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A New Lens: Using the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Framework to Guide Community Development

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Abstract. Extension is uniquely positioned to deliver data-driven solutions to complex community issues with University applied research, particularly through crises like COVID-19. Applying the Policy, Systems and Environmental (PSE) framework to community development is an effective, innovative approach in guiding Extension leaders to create, document, and share long-term transformative change on challenging issues with stakeholders. Beyond the public health sector, applying a PSE approach to community development provides leverage points for population-level benefits across sectors. This article describes current public health approaches, methodologies, and how the PSE framework translates to other programs with four examples of high-impact, systems level Extension projects.

INTRODUCTION

This article demonstrates that beyond the public health sector, the Policy, Systems, and Environmental (PSE) approach is a useful framework to guide the work of community development leaders. By taking a PSE approach that focuses on addressing policy implications, organizational structures and systems, and the physical environment, Extension can contribute to building community resilience and addressing complex community problems—from broadband access and rural economic development to climate change adaptation. As Franz (2011) states, “Embracing the public value of Extension education means repositioning the way we describe our work from what clients learn and do to what economic, environmental, and social conditions change” (p. 3).

POLICY, SYSTEMS, AND ENVIRONMENT DEFINED

The Policy, Systems and Environmental change framework emerged in the last decade as a way to approach difficult and layered public health problems including obesity, diabetes, and cancer. *Policy* refers to the written statement of an organizational position, decision, or action. *Systems* refer to the unwritten, ongoing, and often qualitative organizational changes or decisions. *Environment* is defined as the visible changes to surroundings, whether economic, social, normal, or physical (Better Living for Texans, 2017).

Rather than focusing solely on individual choices, the PSE approach acknowledges the “interrelated, dynamic, and adaptive factors” (Lyn et al., 2013 p. S24) that influence an individual’s health. Therefore, public health practitioners are addressing individual’s choices as well as the broader landscape that influences personal behavior—including the policies, systems, and environments that shape those behaviors (Leeman et al., 2015). Table 1 illustrates this comparison. Within Extension, those working in the field of nutrition and health are increasingly incorporating a PSE approach in their work (Kennedy et al., 2020; Schroeder et al., 2018; Sneed et al., 2020).

UTILIZING A PSE APPROACH IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Frequently, community development Extension work is rooted in affecting change at a policy, systems, and environment level. Beyond direct educational methods, Extension work takes place within coalitions and councils made up of agencies, organizations, and other stakeholders that work together to address complex community-level

issues (Ryser et al., 2020). Extension professionals often play a role in assisting coalitions as they work through a shared process to identify the problem, set shared goals, and execute action steps. Extension’s role increases capacity with skills like facilitation, applied research, fund development, and evaluation (Smathers & Lobb, 2015). This expanded capacity enables communities to better respond to challenges, such as coordinating a response to food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community development Extension professionals are uniquely situated to do effective PSE work involving data-driven activity planning, community asset mapping, and the creation of goals alongside stakeholders (Ryser et al., 2020). Described as “a portfolio of strategies at multiple levels (e.g., individual, family, community) across multiple sectors (e.g., school, worksite, neighborhood) following some variant of the socioecological model” (Cheadle et al., 2016, p. 349), PSE complements Extension’s emerging, innovative work. The PSE framework creates long-term change while moving from programs to projects (e. g., from offering direct education to building coalitions that change policies, systems, and/or environments). To facilitate a process for desirable change outcomes for community development, the PSE framework (Lyn et al., 2013) outlines seven key activities:

1. Assess the social and political environment.
2. Engage, educate, and collaborate with key stakeholders.
3. Identify and frame the problem.
4. Utilize available evidence.
5. Conduct research to identify needed data.
6. Identify PSE solutions.
7. Build support and political will.

For example, WSU Extension in Clallam County saw increased wild carrot invasion and heard concerns by the county road department in assessing and controlling spread (*assessed the environment*). Extension engaged Master Gardeners to collaborate with the county road department to identify where there were infestations and how to control the spread (*engaged stakeholders, identified the problem*). Master Gardeners recorded and shared data on wild carrot infestations on county roadsides and advised on timing and location of maintenance work to reduce spread (*utilized evidence and identified needed data*). This collaboration improved county-wide sustainable weed management policies (*identified PSE solutions*), while building political will that led to new collaborative native roadside plantings (*built political will*). Table 2 demonstrates this and other community development projects completed by Extension faculty and explains how that work relates to the PSE framework.

Providing decision makers with data for effective policy decisions (Dodd & Abdalla, 2004; Rome & Lucero, 2019) complements Extension’s role in community development, as does coalition building that brings together partners to identify and work on problems (Harder, 2019; Koonce et al., 2016). Extension faculty and staff also secure funding to create improved infrastructure for our communities, resulting in long-term impacts to our built environment (Sandkamp, 2014).

