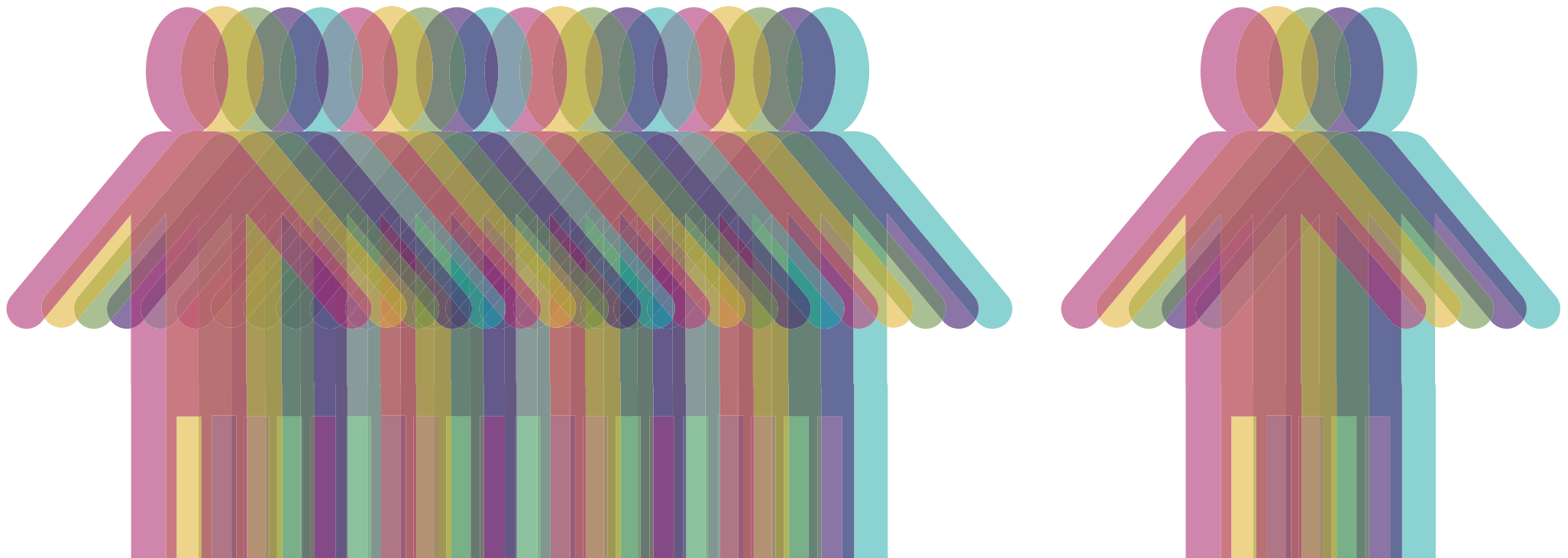


# **Altogether now?** The role and limits of civil society associations in connecting a diverse society



## Introduction

In 2008-2009, NCVO and the Carnegie UK Trust Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland jointly organised a seminar series on bridging social capital. Both organisations had an interest in better understanding civil society's capacity to bridge and build bridging social capital. This has attracted much attention in recent years due to growing fears that our society is becoming more and more fragmented and a belief that civil society could have a larger role in strengthening social cohesion. Civil society associations have undoubtedly a role to play because they engage and connect people, but the development of bridging social capital is not without its challenges.

The seminar series explored the dynamics of bridging social capital in a number of different contexts and provided an opportunity for civil society practitioners, academics and policy makers to share insights into how bridging social capital is generated.

The six seminars in the series covered the following themes:

- building bridges
- social capital and dimensions of equality
- diversity and social cohesion
- intergenerational connections
- bridging the learning divide
- a more civil society.

The speakers came from a range of different backgrounds. Their presentations addressed a number of questions and stimulated some lively discussions that emphasised the contested nature of the topic. In what circumstances and contexts should bridging be encouraged? What are the key fissures in our society that require attention? Whose 'responsibility' is it to bridge? How can civil society associations enable connections across perceived differences? Should bridging focus on exploring differences or similarities? What features of civil society associations are conducive to bridging?

This report provides a brief summary of what was said across the series; individual seminar reports are available on the organisers' websites<sup>1</sup>.

