



# COLLABORATIVE PROCESSES AND CONNECTIONS TO COMMUNITY WELLBEING

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**M**any communities in the rural western United States seek ecological, economic, and social wellbeing and resilience of their people and landscapes through collaborative groups. Increasingly, these groups have recognized a need to engage with social science to inform the connections between their work and community wellbeing. This requires understanding of collaborative processes, their connection to community wellbeing, and applicable social science approaches. This fact sheet and its companion were created to assist collaborative groups supported by the High Desert Partnership in Harney County, Oregon.

## WHAT IS A COLLABORATIVE PROCESS?

Consensus-oriented collaboration can look different in approach and design depending on local context and stakeholder interests. Often, important steps in collaborative processes include:

- Identifying diverse interests/stakeholders
- Developing shared purpose, vision, and goals
- Incorporation of available science or data
- Seeking consensus on planned actions
- Monitoring, learning, and adaptation

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY WELLBEING?

Human wellbeing is a concept with diverse meanings in several fields from health to psychology to development. One simple definition is that it is “a positive physical, social and mental state,”<sup>1</sup> that includes 1) objective material circumstances, 2) social aspects, and 3) subjective assessment of one’s circumstances.<sup>2</sup> Wellbeing is also recognized as not merely a static state, but also a dynamic process.<sup>3</sup> Community wellbeing is more than the sum of individuals’ wellbeing; it is about “subjective aspects of local life that are not simply individual but reflect the ways in which people feel and are well together.”<sup>4</sup> Another definition is “a state of being with others and the natural environment that arises where human needs are

met, where individuals and groups can act meaningfully to pursue their goals, and where they are satisfied with their way of life.”<sup>5</sup> This is closely related to community resilience, or “processes of responding to change with a view to enhancing community wellbeing over time.”<sup>6</sup>

## HOW DOES COMMUNITY WELLBEING RELATE TO COLLABORATION?

Collaboration and community wellbeing are closely intertwined; existing research recognizes that any intervention to support wellbeing must be developed, led, and supported in a local context in order to be effective. Because wellbeing can have different meanings for different communities or within different segments of a community, these interventions must be locally and collaboratively derived, and will be more likely to succeed if local people participated in creating them and were empowered in that process. The choice of what wellbeing means, how to improve or sustain it, and how to evaluate it should be made by a community and directed by their priorities. Some collaborative groups form deliberately for the purpose of improving one or more factors in community wellbeing, typically by working directly on social determinants of health; others may have community wellbeing as a more general downstream goal of their efforts to build consensus around other specific issues and opportunities.

## HOW CAN SOCIAL SCIENCE INFORM COLLABORATION FOR COMMUNITY WELLBEING?

Social science can aid in collaborative decisions in several ways:

- Help participants identify and assess the tradeoffs that may be associated with different management options, including ecological, economic, and social tradeoffs
- Provide insights into how decisions affect both human and environmental wellbeing, given the interplay of social-ecological systems
- Inform decisions to be more appropriate for those affected by them
- Better anticipate and understand the variety of human interests and implications of management decisions for human communities

There are many examples of social science research related to wellbeing that could be conducted in collaborative settings (Table 1). They share a common emphasis on actively engaging the participant community throughout the research process. This active engagement offers both demands and rewards for collaborative participants. It requires their time and energy, and participants may have differing appetites and abilities to contribute. At the same time, well-designed social science projects may offer useful insights that improve a collaborative’s ability to produce its desired outcomes.

### FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION

[Fact Sheet #24: Considerations for Working with Social Science and Scientists in a Collaborative Setting](#)

[Working Paper #102: Connecting Collaboration to Wellbeing in Harney County](#)

**Table 1 Examples of social science approaches focused on the relationship of collaboratives to wellbeing**

Example social science activity	What it is	Potential applications for collaboratives
Wellbeing indicator development	Criteria for observing and gauging wellbeing outcomes, particularly through measurement and remeasurement over time to track change	Developing a comprehensive set of wellbeing indicators through a community wellbeing collaborative explicitly focused on the topic
Human ecology mapping	Mapping how humans interact physically, materially, spiritually, and emotionally with places and features; and representing those spatially	Using mapping to identify areas of collaborative group priority and agreement about important values, risks, and activities on the landscape
Economic monitoring of natural resource management actions	Measurement and analysis of economic indicators to evaluate changes over time relative to specific management actions	Examining the relationship between what a collaborative group recommends for natural resource management and the economic outcomes of those actions, including avoided costs or losses to values important for wellbeing
Participatory visual storytelling	Engaging community members through diverse forms of media (e.g., photography or videography) to directly share their perspectives	Engaging community members to take photos of things and places that constituted wellbeing or illbeing for them, shared in a community exhibit or webpage and used to stimulate discussion or contribute to common understanding for wellbeing indicator development
Social network analysis	Information gathered about nodes (individuals or groups) and how they are connected, analyzed and mapped out in visual representations	Analyzing how individuals were connected to whom, who served as bridges, who was influential, and/or who connected to non-participating stakeholders or external resources valuable for wellbeing

<sup>1</sup> Summers, J.K., Smith, L.M., Case, J.L., and Linthurst, R.A. 2012. A review of the elements of human well-being with an emphasis on the contribution of ecosystem services. *Ambio* 41: 327–340.

<sup>2</sup> Woodhouse, E., Homewood, K.M., Beauchamp, E., Clements, T., McCabe, J.T., Wilkie, D. and Milner-Gulland, E.J. 2015. Guiding principles for evaluating the impacts of conservation interventions on human well-being. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 370(1681): 20150103.

<sup>3</sup> McCrea, R., Walton, A. and Leonard, R. 2014. A conceptual framework for investigating community wellbeing and resilience. *Rural Society* 23(3): 270-282.

<sup>4</sup> Atkinson, S., Bagnall, A.M., Corcoran, R., South, J. and Curtis, S. 2020. Being well together: individual subjective and community wellbeing. *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21(5):1903-1921.

<sup>5</sup> Breslow, S.J., Sojka, B., Barnea, R., Basurto, X., Carothers, C., Charnley, S., Coulthard, S., Dolšak, N., Donatuto, J., García-Quijano, C. and Hicks, C.C. 2016. Conceptualizing and operationalizing human wellbeing for ecosystem assessment and management. *Environmental Science & Policy* 66: 250-259.

<sup>6</sup> McCrea et al. 2014, p. 2.