Social Capital as a Public Policy Tool
Conclusions from the PRI Project

Social Capital and Public Policy Seminar
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March 2, 2006
Interest in social capital has increased dramatically in recent years in academia.

Articles Published Each Year on Social Capital, 1984-2003

(source: David Halpern, Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, UK)
... as it has in several governments and international organizations
But too often the empirical evidence has been more suggestive than definitive.

And the empirical work employs a diverse array of proxies

The PRI project

Conceptualization

Measurement

Implications for Public policy
Different perspectives exist to examine the contribution of social capital

- All social resources that enable cooperation and collective action?

- Particular structures (social networks) and the resources that they convey?

Draw the best from both approaches
The project has adopted a network-based approach to social capital …

Social capital refers to the networks of social relations that may provide individuals and groups with access to resources and supports.
... within a broader framework for analysis

Determinants
- Individual Level (e.g., age, gender, health, attitudes, social participation, trust)
- Group Level (e.g., organization’s mandate, reputation, experienced & knowledgeable members, trust)

Social Networks (social capital)
- Network Structure (e.g., size, diversity, density)
- Network Dynamics (e.g., the nature of network-specific interactions: norms, trust, etc.)

Complementary Resources
Such as other forms of capital (e.g., human, financial, etc.)

Resources & Support
(e.g., material goods & services, information, emotional support, reinforcement of positive behavior, service brokerage, cooperation, coordination)

Social, Economic & Health Outcomes
(e.g., better health, employment, happiness, civic engagement, trust, social cohesion, etc.)

Specific Context
Does the specific context lend itself to achieving particular outcomes?

Broader Context
Cultural, Political, Legal, Institutional, Economic, Social, & Environmental Conditions
Potential benefits of social network membership include:

- material goods and services
- information
- reduced transaction costs
- emotional support
- reinforcement of positive behaviour norms
- service brokerage
Network differences matter

Frequently cited typology:

- Bonding
- Bridging
- Linking
Key messages on conceptualization:

1. Social capital refers to the networks of social relations that may provide individuals, groups or organizations access to resources and supports.

2. A focus on social networks allows analysts to consider social capital as a means to achieve broader policy objectives, rather than an end in itself; it makes it possible to separate conceptually and analytically “what social capital is” from “what it does.”

3. The value of different forms of social capital is context-dependent. Maximizing social capital per se may not always be beneficial.

4. Social capital does not function in a vacuum; it is affected by, complements, or reinforces the role of other resources that have relevance for a particular challenge or issue.

5. It is therefore necessary to consider the value of different types of social capital in the context of a specific context or challenge.
Is there a role for government?

- Governments already influence the development of social capital.

- A more systematic consideration of the role of social capital would be useful.
Key areas for a social capital focus:

- Helping populations at risk of social exclusion
- Supporting major life-course transitions
- Promoting community development efforts
1. Helping populations at risk of social exclusion

For example:
- new immigrants
- the long-term unemployed
- lone mothers
- youth at risk
- certain aboriginal communities

Having the right connections can make a difference
2. Supporting key life-course transitions

Examples of key life-course transitions include:

- the passage from school to labour-market
- fundamental changes to one’s family (parenthood, marriage, divorce, death)
- Retirement
- loss of autonomy or ability to care for oneself

More Canadian data needed on the role of networks

In these transitions
Olivia’s Life Course

- Paid Jobs
- Family & Social networks
- Community
- Learning

T = Main transitions
TT = Simultaneous transitions in different trajectories
= Low Stress
= Medium Stress
= High Stress
Multiple types of resources

- Money – for consumption and to build formal assets
- Skills, knowledge (being acquired and provided)
- Social capital
- Goods and services (including care-giving)
- Information
Accounting for the role of assets

Financial Capital (in dollars)

Physical Capital (in dollars)

Human Capital Index

Social Capital Index

Family
Learning
Work
Community
3. Promoting community development efforts

What are the most effective ways to build and support dynamic and sustainable networks that connect diverse local actors and public authorities?
Making use of social capital in public policy: from direct to indirect influence