### What is social capital?

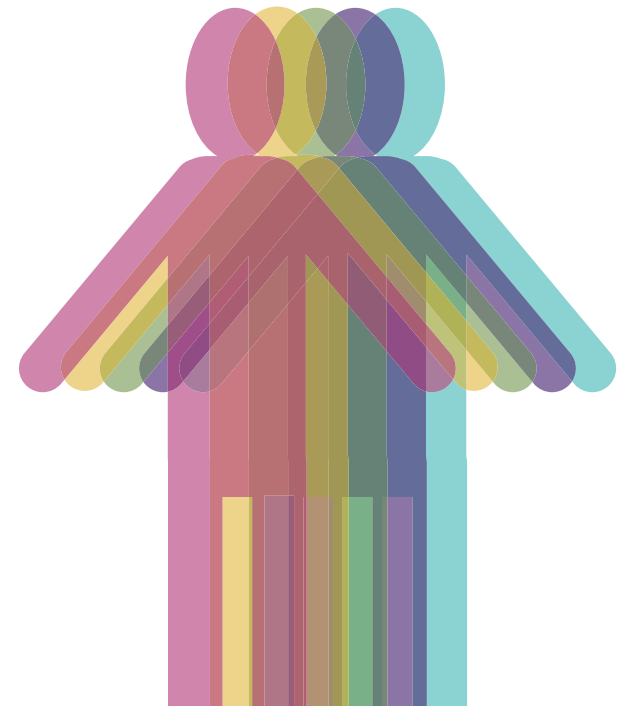
There are many definitions of social capital. It is often used to refer to the social networks and norms (such as values and trust) that bind people together. It is seen as a resource which helps people achieve individual and collective goals.

A distinction is made between three types of social capital:

- Bonding social capital which refers to the ties between people who are similar, and relates to common identity.
- Bridging social capital which refers to the ties between people who are different from one other, and relates to diversity.
- Linking social capital which refers to the ties with those in authority, and relates to power.

In the seminar series, speakers and participants used the term bridging to describe the act of building bridges across differences and divides. They were far less comfortable with the term bridging social capital.

<sup>1</sup> [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/socialcapital](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/socialcapital) and [www.futuresforcivilsociety.org](http://www.futuresforcivilsociety.org)



## Why bridge?

Public policy interest in social capital has been prominent for a number of years, although perhaps less explicitly recently. It was Robert Putnam's work on social capital that first captured the imagination of New Labour, particularly the distinction he made between bridging and bonding social capital. In an increasingly diverse Britain, bridging was considered important because connections between people of different backgrounds were seen as contributing to generalised trust and other shared social norms<sup>2</sup>.

### Building bridges to strengthen social cohesion

The government has referred to the idea of bridging in public policies aimed at encouraging greater social cohesion and promoting community relationships across divides (particularly those based on faith and ethnicity)<sup>3</sup>. More emphasis has been placed on social cohesion since the disturbances in the North of England in 2001 and the publication of the ensuing Cantle report, which highlighted how some communities were living parallel lives and not interacting<sup>4</sup>. Britain's multicultural model was criticised for encouraging separateness, and these critiques have led to a gradual policy shift that values integration over diversity.

After the 2005 terrorist attacks in London, debates about social cohesion became more connected to the issues of Islamic extremism and counter-terrorism. In response to these attacks the government set up the Commission on Integration and Cohesion to *"consider innovative approaches looking at how communities across the country can be empowered to improve cohesion and tackle extremism"*.

There has also been increased government and public focus on migration since the accession of a number of

Eastern European countries to the European Union. The scale and geographical spread of accession migration have been unprecedented in modern society and have contributed to a growing perception that there is less social cohesion and that society is increasingly fragmented<sup>5</sup>.

### Avoiding or resolving tensions and conflict

There is a growing fear that fragmentation could result in the polarisation of communities along ethnic, religious, social and economic lines, leading to feelings of segregation and the emergence of tensions and conflict. Finding ways of bridging communities is considered important to prevent this from happening. Bridge building policies and activities have been designed with the view to reduce prejudice and hostility between different groups and help people live together peacefully<sup>3</sup>. The need to bridge has been felt particularly strongly where there is an open and entrenched conflict between communities, as in Northern Ireland for instance.

