

Keynote Paper

Achieving more socially sustainable communities

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Abstract. We are only too aware that the communities in which we work are dynamic environments where change is a constant. In addition, the demographics in Australian rural/regional communities are also changing. When placed on top of the big issues facing Australian society – such as those associated with adaptation to climate variability; claims for upgrading of communications infrastructure; or demands for energy, water resources ... the impact of this on our practice can become a challenge. How can extension practice draw on the strengths inherent in communities to enable change and what strategies do we need to consider when faced with the intergenerational change underway in our communities? This presentation draws on recent experience and examples from the Expert Panel on the Social Impacts of Drought in Australia Report, as well as research undertaken in the South Coast region of Western Australia, to suggest a strengths-based perspective to 21st century extension practice to enable more socially sustainable communities.

Keywords: social capital; adaptation; intergenerational change; regional impacts

It is a great pleasure to be here with you today and to share this important event with you all. The theme of the conference is *Shaping change in communities – Dimensions of excellence* - and I want to focus on an aspect of such a dimension of excellence – the strengths-based approach to community – with you today.

For many years I have been involved in research and development in a variety of settings – from place-based, such as Central Queensland and more recently, South Coast of Western Australia – to interest-based, such as the Natural Resource Management or human services sector.

This work has continually highlighted an important, but relatively under-realised fact, **that the work of the practitioner within communities is a key to an appreciation of the strength of that community.**

In this context, I consider you all to be practitioners in community development, community capacity building or community practice. Your titles may be quite different, but fundamentally, your goal is to leave your communities stronger than when you began your work with them.

You may be thinking – ‘but I work with individuals – my clients are farmers, or land managers – not the community as a whole – that’s a bit too big for just one person!’ - I agree. My message to you today is that even if we conduct our practice with one person, we are in fact, because we are working towards building a sustainable future, working with the whole community within which that person lives, works, recreates or socialises.

It has now been established in medical research that human beings are essentially healthier, more capable and more able to deal with change when they are connected with others. Living outside of community connectedness is in fact an indicator for poor mental health. Alienation – another term for this – can result in depression, in self-harm through drugs or alcohol – and in suicide. Connection is the key to a good life, to physical and emotional health and wellbeing. As practitioners that is what we have at the heart of our practice – connection.

The other important aspect to this is that in order to achieve change, we necessarily need to work in groups. Everything is connected to everything else – and it is very seldom that an individual – working alone – achieves whole of community change. Sometimes we join together because of external forces – we want to resist change – but in the resisting we actually create something new (Trauger 2009). Sometimes we come together because we have issues in common – Landcare was an example of such a coming together. Networks – which is another way of thinking about such groupings – are also becoming virtual, rather than real, and this adds another dimension to their complexity.

As practitioners you are often required to act as bridges between individual clients and their broader communities - either of place or of interest. This act of bridge building has been identified as a key component to social capital. What is social capital? Social capital is a key component of understanding a ‘strengths-based’ practice.

Social capital provides a framework for understanding the connections between community engagement and business enterprise (Stone & Hughes 2002). Social capital can essentially be considered as the networks and norms that facilitate co-operation among groups.

Social capital at one level – is a way of trying to put back the social into the economic debate. As the pendulum swung away from community and family toward the individual – many social commentators felt powerless to enter the dominant conversation. Social capital became a way of conceptualising how our society operates. Definitions are many. The one I am comfortable with is that it is the 'raw material of society created from the myriad of everyday interactions between people (Bullen & Onyx 2000) and another – perhaps one you have heard – is that it is the 'glue' that holds society together.

Wendy Stone has described it as the 'networks and norms that allow people to work together to resolve problems and achieve common goals'. You can see from this that the 'capital' that is being built here – is not economic capital – not money or infrastructure – but intangible resources that enable a community to withstand pressures. Let's look at the other forms of capital a little more closely.

- **economic** capital – financial resources – money/mortgages/loan/credit etc.
- **physical** capital – buildings, housing, roads, machinery
- **human** capital – what each of us knows – our skills and knowledge
- **cultural** capital – knowledge, skills, forms of expression that are culturally valued and distinguish some groups from others.

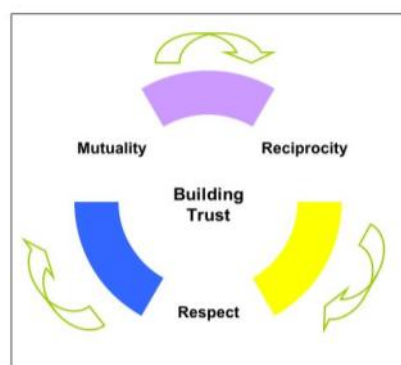
The concept of social capital is a layered one¹ – over the past twenty years we have come to understand it as including:

- networks, ties and relationships
- advantages and opportunities that come through membership of various communities of interest or groups
- civic engagement – which in turn leads to – economic engagement.

The scholarly work undertaken by these and others moved the social capital concept beyond the individual and into community and society. As a result it has now become very popular with governments of all political persuasions (and has entered into the policy frameworks in a variety of settings) as a way of attempting to 'measure' the essentially, unmeasurable² or at least very hard to measure. What is important about social capital to our practice in building strong and sustainable communities is that we are the links that enable some of the glue to stick. This is because the critical factor in social capital building is trust.

In 2005 I published an article taking this idea further – here is the model I developed in that article (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Building trust for social capital as an action cycle



Taken from Stehlik, D (2005) Partnering industry to build stronger communities. In T. Stehlik & P. Carden (eds). *Beyond Communities of Practice*. pp 229-244, Post Pressed: Flaxley, Qld.

¹ Like most ideas it has a long history which some scholars have traced back to 1961 and Jane Jacob's groundbreaking text: *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.