- Build & support networks
- Tap into existing networks to deliver services
- Establish favorable conditions for desired network formation/maintenance
- Increase program sensitivity to existing social capital
(1) Building and supporting networks where relevant for specific program objectives

Some programs already do this:

- employability or job search programs for social assistance recipients
- integration programs for newly-landed immigrants
- civic participation forums and exchanges for youth
- community crime prevention initiatives linking citizens to police services

A more systematic evaluation of the social capital effects of these programs would be helpful.
(2) Tapping into existing social networks to deliver programs

- Popular opinion leader (POL): a community AIDS/HIV risk reduction program for gay men
- The ASSIST Study - A Stop Smoking In Schools Trial
(3) Establishing favourable conditions for desired network formation/maintenance

(1) Enhance opportunities and capacities for social interaction:

• supporting the development of individualized socialization skills and community capabilities

• public infrastructure

(2) Assistance to social “brokers” or “entrepreneurs”
(4) Increasing program sensitivity to existing patterns of social capital

- Collect information on social networks and integrate this into the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs.

- Raise awareness of the possible impacts by new programs and policies on existing social capital
Key messages on policy applications:

1. Governments inevitably affect patterns of social capital; an explicit focus on social capital allows governments to do so more strategically in keeping with policy and program objectives.

2. A social capital approach may be particularly fruitful for policies and programs helping populations at risk of social exclusion, supporting key life-course transitions, and promoting community development efforts.

3. Governments may have a role in directly supporting the development or maintenance of social capital as a means of achieving program objectives or working with existing networks to deliver services. They may also incorporate a social capital dimension through establishing favourable conditions for the development of useful networks and through a greater sensitivity toward the interactions between policies and existing social capital.
Major directions for empirical social capital research:

- Measure the **presence** of social capital through structural properties of networks.
- Measure how social capital **operates** through the dynamics of networks.
- Approach social capital as an **explanatory variable**.
What to measure:
Contributions of network analysis

- The relation is the unit of analysis

- Network structure:
  - Size / density / diversity … of network
  - Frequency / intensity / proximity … of relations

- Network dynamics
  - Creating and accessing networks
  - Creating and accessing resources
How to measure:
Techniques from network analysis

- Mapping is principally illustrative …
- Good network analysis possible with Excel or SPSS
- Improved techniques:
  - Name Generator
  - Generator by Context
  - Position Generator
  - Resource Generator
  - Technique by McCarty et al.
Methodological strategies: depends on the objectives of investigation

- Quantitative research on social capital
  - Statistical data
  - Social capital indexes
  - Special surveys
  - Standardized social capital module in thematic surveys
  - Longitudinal surveys incorporating social capital

- Qualitative research on social capital
  - Applying qualitative methodology to statistical surveys
  - Case studies
  - Meta-analysis
  - Social capital observatory
  - Using a social capital lens to develop and evaluate projets & programs
  - Demonstration projects on innovative social capital policies
Key messages on measurement:

1. In public policy research, investigate social capital not only as a dependent variable, but also as an explanatory variable that can contribute to the understanding of a specific socio-economic outcome.

2. The object of analysis is not an individual, group or community. Rather it is the relations between these units.

3. Empirical investigation should focus on network structure (the presence of social capital) and on network dynamics (how social capital operates).

4. In recent years, several relatively simple and proven techniques have been developed to measure many important aspects of networks (name generator, position generator, etc.).

5. The choice of a research strategy strongly depends on public policy objectives and on the specific needs of different policy domains.

6. In order to advance research on individual and collective social capital, new innovative instruments can be combined with more traditional research methods.
PRI publications on social capital
September 2005

Social Capital as a Public Policy Tool
Project Report

Social Capital Measurement
A Reference Document for Public Policy Development and Evaluation

Social Capital in Action
Thematic Policy Studies

This compilation of thematic studies explores the relevance and application of a social capital lens in eight specific policy and program areas in Canada: poverty reduction, aging well, settlement of new immigrants, educational outcomes of Aboriginal youth, youth civic engagement, community crime prevention, policing in First Nations communities, and local associations and community development.