

Not My Fault: Making social connections builds social capital, community resilience

Lori Dengler/For the Times-Standard
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Last week, I mentioned lack of social capital as one of the culprits in the Haiti earthquake disaster. Social capital is a measure of community connectedness and many studies show that it can reduce impacts and improve recovery in disaster. For me, enhancing social capital is a no-brainer. Much of how to build it is relatively easy and has the added benefit of making our society more livable even between disasters.

Social capital is a difficult thing to measure and sociologists have many ways of defining it. Some even argue that is an impossible thing to put a number on. I am not a social scientist, and hope I don't offend my more expert colleagues by taking an arm waving approach. The higher the social capital in a community, the higher the value its members place on one another and the more likely people are to be altruistic and help one another. No time is this more important than in a disaster.

A study conducted after the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami concluded that social networks were more important than emergency supplies in reducing losses and accelerating recovery. The study by Daniel Aldrich and colleagues (link at bottom) surveyed 130 towns and cities in the Tohoku region and examined how factors such as exposure, wave height, seawalls, demographics and social capital influenced mortality rates. They measured social capital through interviews of survivors asking how many of their neighbors they knew. They found that high trust communities, where people were more likely to know each another, had higher survival rates that comparable low-trust communities.

The Aldrich study was one way to estimate social capital. There are many studies which have looked at other variables. Numerous positive factors have been suggested including church and volunteer membership, voting percentage, charitable contribution rates, attendance at local sports and community events, and local media such as radio and newspapers. Crime, poverty, war, drug use, homelessness and hate groups reduce it. Other factors such as lower education levels, poor access to medical and mental health care, heavy

television/electronic use among children, percentage of children living with single parents, and home insecurity also have been identified as negatives.

Several years ago, I saw a study that measured the number of times a person ran into an acquaintance unexpectedly in the course of a day or week as a measure of both connectedness and personal well-being. I laughed at that one, recalling the time when the Arcata Co-op had Groucho glasses for disguises if you really didn't want to spend hours chatting with people you bumped into there.

The jury is still out on the influence of social media on social capital. The World Bank did a study a few years ago looking at the issue and found that, like cholesterol, there's good and bad types. Social media can both enhance and distort connections. The rise of cyber bullying, trolling and hate messaging is toxic to developing community values. My own take, when electronic connections trump face-to-face ones, the net effect is a loss.

Studies of state social capital put Utah, Colorado and the upper Midwest at the top of the list and the south (plus New York) at the bottom. California is in the lower middle, and Humboldt County ranks about in the middle of the state. We have positives including community events and local media and many opportunities for volunteering in community-minded organizations. And we have big negatives – inadequate health care, drug addiction, homelessness and food insecurity, to name a few.

Our social capital took a hit last year when KHSU ceased to become a community-based radio station. Community radio plays an important role in building social capital during normal times. KHSU did many things to keep us connected: discussions with local artists, politicians, organizers, and other community members, announcing community events, covering local news and putting national events within a local perspective. In times of emergency, it is local radio that keeps us informed and gives us a real people who are going through the same thing that we are to listen to. I rarely listen to KHSU any more and when I do, I am so annoyed by the music that fills the space where local content is supposed to be. What a lost opportunity to build social capital.

It's hard to get people to prepare for disaster. Storing food and water is important, as we all learned thanks to PG&E's shutdowns. Taking a first aid or CPR class are great things to do. Kudos to all of you who have taken CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) classes or

have HAM radio licenses. You are my heroes. If taking these big steps are difficult, just remember that building social connections could be just as important in how well you and your community make it through the next big earthquake. Take the time to get to know your neighbors, volunteer at your church or other organization. Listen/read and advocate for your local media. And remember when you attend a local event whether it's the Farmer's Market, a Crabs game, the Eureka Symphony, participating in an ocean cleanup day or other event, you are helping to build social capital and creating a more resilient community,

Briefly in the news: A magnitude 6.7 earthquake in Turkey on Friday quickly became the deadliest quake of 2020. Earthquakes in Turkey are no surprise and sadly, many are deadly. NOAA keeps natural disaster databases and their Significant Earthquake list includes 160 Turkey quakes that have caused deaths and 49 where the casualty numbers have exceeded 1000. Turkey has all the ingredients for high seismic risk – a complex tectonic setting, frequent earthquakes, moderate to high population densities and a built environment that includes many unreinforced or poorly reinforced buildings. As I write, the confirmed death toll stands at 22, with over 1200 injuries. At least ten buildings suffered total or partial collapse, accounting for most of the casualties and many injuries.

Note: Study of how social capital influenced loss and recovery in the 2011 Japan earthquake and tsunami: <https://observer.com/2017/02/recovering-from-disasters-social-networks-matter-more-than-bottled-water/>

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<https://www.times-standard.com/2020/01/25/lori-dengler-making-social-connections-builds-social-capital-community-resilience/>