### Engagement and empowerment

More recently, there have been growing concerns that the changing demographic structure of the population and the rise in the number of older people could lead to a widening gap in understanding between generations. With the increase of the age dependency ratio (i.e. the number of economically active workers per dependent) equity between generations may in the future no longer exist and this could provoke tensions<sup>6</sup>. Building bridges between people of different ages is seen as one of the ways of addressing this potential threat by bringing together the young and the old to learn from one another, encourage mutual support and fight against stereotypes<sup>7</sup>.

The theory underpinning bridging is that it can benefit individuals as well as communities and society more generally. Bridging is referred to explicitly mostly in the context of social cohesion. However, it is also present, perhaps more implicitly than explicitly, in debates and policies around collaboration and engagement which have all been championed by New Labour. For instance, the development of new forms of governance and partnership working has meant organisations and individuals now work more than ever across sectoral boundaries. Even though there are many challenges associated to these changes, they provide opportunities for interaction and exchange, and this can empower communities and individuals previously excluded from decision-making processes<sup>8</sup>.

### Is social capital a useful concept?

Social capital is a much contested concept. It is criticised for a number of reasons:

- It is nothing new and is just a policy buzzword;
- It can be viewed purely as a good thing and a remedy to many of society's ills;
- It simplifies the complexity of social ties and networks;
- It stops people taking into account key structural factors such as social class.

Despite these criticisms, the concept has had the merit of placing social networks and ties at the heart of debates. The distinction between bonding, bridging and linking seems to have particularly inspired policy makers and practitioners. It has often been used by organisations to better understand the relationships they have with others and identify where the gaps might be.

<sup>2</sup> NCVO (2003) Social capital: beyond the theory

<sup>3</sup> IVAR (2009) Bridging community divides: The impact of grassroots bridge building activities – [www.ivar.org.uk/Findings/](http://www.ivar.org.uk/Findings/)

<sup>4</sup> See seminar report no.3: diversity and social cohesion.

<sup>5</sup> NCVO (2008) The impact of migration on the VCS – [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=10766](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/index.asp?id=10766)

<sup>6</sup> NCVO (2008) Voluntary Sector Strategic Analysis 2008/09

<sup>7</sup> See seminar report no.4: intergenerational connections

<sup>8</sup> See seminar report no.5: bridging the learning divide

## When and how do we bridge?

Today Britain is marked by both diversity and inequality. For instance, schools are becoming more polarised and ‘white flight’ from cities to rural areas is changing the population composition<sup>9</sup>. Subjective assessments of the extent to which differences and interactions between people of diverse backgrounds are healthy, normal, unhealthy or even threatening to social cohesion determine perspectives concerning when bridging is appropriate and how it is built.

### Focus on difference vs. focus on commonalities

Britain’s multicultural approach has increasingly come under criticism on the grounds that it focuses too much on differences rather than commonalities and thereby encourages separate identities. At the heart of the recommendations of the Commission on Integration and Social Cohesion is a belief that encouraging shared experiences and opening up opportunities for meaningful interaction across communities wherever possible are the key to a cohesive society.

A recent study by the Institute for Voluntary Action Research (IVAR) looked at bridge building at the grassroots level in three areas of England and showed that the activities of organisations involved in bridge building are shaped by a similar belief<sup>10</sup>. Their aim is to provide a range of activities including social, educational, cultural and sporting activities which bring different communities together to improve community relations. The research highlights that bridging activities tend to focus on commonalities not differences and use ‘super-ordinate goals’ on which communities can agree as the focus for participation and engagement. Bringing people together to achieve ‘super-ordinate goals’ that transcend differences allows the fostering of shared experiences and builds trust and understanding across communities.

Having practical ‘super-ordinate goals’ (such as rebuilding houses) is particularly effective even in areas where there has been conflict as research in former Yugoslavia shows<sup>10</sup>.

In Northern Ireland, the priority given to the exploration of commonalities through shared experiences has been challenged by research showing that sharing experiences has only led to *functional integration*; this is where people accept to work across boundaries around shared interests on the understanding that differences are not discussed<sup>9</sup>.

