



NEW HAMPSHIRE  
CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

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**Social Capital Impact Assessment:**  
***Collaborating to Bring Community Concerns to the Policy Agenda***  
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Social capital is an essential ingredient in building healthy communities. Planning decisions and policies have the power to impact social capital positively or negatively. Only by insisting on an account of potential social capital impacts can citizens make informed decisions that weigh economic, environmental, and social concerns. Attention to social capital can also improve planning outcomes by incorporating local knowledge of issues, generating creative alternatives, and enriching the overall policy discussion. What can be done to ensure that policymakers pay attention to social capital and mitigate for detrimental impacts? Here, we briefly describe our experience in two pilot projects in New Hampshire and introduce our ideas for spreading these efforts nationwide. We propose to launch a national collaborative venture to infuse social capital concerns in policymaking at every level. We invite your ideas and participation in this new venture.

**Identifying Social Capital Impacts**

Why should policymakers pay attention to social capital? Public projects and policies have the potential to harm human networks, trust, and engagement in ways that undermine important outcomes, such as health, safety, and prosperity. Planning decisions and policies have the potential to affect social capital in four main ways:

- ***Dispersing Human Populations:*** Projects that destroy neighborhoods or disperse communities offer the clearest cases of negative social capital impacts. They uproot individuals and tear apart networks by ending the geographic proximity that enabled social support. The classic example of projects that harm the social fabric by dislocating communities is the urban renewal projects of the post-World War II era.
- ***Disrupting Community Institutions:*** Projects that disrupt or destroy community institutions also can be harmful. If individuals in a rural town gather only at the local post office, the loss of this functional gathering place would diminish opportunities for the casual contact that builds trust and reciprocity.
- ***Diminishing Opportunities for Engagement:*** In addition to these clear-cut cases of social capital impact, some projects include components that decrease opportunities for engagement in the community. Policies and projects that result in phenomena associated with lower social capital – sprawl, commuting, residential mobility, increased television watching, longer working hours, and income inequality – have the potential to undermine local networks, participation, and trust.
- ***Denying Opportunities to Build Social Capital:*** Finally, when we do not pay attention to social capital in our planning and policymaking decisions, we may miss out on important opportunities to build social capital in our communities. For instance, if we pay attention to social capital, we might remember to include crucial community gathering places and public meeting rooms when a new library or school is constructed.

## **Infusing Planning with Social Capital Concerns**

How can we ensure that social capital concerns receive policymaker attention? Based on two pilot projects and conversations with experts nationwide, we propose six mechanisms that expand decision-making criteria to include social capital considerations, encourage cooperative efforts to advocate for social capital, build awareness of social capital, and expand the social capital toolkit to improve future policymaking.

### ➤ **Expand Decision-Making Criteria to Include Social Capital**

- ***Using the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Process:*** For any project that will significantly impact the human environment, federal agencies must prepare a statement that analyzes all “adverse effects” of the project, including social impacts. The EIS process allows concerned parties to comment on the statement, but social impacts are often overlooked. In New Hampshire, we have twice used this process to emphasize social capital impacts in a highway expansion project and in the construction of a new prison.
- ***Incorporating Social Capital in Master Planning:*** In New Hampshire and many other states, periodic master planning is a municipal requirement. A master planning process in Candia, New Hampshire, used social capital considerations to identify and revitalize an intersection at the center of town social activity. Through pilot projects or state requirements, social capital could become a standard consideration in master planning.
- ***Amending Land Use Law to Include Social Capital Considerations:*** Site plan and subdivision review offer other potential venues for highlighting social capital concerns. Already, planning and zoning boards require evaluation of and mitigation for various impacts. Social capital concerns should be added to the list of impacts so that projects that dislocate populations, disrupt community institutions, and decrease opportunities for engagement are highlighted.

### ➤ **Collaborate to Advocate for Social Capital**

- ***Joining Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) Coalitions:*** A CBA is a negotiated legal contract between a developer (government or private) and a coalition of citizens. The CBA lays out what the developer will do for the community in exchange for residents’ support in the permitting process. These coalitions are one venue in which social capital advocates can raise their concerns to a receptive audience.

### ➤ **Build Awareness of Social Capital**

- ***Educating Policymakers about Social Capital:*** The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation has led statewide efforts to make social capital common knowledge among community leaders and policymakers, including two rounds of social capital learning circles and a grant that introduced New Hampshire’s regional planners to social capital concepts through a series of workshops. These efforts are crucial to building support for and awareness of social capital. When projects arise, leaders in the state are now cognizant of social capital impacts.

### ➤ **Expand the Social Capital Toolset**

- ***Launching Pilot Projects that Implement and Evaluate Social Capital Mitigation Measures:*** Since the term social capital rose to prominence in the 1990s, scholarly efforts have improved measurement and proposed policies to strengthen and sustain community bonds. As measurement becomes more widespread and policymakers begin to address social capital issues, evaluation of social capital mitigation measures is a crucial step. In order for social capital to fully rise to the national policymaking agenda, we need to improve our knowledge of what measures effectively build community networks and strengthen trust and civic participation.

## **The Social Capital Policy Initiative**

We are exploring the possibility of spearheading an initiative to raise social capital’s profile in policymaking by implementing and evaluating pilot efforts nationwide. The New Hampshire Charitable Foundation is in the earliest stage of discussions with national funders and is looking for other foundation partners to join a collaborative network interested in advancing social capital interests. Notionally, partners would contribute to a pool of shared funding, supplemented by an anchor sponsor. The shared pool of funds would support the provision of expert advice and technical assistance to partners, as well as provide mechanisms for information sharing and learning about locally sponsored pilot projects.