Table 1. Moving Toward a PSE Approach

Setting	Conventional Approach	PSE Approach
School	Teach a lesson on eating more fruit and vegetables.	Make fruits and vegetables appealing and easy to access in school cafeterias.
Workplace	Offer an employee health fair once a year.	Coordinate weekly CSA produce deliveries to the workplace.
Community	Arrange a one-time fun run for disease awareness.	Improve pedestrian and bike access on local roads and sidewalks.

Source. (Comprehensive Cancer Control National Partnership, 2015).

Using the Policy, Systems, and Environmental Framework to Guide Community Development

Table 2. Examples of Extension Community Development Creating Policy, Systems, and Environment Change

Project	Policy	Systems	Environment
Integrated Weed Management ^a	Master Gardeners collected information on the invasion of wild carrot, and in the process, shaped county-level sustainable management policies that address the larger problem of roadside weeds.	The county road department now consults annually with Master Gardeners and noxious weed control staff on appropriate timing and locations for their maintenance work to minimize the spread of weeds through mowing activities.	The Master Gardeners and noxious weed coordinator have established several plots of native roadside plantings as a demonstration of sustainable roadside management.
Marine Resources Committee (MRC) ^b	The Marine Resource Committee worked with coastal non-profits, tribes and agencies to seek dedicated funds for restoration in underserved areas of coastal Washington. These funds are now allocated by the state legislature specifically for Washington coast restoration and resiliency and managed as a state grant program.	Historically, hands-on science STEM experiences were limited by transportation and aging equipment. The MRC's additional funding to school STEM field trips and equipment over the last ten years enable consistent hands-on education in the high school on stream restoration and fish biology.	The Marine Resource Committee partnered with the school district to create a value-added food and fish processing facility. The committee secured funding for the facility, provided university food safety training to fishers, and completed the 1440 sq. ft. commercial food processing facility for school and fishers' use.
Community Food Systems ^c	The Kitsap Food Policy Council worked with community partners to write new food policies for the 2016 Comprehensive Plan update.	The Healthy Eating, Active Living collective impact coalition of 29 organizations and agencies aligned strategies to improve community-level health outcomes through increased access to opportunities for activity and fresh food.	The Kitsap Fresh cooperative operates a weekly online farmers market that connects food buyers with businesses selling locally produced and processed foods and distributes food throughout the county.
Broadband Action Team (BAT) ^d	The BAT has directly influenced major legislation recently introduced by Senator Murray—the Digital Equity Act of 2019—that would look to provide over \$1 billion in grants over five years to stand-up and support BAT-like organizations.	The BAT provides a “one-stop shop” forum and website for all stakeholders to share resources, issues, solutions and collaborative projects.	The City of Chewelah held a BAT community meeting, resulting in having an Internet Service Provider lay fiber.

Note. ^a(Rome & Lucero, 2019), ^b(Backman, 2020), ^c(Kitsap County Department of Community Development, 2016), ^d(Rjyser et al., 2020).

THE IMPORTANCE OF ADOPTING THIS FRAMEWORK

With the advent of the information age, Extension professionals need to adapt services to remain relevant (King & Boehlje, 2000). With increased competition, Extension as a source for information alone is increasingly irrelevant. For example, King (2018) found that in Oregon, between 1986 and 2006, the number of people who said they had used Extension in the preceding year dropped from 44% to 22%. In this changing environment, Extension has struggled to find ways to help decision-makers understand the public value of Extension work (McGrath et al., 2007).

With PSE widely accepted as an understandable and effective framework (Honeycutt et al., 2015), the authors propose that it can be an important platform for communicating the critical, unique, and sometimes nebulous and unseen role we play in community development work. PSE can give new relevance to the important work that Extension professionals do in communities across the country. Extension is uniquely positioned to create PSE change because of their intrinsic collaborative skillsets and abilities to leverage strategic partners and media (Jouridine & Green, 2001; Surls & Hayden-Smith, 2013).

PSE AND COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated vulnerability in many policies and systems, affecting almost every aspect of the environments in which we live and work. Extension professionals working in all fields have been adapting, pivoting, and responding to this new challenge in diverse ways, many relying on the foundations of PSE work laid prior to the pandemic. The network of community relationships and coalitions built by Extension agents has become a powerful way to exchange information, strategize effective responses, and stave off isolation in this newly fragmented environment (Nash et al., 2020; Washburn et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

The authors propose that the PSE approach is an effective framework with which to guide the work of community development-focused faculty and staff in Extension. In addition to creating community-level impacts addressing complex issues, the PSE framework can effectively communicate the work of Extension to audiences both internally (at the University) and externally (to stakeholders and funders). Moving forward, Extension is seeking to be relevant and effective in addressing 21st century problems. Leading the charge in facilitating PSE change in communities, in addition to maintaining the traditional direct education role, positions Extension professionals at the forefront of helping communities address these emerging challenges.

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