar size and composition. One city had a tight network of civic organizations and institutions led by an overlapping group of leaders who knew each other well and worked closely together. The other city had a more diverse and loosely connected network of leaders, organizations and institutions. The ties were not as tight, the relationships less intense, and the gaps more notable. Safford began by assuming that the city with the very strong and tightly knit leaders would respond more effectively to the reinvention required by the steel industry crisis.

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What he learned was that the opposite was true in the years following the crisis. His examination of that counterintuitive result revealed that during times of change, if there was too much bonding capital (strong ties among a well-known network of people), the network would be resistant to change and hence to the innovation needed to find a new economic pathway. The city with the more loosely connected network of organizations and leaders had a greater appetite for novelty, change, and innovation which led to more successful navigation of the post-industry collapse (Safford, 2009).

Clearly, deliberations about social capital need to consider context and the types of social capital present. We need relational ties, rooted in trust in order to work well together, to pursue some facet of the common good. But in seasons of change such as depopulation of rural communities, growth of cities and towns, or economic restructuring, fostering ties beyond the usual networks can be critical. We live in a time when the trend is that most of us have fewer and more intense relationships – we gravitate to a tight, close core. This provides the belonging and continuity we need but can foster

extreme or exclusive views and habits of thought – high bonding capital can thus come at the expense of the bridging capital which is a source of innovation and growth.

In the second example, Australian sociologist Andrew Woodhouse studied two small, rural, agricultural communities to compare their respective economic development over time. As with the cities above, these two rural communities were very similar to each other except that one community had a notably higher level of grassroots interactions than the other. People in the connected community would spend more time talking with each other, sharing things, and participating in group activities. Dr. Woodhouse was interested to see how that would impact economic development over time. His research concluded that there is a causal link between higher social capital and greater economic growth:

“... both bonding and bridging social capital will foster the development of engaged communities and this is of crucial importance in facilitating enhanced economic development outcomes within the context of a small regional community.” (Woodhouse, 2006)

This is of particular interest to us for two reasons. First, the interactions of bonding and bridging social capital are tied to local conditions. The presence of both types of social capital is very important and can contribute to new opportunities where there is positive creative tension between them. Too much of either, whether in cities or rural areas, can make adapting to change (change as either an opportunity or a threat) much more difficult.

The third example stems from another economic development project where the goal was to build local economic capacity by deliberately increasing social capital through relationship building. June Holly and Valdis Krebs (Krebs & Holley, 2004) used social network mapping to determine a baseline of relational networks in an economically depressed area of the Appalachians (Athens, Ohio). After years of fostering shared food preparation, marketing, and business support aimed at linking low-level food producers to each other in order to cooperate on food preparation equipment and marketing, a marked economic increase was one result. Although the food producers initially knew each other, cooperation was minimal and collaboration rare. After the strengthening of relational and business ties (enhancing the bridging capital to include more bonding capital) higher value returns on their inputs were realized.

Underlying these and other examples of social capital development is the principle that physical capital (things) and human capital (skills) are nearly powerless to produce significant benefit when severed from social capital (relational connections). Examined from the vantage point of parent and child, a weak relationship means that what the parent knows and can do (skills) will not be transmitted to the child just because they happen to share the same home or living space:

“Even if adults are physically present, there is a lack of social capital in the family if there are not strong relations between children and parents. The lack of strong relations can result from the child’s embeddedness in a youth community, from the parents’ embedded-

ness in relationships with other adults that do not cross generations, or from other sources. Whatever the source, it means that whatever human capital exists in the parents, the child does not profit from it because the social capital is missing.” (Coleman, 1988)

The core principle goes well beyond parent and child. We need relational connections and trust to realize the full benefit of skills and resources. Social capital is like the can opener that allows us to access the good that is locked inside the can – without it we may starve amid plenty, unable to activate the value that is nearby. Many economic and community development aspirations are based on someone from somewhere else coming in and doing something big. What exists all around us, however, are a range of significant benefits that will only be unlocked as we find ways to strengthen personal, organizational and institutional ties.

Trust is the operative dynamic in social capital, so any decline or change is of paramount importance for people, organizations, and societies. For Saskatchewan, there are clear implications that are worth examining.

