

ELEMENTS OF COMMUNITY DATA CAPACITY

A community with data capacity is one where people can access and use data to understand and improve outcomes where they live. Our aspiration is for all residents of a place and those working in public, private, nonprofit, and philanthropic organizations that serve that community to be able to use data effectively. Communities have data capacity when they have (1) the needed enabling resources and (2) a set of skills and practices held by individuals, by organizations, and collectively.

ENABLING RESOURCES

Access to data and access to help with the data are the basic building blocks of community data capacity. In recent years, we have seen access to data at the local level markedly increase but noted that access to help in using data has not grown at the same pace.

- **Access to data.** People can discover and obtain needed data in accessible formats for their purposes. Shared data systems, data-sharing agreements for sensitive information, open data platforms, and public websites where data are posted are examples of infrastructure that help provide access to whole datasets. Access may also include presentations or tools geared to nontechnical audiences, such as fact sheets of data and analysis on a specific topic; websites with easily understandable neighborhood profiles; and online tools to look up information about a particular school.
- **Access to help with data.** Data users can get help determining what data are needed; finding, collecting, and accessing data; and interpreting and applying the data. Assistance may be interactive, such as through technical assistance programs, training workshops, or one-on-one coaching, but it also can come in the form of static resources, like explainer videos, written guidance, and file documentation.

INDIVIDUAL

Many capacity-building efforts focus on a person's skills and knowledge. Ideally, everyone would have the first two elements of data capacity in the list below, confidence with data and ethical conduct. Only some people would be expected to develop the three other elements; individuals can bring these skills and knowledge to advocacy and action initiatives as needed.

- **Confidence with data.** The ability to interpret data that are presented and to ask questions that explore their origins, usefulness, and application.
- **Ethical conduct.** Awareness that people can use data to improve lives but also cause harm, an understanding of how to use data responsibly, and the ability to eliminate or reduce harm at any stage of using data.
- **Technical skills.** The ability to collect, assess, and manage data; analyze data to generate statistics and insights; and visualize and map data.
- **Subject matter expertise.** Knowledge from lived experience or formal training to identify appropriate data sources, develop indicators, understand data limitations, and connect data to changes in investments, programs, and policies.
- **Communication skills.** The ability to talk and write about data and tell stories with data to audiences with different confidence levels with data.

ORGANIZATIONAL

Organizations, including foundations, should strive to create the elements of data capacity below through investments in their teams and their management processes. What it takes to develop capacity will vary across organizations.

- **Culture of curiosity.** Organizations and their leaders promote data as a tool for exploration and learning.
- **Data investments.** Organizations invest time and resources to use data in actions and processes. They may train and support staff members, set aside time for discussions about data in meetings, set goals for using data across programs, and communicate their analysis with the board of directors.
- **Data governance.** Organizational policies and practices ensure that data holders and users ethically manage the data life cycle: acquisition, processing, dissemination, and disposition. Policies and practices incorporate data security measures that safeguard private and confidential data, as well as govern processes that protect people who are subjects of research.
- **Routine data use.** Organizations systematically engage with data to inform their decisions and actions. Examples include when a nonprofit regularly reviews program data to improve its services to clients or a government reviews key indicators for agencies to ensure that they are equitably distributing resources, like investments in infrastructure upgrades and park space.
- **Integration of data across roles.** An organization understands that using data is not one person's responsibility. Staff members at all levels and across functions have roles in producing, reviewing, and making decisions based on data.

COLLECTIVE

Collective data capacity strengthens the connections among different groups and is more than the sum of the individual and organizational capacities described above. By working together, organizations take advantage of one another's perspectives, data capacities, and networks. And they facilitate more consistent and widespread use of data to address community issues. Locally, the aspects of capacity listed below are generally less developed than the elements of individual or organizational capacities.

- **Learning communities.** Communities share and learn from best practices and common challenges with data, cultivate relationships among data users and providers, and engage new groups in thinking about data capacity.
- **Resource investment.** Communities invest time, funding, and political capital in building data capacity. Actions include developing and securing investments to fill gaps in local data capacity and advocating for data sharing, open data policies, and efforts to plan and exchange information related to data use and data capacity.
- **Collective planning.** Communities can collectively identify what is needed to improve their data capacity, such as tools, services, and communication methods, and can develop coordinated strategies in response. This can include assessing different aspects of data capacity or the capacity of different sectors.
- **Data sharing.** Organizations develop trust and articulate the benefits of sharing data with the people they serve, as well as with other key stakeholders and constituents, within the bounds of protecting privacy and confidentiality.

This fact sheet draws from the Urban Institute brief "Investing in Data Capacity for Community Change" (<https://urban.is/37bD0GE>), which provides strategies foundations can use to promote and invest in data capacity.