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Re-inserting Advocacy into Social Capital Debates

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Let me make it clear that I think that Systemic Advocacy is a core and essential aspect of social capital. I am puzzled as to why this is not generally seen to be the case. So I guess there are two questions to be answered:

- **What are the key ingredients of social capital and how does systemic advocacy fit in?**
- **Why is it that social capital has been identified and used without the advocacy?**

First, what is social capital? There are of course many debates about what it is and is not, and I must say a lot of misuse of the concept to suit particular agendas. There is in fact quite a lot of agreement among academics about what it is and is not.

Social capital can be developed and used wherever humans gather together for a common purpose. It is primarily associated with civil society, with that space that lies outside the state and the market. Social capital is the key ingredient in civil society. The definition most often used is that of Putnam as “those features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam, 1993).

If you don't like formal definitions, think about your own life. Think about where you live, or work, and the networks you have formed there. Think about a problem that came up. Maybe you were in trouble and needed some help to solve the problem. Maybe the community had a problem, that could only be solved by people coming together to deal with it. Our recent bush fires come to mind for me. I am not talking about calling in the professionals, but using the informal networks to make things

happen. That is social capital. At one level it is obvious. At another level it is new...and has never been formally recognized or accounted.

Let me summarise a few basic propositions. There is some debate around each proposition, but together they are starting to add up to some very powerful ideas.

1. Social capital, like other forms of capital, like money, is an essential ingredient in social action. Social capital does not refer to the social action itself but to the essential prerequisite of social action. If you want something done, you need more or less financial capital, natural capital, cultural or human capital, and social capital.
2. Any community of people who form networks of common interest can generate social capital. Social capital is not something that anyone can possess as an individual, although individuals may make use of it. Essentially social capital resides in the connection between people.
3. However, unlike other forms of capital, you don't need to be rich to acquire social capital. There is little or no correlation between material well-being and social capital except for the extremely poor and disadvantaged.
4. Like other forms of social capital, whether it is used for good or evil is up to those who use it. It is always used for the common good, but that leaves open the question of "whose common good" and "who decides". It is the case that there are nearly always winners and losers in the use of social capital, as with any other form of human activity.
5. Communities appear to be remarkably resilient. The denser the networks of connection and participation, the more resilient the community. The key always is in the relationships. In general, rural communities tend to have higher levels of social capital, at least bonding social capital.
6. There are two levels of social capital (at least). One concerns the bonding networks **within** communities, and the other concerns bridging links **between** different groups. The first is marked by what is termed "thick trust", the mutual support of insiders, the thing that holds a small community together in the face of fire or the loss of banking services for instance. Bridging social capital is not about social support, but about drawing on resources from other networks. It also requires trust, but of a different kind. While bonding is important for mutual survival, bridging is

important for getting ahead, for creating new opportunities, new growth. We need both.

7. An essential feature of social capital is **social agency**: the capacity of people working together to take the initiative. It is about people as active participants, not as passive victims or even as “customers” or “clients”

Can we measure social capital?

Social capital has a number of elements; it is not a unitary concept. With a colleague, Paul Bullen, I was able to demonstrate that you can measure social capital quite easily, and you can measure the different aspects of it, if you ask the right questions. We found eight elements of social capital, including four “building blocks” referring to ‘Trust’, ‘Social Agency’, ‘Tolerance of diversity’ and ‘Value of life’. Underlying all these factors is the common or core ingredient of social connectedness. The other four factors referred to four distinct social arenas: ‘Participation in the Local Community’ (formal engagement with local community organisations), ‘Neighbourhood Connections’, ‘Family and Friends connections’, and ‘Work Connections’. This suggests that social capital may be generated in a variety of arenas, and that people may have access to, or be involved in the production of social capital in different ways. To access the scale we developed, go to Paul’s web-site at: www.mapl.com.au.

So, to summarize what I have been saying so far, social capital is about active citizenship, about people coming together to find solutions and co-ordinate their own actions. Social capital is a necessary pre-requisite for social action. But also social capital is one by-product of social action. It is both cause and effect.

So why has social capital got bad press? That is the other big question here. I think there are two problems here.

1. governments do now fund organisations to generate social capital (that is itself problematic). But they do not fund for Advocacy. In fact conservative governments (and even Labour) do not want advocacy. Advocacy is disruptive, usually critical of government policy, potentially dangerous.

Governments that are driven by fear, do not want to hear the voice of criticism. Let alone fund it.

On the other hand governments of all persuasions have recognized that economic rationalist policies have produced serious negative impacts. One of the most serious critiques of economic rationalism is that it systematically undermines the values of community and the capacity to develop community. In particular, economic rationalist policies have the effect of drawing on existing stocks of social capital, without providing the conditions for its replenishment or growth. In the long term this is a recipe for disaster. Government programs are now in place to reverse this process. In general these programs are about trying to assist community capacity building by promoting social capital.

But of course they want a docile social capital. What they want to promote is a kind of self-help, cheap, obliging, NICE sort of social capital that is about communities helping themselves within the existing system. They want community development without the sting. Status quo not social change. I have been intrigued by the fact that government policy documents relating to social capital talk about networks and trust and mutual helping (and mutual obligation) but they never talk about the community taking the initiative. Clearly governments are trying to use social capital as a tool of social control, not an agent of change.

2. The second problem concerns the attitude of community sector people. This goes back to what you mean by Systemic Advocacy. In old welfare state terms, advocacy really meant **Lobbying the state**. It really meant **“somebody should do something”**. That is actually a very passive position to take. It is actually saying this problem is someone else’s problem, probably the state’s responsibility. That engenders a form of passive citizenship in which we are all recipients or victims of state policy. Having lobbied the state there is nothing else to be done.

What I am arguing for is a form of Active Citizenship. This is not about letting the state off the hook. But it is about taking a much more active role in the process. The community identifies a problem and uses it's social capital to deal with the problem. The solution is almost certainly going to be complex and multi-level, just as the problem is. Social action of this sort almost certainly involves the following:

- **Mobilizing existing community resources what ever they may be**
- **Involving local businesses to contribute their resources**
- **Developing bridging networks to reach outside the community to access information and external resources**
- **Accessing financial and other resources of the state**
- **Lobbying where necessary for changes to the existing legislation or administrative policy or funding priorities**
- **Developing pilots or innovative approaches**

In short, social capital is the key resource that a community can mobilize. It is quite simply “people power”. That power can be used for whatever the community decides needs to be done. Part of that action is almost certainly going to involve systemic advocacy. But the advocacy occurs in the context of broader community action. And leadership remains within the community.