Some civil society associations are designed to increase understanding of why people are different and use dialogue as the means to explore difference; with these organisations dialogue becomes the shared experience. Their aim is to provide a space where opposing, often conflictual, perspectives can be explored without necessarily moving toward consensus or harmony. The final seminar in the series focused on conflict and highlighted the dangers of what was termed *disagreement failure*; the avoidance of dialogue around thorny issues in order to maintain or manufacture harmony. Both speakers at the seminar emphasised how important the design of space and methods was in achieving *disagreement success*; bridging that does not rely on common ground or consensus but rather aims to develop relationships across divides<sup>11</sup>. Speakers were keen to distinguish between harmony and ‘good relations’; for them, community cohesion or ‘good relations’ are not the same as harmony, consensus and assimilation.

These different takes on bridging are in part due to context. The IVAR research focused on areas where cohesion and the prevention of tensions and conflict were the goals. In that context, social activities appeared to be more popular than the more confrontational activities which explore antagonisms more explicitly.

Clearly the learning from Northern Ireland is gleaned from a conflict resolution perspective. Undoubtedly, exploring both differences and commonalities are not mutual exclusively and both contribute to the development of a more cohesive society.

### Dynamics between bonding and bridging

To build bridges people need to interact both within their own identity group and across boundaries<sup>12</sup>. Many civil society associations provide spaces in which both bonding and bridging can take place. London Citizens, for instance, use activities that bond people together to build capacity (e.g. citizenship skills) within affiliate groups and activities that bridge communities (e.g. deliberation and debate) to agree agendas and actions across the different groups.

How to achieve a healthy balance between bonding and bridging social capital has been largely contested in recent debates on multicultural Britain and has been central to debates in Northern Ireland. The Commission on Integration and Cohesion identified bonding as one of the main reasons multiculturalism has led to the development of parallel lives. It recommended that bonding (single group) funding should be the exception and not the rule and that funding, from government and independent sources, should be directed to those organisations that promote integration and cohesion in their service delivery. This particular recommendation sparked a national debate in the voluntary and community sector that highlighted the sensitivities surrounding the question of when bridging should happen, the extent to which bridging should be integrated into public service delivery and bridging requirements attached to funding<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> See seminar report no.3: diversity and social cohesion

<sup>10</sup> See seminar report no.1: building bridges

<sup>11</sup> See seminar report no.6: a more civil society?

<sup>12</sup> See seminar report no.1: building bridges

<sup>13</sup> CLG (2008) Cohesion Guidance for Funders Consultation: Summary of Responses – [www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/cohesionguidancesummary](http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/cohesionguidancesummary)

Critics stressed the adverse effects this would have on organisations that play an important role in supporting disadvantaged groups in a wider context of inequality. Bonding activities are a key tool in empowering disadvantaged and marginalised groups and also a prerequisite for bridging. Inequality makes bonding essential for disadvantaged groups<sup>14</sup>. Research has shown that bridging, like linking, is more resource intensive. Bridging without parallel efforts at bonding can be exclusionary, leaving groups without capacity marginalised. A recent court ruling acknowledges the key role of equality in cohesion:

*'There is no dichotomy between the promotion of equality and cohesion and the provision of specialist services to an ethnic minority'<sup>15</sup>.*

### The problem with bridging

The use of the concept of bridging raises challenging questions around what constitutes difference. Everybody is obviously different but policy implies that some people are more different than others. Clearly the focus in policy is on differences of faith and ethnicity.

The boundary between bonding and bridging is usually blurred. As a participant to one of the seminars pointed out, if you go to a football club with people from diverse backgrounds, are you bonding with the other players because you share a common interest (i.e. football) and feel you belong to the same team, or are you bridging because you might not be of the same faith or age?

Making the distinction between bonding and bridging might mean artificially putting people into boxes and simplifying quite significantly reality by failing to acknowledge the complexities of people's identities. Bonding and bridging clearly co-exist in many situations and can be mutually reinforcing.

The distinction between bonding and bridging rests largely on how identity in a given context is perceived; in a society where individuals adopt multiple identities such assessments of identity can be problematic. What may look like bonding from the outside might feel like bridging by those involved. It depends entirely on the lens being used. Through one lens a group may look ethnically homogeneous but individuals might still be bridging across gender, class, faith and intergenerational lines. Often, the internal plurality of each group is overlooked.