² The measurement of social capital and the indicators associated with this is the subject of much controversy within the literature. A good starting point for someone interested in following this further would be the work of Wendy Stone and her colleagues (see <http://www.aifs.gov.au/institute/pubs/RP24.pdf> retrieved 18th November, 2009). Another useful database of various papers can be found at: <http://www.mapl.com.au/A13.htm>

You can see that I take each of these as assisting in the trust building process. It is designed as an action cycle, which means that we can never take it for granted. It doesn't just happen. Nor can we become complacent. So even in the longer term relationships, the building of trust continues.

It begins with **respect**. By this I mean 'show consideration for' each other. For me, this begins with an understanding of what each partner stands for, what goals and visions they have, and how these then impact on their communities of interest.

Perhaps some of that incipient cynicism that we are often confronted with when we attempt to develop such community partnerships comes from a lack of understanding of what such partners actually do. There can be no assumptions that we 'just know' what we do and what capacities we have. So the respect begins with a deeper understanding, which takes some time to develop and much good communication to enable.

It also means that we take time to learn about the history of our partners. What has happened in the past impacts on our present day relationship – even if we didn't know of each other at that time. We should never ignore the importance of history. The relationships that our partners have with other partners is also important in this understanding that comes with respect. An understanding of the culture of our partners is also important.

That leads to our second aspect – **mutuality**. This I take to mean 'empathy' which is a useful and commonplace word in the language of human services. We are exhorted to stand along side our communities, so in that mutual relationship are the principles I am suggesting here. Mutuality between partnerships means honesty, clear communication, not leaping to judgements without information. In a partnership of the kind we are talking about today, the empathy between parties enables the building and re-affirmation of trust.

The third aspect of our action cycle for trust building is **reciprocity**. This is probably the first time that the question of 'what's in it for me?' has emerged in the discussion. However reciprocity is much more than simply getting what you want – it implies that we do so in a way that builds the relationship. We give because the giving is important, not because of what we are getting. Again, this is an important value which often emerges when we talk about the NRM sector so let's incorporate it into our partnerships programs too. Just as we would not approach a community in this 'I'll take what I want approach' – so our partnerships should also be based on a reciprocal arrangement. In order to ensure that such reciprocity works well, we need to understand our partners well – it goes without saying.

So in the building of **trust** these three values are crucial. Just what do I mean by trust in this context? In this sense I am talking about a trust that:

- can be sustained through both positive and challenging experiences
- enables and nurtures
- enables a management of the mistakes that may (and usually do) happen
- enables and strengthens the relationship.

As practitioners working in communities, we should be well aware of the role of trust in building social capital in communities. I am suggesting that such trust is crucial and that these three values enable such trust building and sustainability in the long term.

From these ideas and frameworks we can see how it links to some other common understandings. For example: **capacity building** which relates to a range of activities by which individuals, groups and organisations improve their capacity to achieve sustainable goals – including awareness, skills, knowledge, motivation, commitment and confidence – such capacity building activity should be integrated in all organisational practice. Also important is **community engagement** which includes all aspects of the ongoing relationship between you/your organisations and their geographic and communities of interest. Such community engagement – to work in a strengths-based way - proposes a peer-based relationship, based on trust and principles of mutuality, reflexivity and respect and involves active two-way communication.

Environmental stewardship and social action are now well understood as major drivers in changing land management practices (Government of Western Australia 2003) and the place of innovation in enabling and supporting entrepreneurial activity in communities also strengthens social and cultural capital, thus expanding impact beyond the individual enterprise into the wider community. The links between social capital, community capacity building and the importance of place (Axford & Hocking 2005) in the lives of stakeholders and the broader community, are a critical component of your practice.

Increasingly, demands are being placed on individuals and groups to be self-motivated and self-directed in terms of their planning for the future. At the local level, this demand places pressure on a few, usually volunteers, while it ignores the capacity and inherent strengths more broadly available but less likely to be included. This is not only a national challenge, but also one that has international resonances (Cahill 2005). These ideas and others can be found discussed in more detail in the following publications (Stehlik 2006a; Stehlik 2006b).

Let's run a brief 'check list' against our understanding of the communities in which we operate as this also assists us to understand if we are searching for 'strengths' or 'deficits' and in enabling our practice to be inclusive of social capital building. Such a check list raises some interesting (and challenging) questions:

- What do you consider to be your biases?
- What aspects would you need to consciously work on to increase your defining of community?
- How many people do you know - who knows who?
- How do you record and update this information?
- Are you confident and competent in identifying a particular "community of interest", (e.g. the local Landcare group) and then analysing some under-realised opportunities that may be possible within it?

In conclusion, those of us working at the front line in communities are well aware of the rapid change underway. This is not only from external factors, such as climate variability or price fluctuations, but from also internal factors, such as the fact that many of our land managers are reaching retirement age, and there is a transition occurring between generations³. Rural Australia is also continuing to be impacted by the growth of regional centres, by the hollowing out of young people, and by the (in some places) influx of new migrants who may be on 457 visas, and who have no history or cultural links with the place in which they are now living.

Working from a strengths based perspective, taking account of the fact that your practice can build (or destroy) fragile social capital – means that we have to think about the way we work. We need to be reflexive – that is, we should be learning as we are doing. We should take opportunities such as this conference to come together and share our experiences – positive and negative. It is important to recognise the vital role that the practitioner plays in building and maintaining strong communities. We are committed to our nation's future, which is why we are doing what we do.

I commend you all and thank you for your attention.

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³ This is explored in more detail in: Stehlik, D. (2009) Intergenerational transitions in rural Western Australia: an issue for sustainability? In Merlan, F. (ed) *Tracking Rural Change. Community, Policy and Technology in Australia, New Zealand and Europe*. Australian National University: Canberra. 135-150.