## ►► The Local is Ground Zero for Social Capital

The place where trust and relationships matter the most is in our local communities among neighbours, businesses, community groups and the workplaces that occupy the vast majority of our time. Building on Eisler’s earlier work that pointed out changing levels of trust in Canada, we need to be unrelenting in understanding how social capital is changing right around us.

We need to work on developing our own ability to track changes in trust and connectivity over time in our neighbourhoods, communities, villages, towns, and cities. Trust and relationships are built directly and locally but we have tended to measure the effect provincially or nationally. Even if social capital could be measured for the City of Regina, it may not be of much use to your particular sector, community or group. Instead, what is needed is a way to take stock of social capital at our local and lived levels of life, the scales at which you and I are capable of taking individual action.

Across Saskatchewan there is a critical opportunity to refocus what we know and apply it in a more granular way. One facet of this is to improve our understanding of our local civil society. It is sometimes called the social sector and includes the delivery of an actual service, support or opportunity to individuals. That delivery happens outside of a for-profit or government agency. Attending to the immediate needs of individuals and their relationships are the irreducible front-edge of our communities and common lives, the capillaries of the social goods circulatory system. Having a clear, local description of how these realities are changing is very much needed. Changes in these local dynamics signify changes in social capital at a community level. Many communities do not have a consistent line of sight arising from what is available to them – they know how well their community is doing within their line of sight but may lack the tools to see the connections to wider trends.

## ►► Community Knowledge Integrated with Formal Data is Valuable

Although charitable, not-for-profit and other kinds of data are collected systematically, most of that data is annual at best. Annual data gives us broad trends but won’t help us address a particular organization that may be experiencing financial difficulties in a given month. Day-to-day operations and annual data collection are two different kinds of information.

Community knowledge operates out of the many ways in which we help and support each other that do not get officially recorded in forms. Canada has instruments like the General Social Survey which focus on different themes, such as trust or volunteering. That data, however, may only be collected every few years at best. This is useful for understanding larger patterns in trust and volunteering but it doesn’t tell us nearly enough about what might be happening in our part of the city, in our village or neighbourhood or on our block.

Life, however, is lived locally. A winter storm may elicit shared snow removal, checking in on a neighbour, helping someone get to work or get their vehicle unstuck, or putting out the garbage or recycling for someone. Sickness in a nearby home or among our friends may trigger the casserole committee. If we only rely on large-scale systematic data, these things go unseen.

Important shifts in communities, however, can happen locally. Increases, decreases or steady patterns all tell us something about how people are responding to each other and to the circumstances of their lives. Just as a road trip requires a larger scale, overall plan as well as a specific set of decisions while driving, so our attention to changes in our communities requires an understanding of both large-scale (and slower) patterns and very fine-grained (and faster) local conditions. The greatest benefit is to integrate different scales of understanding so that communities can respond to the faster, smaller challenges or opportunities while also gaining insight about larger, slower trends that may impact them over time.

For example, individuals are vital for volunteering, leading, and working to maintain and develop our community social infrastructure. People doing that work or living in the community have some sense of how that is going, but often there isn’t a consistent way to capture that insight and feed it into our community deliberations. We use our own sense of things to try to fill that in. An elected counsellor at a meeting might claim that people want or don’t want something but most of the time that judgement is based on very loose and informal impressions of things or the feedback of a few people in that person’s network. People are the most advanced social feedback means that we have. Linking our human insight to our democratic and municipal processes in Saskatchewan would enable us to deepen connections, collaborate more fully, and practice the art of shared life more productively.



## ►► Scale Matters for Social Capital

Generally, the larger an institution, the slower it is to change. One person can make a decision about lunch quickly. Put twenty people together with the task of finding a place to eat and the time-span will lengthen considerably. Social structures, and social capital as part of those structures, changes at different rates depending on size, and the stage of life of the organization or institution. Some attitudes, ideas, and convictions will persist over long periods of time, others will change very quickly.

Dale Eisler notes that politics in Saskatchewan can be, in part, described by cycles of populism that start as grassroots movements, spread, gain power and institutional presence, before being challenged by a variant populism that follows a similar cycle. (Eisler, 2022) One implication is that we can't use the same ways of measuring or thinking at all these different scales. The means of collecting data for Statistics Canada may not be suitable for the community of Milestone for many reasons. Detecting changes in social capital needs to fit with the dynamics of a community – how big is it, are the dynamics happening over year or months or days. Finding ways to connect insight with the time and size dynamics is essential for effectiveness.

