

# The role of social capital in healthcare: a lesson from the connectedness of rural sugar cane farm communities in the Dominican Republic



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Opinion Editorial

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## Abstract

Social capital, including networks, relationships, and social bonds within communities, fosters trust, reciprocity, and cooperation among members. The Dominican Republic, though lacking physical capital, has collectivist values and a rich social capital that has been harnessed by community health workers and physicians of One World Surgery to address the unique health challenges faced by individuals living in rural areas. By tapping into the expansive social networks also found within rural communities in the United States, we can foster better healthcare access, increased social support, and more effective community-based interventions.

It was nine o'clock in the morning and the sun was beating down as three plastic boxes, two community health workers, one doctor, and myself piled into the One World Surgery (OWS) truck. As we passed through sugar cane fields, we beeped the horn in greeting at smiling Dominicans conversing in chairs outside their homes. On arrival at a church in the middle of a small community, we met the community leader and the eight patients currently being treated by OWS staff for hypertension and diabetes. The clinic day began as community health workers chatted with patients about their families while taking blood pressure and checking blood glucose levels. The general physician jumped into consultations. Medication changes were made and the health workers provided education for appropriate use. By noon, the patients began to meander home, stopping every few feet to greet a neighbor. We were headed back to the truck and on to visit the next community, now carrying a lighter load of amlodipine and a bag heavy with mangoes a patient gifted us in gratitude.

While the United States as a whole is highly individualistic, in the vast landscapes of rural America, community ties are deeply woven and altruism is a cherished value [1]. Here, much like in the Dominican Republic, while physical resources are lacking, the concept of social capital has the potential to be a powerful catalyst for improved health outcomes. This essay aims to explore how a flourishing social capital can positively impact healthcare outcomes in rural communities as well as avenues to building these strong connections.

Social capital refers to networks, relationships, and social bonds that exist within a community, fostering trust, reciprocity, and cooperation among its members [2].

Harnessing the rich social networks in rural communities has the power to yield enhanced access to healthcare resources and bolstered community support. Social capital can be strengthened by engaging and empowering the community and building upon trust and local support systems [3]. In these ways, social capital can address the unique health challenges faced by rural areas and pave the way for healthier, more resilient communities.

## Enhanced Access to Healthcare Resources

Rural communities face geographic barriers that limit access to healthcare services [4]. Strong social networks within these communities, however, can help navigate these challenges. It is not uncommon to hear Dominicans call out to their neighbors, "Hop on my moto, I'm heading into town." While in urban areas of the United States asking a neighbor for a ride may be replaced with the impersonal transaction of requesting an Uber, in rural areas with higher levels of social capital, neighbors are more likely to depend on one another and lend a helping hand [5]. These are qualities that would make individuals in rural communities more open to pooling resources and community-based interventions as a means to addressing their needs where resources are short. As an example, in the rural Dominican Republic, trusted community leaders play a crucial role in disseminating health-related knowledge. Interventions for the management of chronic conditions used by OWS staff involve a central team of a physician and community health workers going out to individual rural communities [6]. While there, they rely on local community leaders who know the members well for

assistance in identifying needs and ensuring that all who need care are treated. In their absence, they rely on the local leaders as a contact point for updates or a conduit for information circulation. Similarly, in rural parts of the United States, where gaps in education levels and transportation challenges prevent frequent access to healthcare providers, social capital via community leaders or ride-share programs can be used to spread information or decrease the burden of travel [7]. This collective action, driven by shared values and social networks, can lead to the establishment of health promotion programs, support groups, and educational initiatives that can enhance health in rural communities. With the pooling of resources and knowledge, rural communities can bridge gaps in healthcare access to ensure timely and appropriate care for all.

### **Social Support and Empowerment**

Living with a chronic health condition can carry stigma, leading to isolation and reluctance to seek support. In rural communities, strong social capital can combat this by fostering a culture of acceptance and understanding [1]. In the Dominican Republic, individuals experiencing hypertension and diabetes lean on their networks for both emotional and practical assistance. Studies looking at appropriate cultural care for rural Dominicans cite family and community presence as most important for meaningful care experiences [8]. With similar values in rural communities in the United States, building on social networks can prevent placing the entire burden of disease management on a physician and can rather be spread across a community [9, 10]. Through open dialogue and shared experiences, social networks can challenge misconceptions and foster a sense of solidarity to improve health outcomes.

### **Moving Forward Together**

Where do we go from here? How can we develop a rich social capital capable of improving health outcomes? How can we replicate the sense of belongingness seen in the Dominican Republic in rural America? Rather than continuing to throw money at the problem, we can focus on engaging and empowering communities and building upon the trust and local support systems necessary to allow rural communities the chance to thrive.

In rural areas, the strong sense of community can be leveraged to create robust social support systems. These social support systems can be used to bridge gaps between medical professionals and local residents to ensure healthcare needs are met. By pooling together individual skills and connections, rural communities can maximize their collective potential to address health disparities. Informal networks, such as neighbors checking in on each other, can be complemented by formal support structures, like community health clinics and support groups. Local leaders, including those in religious institutions and community or education centers, can play a pivotal role in coordinating these networks [11]. In the Dominican Republic, churches and schools function as gathering sites for patients to convene for their health checks by primary care providers who cannot make it to every patient's home for an individual visit. Community volunteers assist with transportation needs and medication deliveries for homebound patients. Empowering residents to actively participate in local initiatives creates a sense of ownership and responsibility for collective well-being. Community-led projects, such as health fairs, wellness workshops, and ride-share programs, foster a sense of belonging, encouraging individuals to take charge of their health and that of their neighbors [3]. Cultivating a culture of caring and compassion strengthens the fabric of rural societies and acts as a safety net to reduce feelings of isolation and prevent health issues from escalating unnoticed. Through collaboration between healthcare providers and community organizations, empowerment of local leadership, and emphasis on local knowledge, individuals become more engaged in community life, healthcare utilization improves, and the community's collective ability to address health disparities strengthens [12].

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten we belong to each other. As rural communities unite and invest in the power of social capital, they will undoubtedly find a brighter, healthier future on the horizon. Social capital alone will not be able to manage these conditions. When used as a piece to the puzzle of care, however, it can be greatly effective. For beyond all the complexity is a simplicity - love our neighbors.

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