### Beyond identity

Although much of the public debate on bridging tends to be dominated by issues around cohesion and multiculturalism, bridging across different communities goes beyond identity. Bridging can be a useful tool in a number of contexts; to build power and to enhance mutual benefit and support. Beyond the current preoccupation with cohesion and the focus of public policy on faith and ethnicity, the following examples illustrate how bridging can help deliver social change:

- Enhancing intergenerational connections is one emerging area. Changing family patterns, living arrangements and the development of age segregated activities are contributing to a lack of intergenerational interaction. Intergenerational activities can provide mutual benefits, increased social capital and help break down stereotypes. Home-sharing schemes have developed over the last few years in Europe, particularly in Spain. They promote exchange between elderly individuals willing to take students into their homes during the academic year in return for company and personal help<sup>17</sup>.

- The community organising initiatives, Change-makers (Bradford and Manchester), Together Creating Communities (Wales) and London Citizens, bridge communities of interest, faith, place and identity in order to build power. These coalitions are aimed at engaging local communities in generating change; issues can range from local street lighting and litter to the living wage<sup>18</sup>.
- Community-university partnerships are another example of bridging beyond identity that surfaced in the seminar series. Through the paradigm of *knowledge mobilisation* these partnerships engage administrators, students, academics and practitioners from the community and voluntary sector in a range of different projects that aim to tackle disadvantage and promote sustainable development through partnership working<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Kaur and Shah v London Borough of Ealing (CO/3880/2008)

<sup>17</sup> See seminar report no.4: intergenerational connections

<sup>18</sup> See seminar report no.1: building bridges

<sup>19</sup> See seminar report no.5: bridging the learning divide



## Where do we bridge?

Civil society associations are well placed to build bridges. They provide many opportunities to bridge by promoting associational life and creating independent spaces in which people can come together for purposes and causes they value. These associational spaces range from the informal to the formal and from the local to the virtual. People from different backgrounds can come together in these spaces because they have a common need or because they feel that collectively they can make a difference and contribute to a common goal. But beyond advocacy and campaigning, civil society associations provide spaces that simply allow people to get together around a common interest or a common view on how they want to enjoy themselves and have fun. The convivial nature of social action can be very powerful.

The interaction that takes place in these spaces, which people have freely chosen to take part in, contributes to the building of trust. Whether the resulting trust is truly embedded or simply temporary and functional remains unclear. However, in fragmented or polarised settings, the evidence suggests that civil society associations have been very important at controlling levels of outright conflict. If there is a lack of organisational links between communities, there is more likely to be overt violence<sup>20</sup>.

## Incidental vs. intentional bridging

Many civil society associations unintentionally build bridges. Bridging is not for them an organisational objective; it is a by-product that happens as a result of their activities<sup>21</sup>. For instance, organisations like community centres and other multi-purpose organisations that provide a range of services and projects, do not necessarily set out to bridge but they often do so when they are inclusive and reach out to people across their communities.

A majority of the grassroots organisations and projects in the IVAR study explicitly aimed to encourage social cohesion, social interaction or mutual understanding. Amongst all the activities on offer, the research found that social activities, including cultural and sporting activities, appealed to a greater number of people. In the study, government funding had some impact on start-ups, however it was not the prime source of support for bridge building activities, which mostly relied on independent sources such as grants from charitable trusts and in-kind support from volunteers or partner organisations. At the grassroots level, bridge building activities were often initiated by social entrepreneurs with a vision and an ability to network within and across boundaries.

Some civil society associations set out to build bridges by exploring differences very explicitly through activities such as facilitated dialogue, conflict prevention or resolution, mediation and reconciliation<sup>22</sup>. These organisations, which are at times referred to as concord organisations<sup>23</sup>, operate mostly in areas where they have been long-lasting conflicts and antagonisms between communities. Dialogue and deliberation, especially in a conflictual context, require an attention to process, skills and spaces, which should be welcoming, safe and 'mutual'. An example in the seminar series of such an organisation is the St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace where people can find new ways of addressing conflict. Its objective is to create a space where modes of deliberation do not rely on consensus but aim to develop relationships across strong divides. Imaginative and thoughtful participatory processes are used to facilitate debates and help people learn and practice the skills of listening, questioning and self-expression.