Organizations, like people, also experience stages of life with distinct features that emerge or recede over time. They are in particular places so geography can be important. They represent some kind of good for the community but also limits and in some cases can become impediments to needed changes as happened in the example cited about the tight knit city failing to adapt. Anchor institutions may have been around a long time and may remain vital. Others can stagnate and falter. The long-standing organizations and structures (Regina Hospitals Foundation, Telemiracle, etc.) are like the coral reef that provide secondary supports for a range of other smaller organizations. We need to learn and dialogue about these stable structures to both preserve and improve them.

## ►► Practical Policy Responses

In conclusion, there is a range of direct policy implications that can make a positive impact on social capital development for our communities at all scales. It is essential that we persistently experiment in a forward direction to find out what approach to social capital development works best in our community (Friesen, 2013). There can be no return to a past era but there are ways to reweave the personal, organizational and institutional relationships needed for life today.

**1. Events, programs, projects and political approaches that increase our connections** must be a key priority. Growing the population of a community while failing to enrich relational connections will not lead to flourishing.

*Example: Conduct a simple review to determine how many face-to-face meeting opportunities people have in your community in a*

*month – where, when, type, frequency. Do that same in six months or a year to see if there is a change.*

**2. Individuals can't carry all the relational freight** and need core familial ties in addition to participation in informal groups, formal groups, organizations, charities, and key community institutions. Getting an accurate picture of the state of social capital is vital, and we do it quite naturally with economic development. Social capital is integrally linked to economic development and needs formal reporting, investment, and monitoring.

*Example: Is there anyone or any group that is tasked with paying attention to the social infrastructure of your community? Does anyone regularly study, report on, or update council on social capital changes in your community?*

**3. Extend greater latitude for resource allocation** to local level and community processes. This will serve to both improve trust in larger business and government institutions and grow local capacities to dialogue, partner, and take ownership of local needs.

*Example: Provincial and Federal Governments need to grow in their understanding of local realities and how greater funding autonomy for their programs is essential in responding to those local needs. Regularly reporting to Provincial and Federal representatives on changes in the charitable sector can increase visibility and understanding.*

**4. Support data and research** strategies so that formal research can be enriched by people at local levels where their specific knowledge can be fine-tuned in ways that make sense to them.

*Example: Development of new institutional structures like a Chamber of Registered Charities working alongside the Chamber of Commerce can generate mutual benefits by providing a context for bridging social capital to take place. Civil society entities like charities are not a luxury – quality of life in our communities and economic competitiveness depend on them.*

**5. Increase our understanding of the dynamics** that allow social capital to grow in the context of human capital (skills) and the businesses and communities that depend on those skills. One anchor study showed that improving the school participation in children only gained ground when the parents were provided literacy and learning opportunities themselves (Hanifan, 1916). That lesson is still being learned. Enhancing and expanding existing groups and organizations is far more efficient than starting them from scratch.

*Example: Make use of schools and community associations to build relationships between and among families and informal networks of interest including arts, religious, hobby and service networks.*

**6. Improve trust in the charitable and not-for-profit sector** by engaging with their leadership to foster greater transparency and accountability on local benefits. One means of doing so was suggested by Mark Blumberg in the form of four questions that charities could answer voluntarily and which would lead to increased local trust and increased public support (Blumberg, 2020):

- i. Did any officer, director, trustee, or key employee have a family relationship or a business relationship with any other officer, director, trustee, or key employee?
- ii. Did the organization become aware during the year of a material diversion of the organization's assets?
- iii. Did the process for determining compensation of the following persons include a review and approval by independent persons, comparability data, and contemporaneous substantiation of the deliberation and decision?
- iv. Did the organization maintain any donor advised funds or any similar funds or accounts where donors have the right to provide advice on the distribution or investment of amounts in such funds or accounts?

*Example: Local charities could consider these kinds of questions as a framework for updating local councils as well as Provincial and Federal representatives. Submission of a simple, regular report or update opens up a pathway for discussion and learning. This can be done without being required or mandated.*



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