

What is capacity and how can we build it?

One of the reasons “capacity” is one of the key challenges for Aboriginal rights and participation in the forest sector is because the concept encompasses so much. While some use the word to refer mainly to needs for training and education, others use it to evoke a comprehensive suite of initiatives at many different levels in the social system. Still others refer primarily to the basic need for fiscal resources to fund whatever activities one might contemplate.

On the other hand, researchers such as Beckley and others (2002) emphasize that building capacity involves more than simply increasing the resources available to a community or organization: Even more important is understanding how a community can effectively *mobilise* its varied resources.

Another important distinction to make is the difference between *individual* capacity and *collective* capacity (communities, organizations, etc.). It is possible to train and educate an individual for work in the forest sector, but for that person to leave the community or take employment in another sector, thus producing little impact on the community level. Therefore, any capacity building initiative should clearly define whose capacity is to be built. For example, the Aboriginal Capacity Working Group of the National Forest Strategy, 2003-2008, has identified collective capacity as the ultimate goal, while building individual human resources, coupled with efforts in other areas, is a key means of influencing collective capacity.

General definition of capacity

Kusel (1996: 396) gives the following short definition of community capacity: “The collective ability of residents in a community to respond to external and internal stresses, to create and take advantage of opportunities and to meet the needs of residents.” Countless variants on this basic definition can be found in the literature. For example, the 2005 Regional Capacity Building Conference, hosted by the Ktunaxa/Kinibasket Tribal Council, concluded that, “Capacity building is a process through which people and governments individually and collectively acquire the personal and organizational resources to realize their socio-economic and political aspirations, and to effectively manage change to meet existing and future responsibilities.” Gordon and CPPC (1997) sort these diverse purposes into (1) a reactive component, i.e. an ability to respond to external emerging initiatives; and (2) a proactive component, i.e. an ability to plan for future, to grow internally and to adapt.

“At the Aboriginal community level, capacity includes the broad abilities to design communal responses to environmental and natural resource management issues, seize the opportunity to improve community socio-economic conditions, and develop strategies to protect and enhance the community’s varied interests – traditional or contemporary.” (National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy 2005: 46)

While the basic definition is quite broadly agreed, more variation is found in how communities and researchers describe the different components that make up capacity. In the mid-1990s, the analysis of community capacity was largely restricted to identifying different kinds of resources (also called assets or capitals – e.g. human resources, social capital, fiscal resources, etc.) that a community could draw upon to perform the functions listed by Kusel. However, more recent thinking has become increasingly concerned with the question of how these resources and assets are applied to real problems, producing desirable outcomes. This question is less well-developed

at present, but it suggests a model that includes the following facets of community capacity (per Beckley and others 2002):

- capital, assets, or resources.
- catalysts.
- mobilization of those resources through social organization and relationships.
- end results or outcomes.

Based on these concepts, various parties have developed their own models of capacity and capacity building. Some of these can be found at:

http://www.nafaforestry.org/forest_home/capacity_what_is.html