

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT SOCIAL CAPITAL

What is social capital?

Social capital refers to *the social relationships and patterns of reciprocal, enforceable trust that enable people and institutions to gain access to resources necessary to fulfill a particular need or solve a specific problem*. In other words, social capital means connections needed to get a job done. It's the nonprofit board member who has connections to a foundation that can fund a park redesign project. Or the long term relationship between an elementary school and a local seniors program that provides tutors and mentors for children at the school. Or the long-time resident that city administrators know they can ask to gather residents from all parts of a neighborhood to discuss a planned development.

Why is social capital important to program officers, organization staff, and government officials?

Used correctly, the concept can help foundation staff, program designers, policy makers, community members and local organizations develop and implement effective programs that can create thriving communities and foster inclusion and opportunity for everyone living in that area.

I've heard that there's good and bad social capital, how do I foster the right kind?

Some policy makers claim that communities don't have enough social capital, or that insular social networks make it hard to achieve goals. Others claim that social capital must cross diverse groups to be effective. In fact, three kinds of social capital have different kinds of networks and offer different resources:

- **Bonding:** *Networks among individuals or institutions with close, long standing relationships and similar culture such as race and class-based groups*. Bonding networks include, family, friends and others who share similar values. These are the people one automatically turns to in times of need.
- **Bridging:** *Established, trusting relationships that cross boundaries of race, class, culture, or philosophy, regardless of power relations*. Bridging networks can be intentionally built among organizations or develop naturally among diverse people who work together. Bridging networks take time and trust to build, they are not one time contacts.
- **Linking:** *Established, trusting relationships among people or institutions where one person or organization has power over the other*. Relationships between government and its contractors or foundations and the agencies it funds are linking relationships.

While bridging social capital is sometimes considered "better" than bonding social capital, bonding, bridging, and linking social capital are equally important for any project to succeed. Successful initiatives and individuals take stock of their existing social capital and make efforts to reach out through their existing connections to foster new social capital to meet their goals.

Often, linking, bridging, and bonding social capital work together. For example, in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the county Medicaid agency was concerned about providing children's health insurance, WIC, and food stamps to U.S. citizen children of Latino migrants. Since many of these migrants were undocumented, they were afraid to come into the county agency. Some refused to come into the Latino social service agency that provided many services through contracts with government. Using its linking ties to the Latino social service agency, government developed a partnership with this agency and a Latino Catholic church mission program to reach into the bonding networks of new migrants. Bonding ties existed between the Mexican-Americans active in the church mission and the Latino social service agency. These organizations had bridging ties into the largely central American new migrants. The new migrants were willing to apply for benefits for their family members through this agency because they trusted the church.

What does culture have to do with social capital?

Each social capital network comes out of a community with its own norms and cultural cues, or *cultural capital*. Knowledge of cultural cues means knowing how to act, dress and what to say to fit in. People trust those who act like them and are willing to share information and resources with them. Individuals and organizations need to learn the appropriate culture if they want to access resources in that network. In bonding networks, members usually have learned appropriate cultural cues as part of their long term affiliation with network members like their family or people they went to school with. Appropriate culture for bridging and linking social capital is learned through a combination of experience with members of that network and coaching from network members helping a newcomer to join. People that move between different contexts often learn additional forms of cultural capital, becoming bicultural or multicultural. The important thing is that cultural cues needed to access social capital can be learned. Many successful people have connections in many different groups and have learned the appropriate cultural cues for each environment.

I've heard all kinds of other terms like civic engagement as important for civic health, what do these concepts have to do with social capital?

Policy makers and scholars use a number of concepts in their efforts to improve civic health. Civic engagement and collective efficacy are perhaps the most relevant in projects using social capital. Civic engagement can mean many things, from volunteering, to voting, to donating to a worthy cause. In general, civic engagement involves some activity meant to influence society or local community life. Civic engagement is often described as depending on *generalized trust* in one's community or its governing structures like trusting the government, police, or one's neighbors. This is different from specific trust in members of a network

characteristic of social capital. Sometimes people confuse civic engagement and social capital, but while social capital can facilitate civic engagement they are not the same thing.

Often, people participate in civic engagement activities through encouragement and contacts from their social capital networks, like individuals gathering their friends to attend a town hall meeting together. Organizations and government also use social capital to foster civic engagement, like a church gathering volunteers to work in a soup kitchen. But organizations that are well known can also garner support through social media or other general communications channels. Effective project use both social capital and general media outreach to garner support.

Collective efficacy is often used to measure of how well a community works together. It means *shared expectations and mutual engagement by community residents to take responsibility for each other and work together to resolve particular issues*. Collective efficacy is social capital in action. For example, neighbors who gather together to address a community problem or knowing that neighbors will look out for children or elderly in their community, providing support or correcting children if they cause problems. Collective efficacy depends on community members having connections to each other and trusting each other, the key parts of social capital.

The goal of building social capital, civic engagement and collective efficacy is social cohesion. Social cohesion is *the ability of a society to work toward the well being of all its members, foster a sense of belonging and trust among residents, prevent exclusion and marginalization, and create equitable access for everyone*. Fostering social cohesion is a complex goal that involves enhancing all three kinds of social capital, as well as building civic engagement, education efforts, and policies that ensure inclusion and equity for everyone. Diverse, socially cohesive societies are not built overnight but involve ongoing efforts to create shared goals.

How can grants or programs foster more social capital?

It is important to remember that social capital is not just connections, but long term trusting relationships that leads to resources. Building social capital means not just bringing people together, but creating opportunities for them to do activities together to develop trusting relationships. For example, instead of simply creating more inviting public spaces, organizing activities in those spaces that foster relationships among participants. For instance, developing a Friends of the Park project that intentionally includes people from all parts of the community in its activities. Two points are important to remember in developing social capital:

- Everyone has social capital, but their social networks may not have the resources they need to achieve a particular goal.
- Organizations have social capital, not just individuals, and an organization's, faith community's, or civic associations' connections can be used to build social capital for people participating in their projects.

The point of any project to build social capital is to create connections that have access to needed resources. The first question program officers should ask is *What resources are needed to achieve this project's goals?* Next determine what resources the community has, tap bonding networks interested in the project, then start building bridging and linking connections that will foster both more social capital and connections to necessary resources. Often, organizations are the first place to start this process.

The best way to bring together a diverse community is to identify a common problem and ask community members to work on it together. Doing this as a social capital building project involves having a neutral facilitator to invite participants and ensure the project runs smoothly. It also means using foundation or government resources to build effective bridging and linking ties.

Projects need to develop ongoing measurement and evaluation systems to ensure that they are in fact developing productive relationships that will work in the future. This means not just measuring the number of connections or participants but the quality and results of relationships. Evaluation should be used throughout the project to identify problems and refine processes.

What can social capital achieve for communities?

Communities with effective social capital have the mechanisms to solve problems as they arise and improve community by leveraging community resources. These resources are not just for one time efforts, but create durable connections that can achieve other goals. For example, community social capital in the Norris Square neighborhood in Philadelphia first fought drug dealers and cleaned up a needle park, then developed a number of other neighborhood improvement projects over the years. Social capital also has spillover effects by creating channels for information and generating interest in the community.

For more information on social capital and place, see *Social Capital and Place: a Primer* at <http://chrysaliscollaborations.com/social-capital-and-place-primer-and-factsheet/>. This fact sheet on social capital was developed with funding from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation by Chrysalis Collaborations www.chrysaliscollaborations.com.