<sup>20</sup> See seminar report no.3: diversity and social cohesion

<sup>21</sup> See seminar report no.1: building bridges

<sup>22</sup> See seminar report no.6: a more civil society?

<sup>23</sup> Nelson, B et al (2003) The Concord Handbook: How to build social capital across communities

## Why civil society?

The role of civil society in generating bridging social capital has been recognised and to a certain extent encouraged by government. However, there are a number of very real challenges that need to be acknowledged:

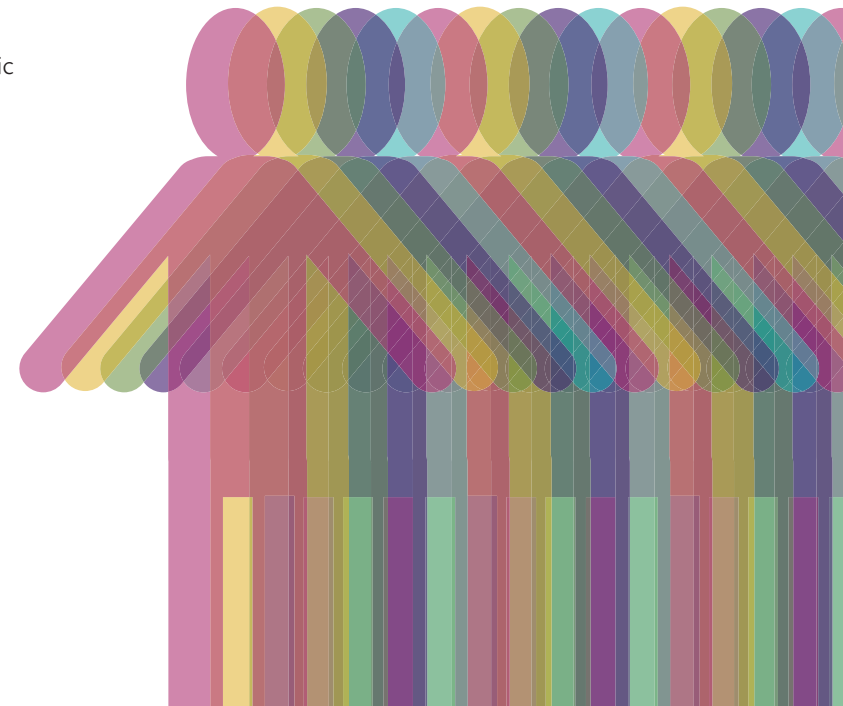
- There is widespread expectation amongst policy makers that civil society associations have the capacity to bridge communities. Unintentional bridging does take place but it is by no means systematic.
- Context matters – civil society associations are responsive to local circumstances and are more successful at bridging if the external environment is supportive.
- Behavioural and attitudinal changes do not happen overnight – bridging may exist very momentarily without having any significant impact. Sustainable change is more likely to take place if long-lasting links are built at the local level and this requires long-term commitments. A key message from practitioners is that meaningful bridging takes time and resources.
- Outcomes are unpredictable and context specific making it very difficult for this kind of work to access funding streams, particularly when it focuses on the provision of social activities.
- Independence remains essential – there are tensions when the state tries to encourage bridging from above, even when initiatives are well intentioned. Government needs to be supportive of existing groups and projects without transforming them into something that no longer corresponds to what people want and need.

- Many civil society associations have been traditionally very good at bonding activities – the challenge for them is to connect to other groups and encourage internal bridging by becoming more diverse and inclusive.
- Civil society associations are not always a force for good; some clearly promote violence, intolerance and exclusion, and do not want to bridge.

Civil society associations are well placed to build bridges, but bridging is a shared responsibility and many other actors have a role to play. There are numerous places such as schools and workplaces, where people interact with one another that can promote a better understanding of diversity and difference. The way Manchester Council is implementing its intergenerational programme exemplifies this well<sup>24</sup>. Public services are particularly important; if people feel there is equal and fair access to local services, they will start thinking they live in and belong to the same place<sup>25</sup>. Debates on diversity and social cohesion are hard to separate from the wider social justice and equality debate. The risk of tensions and conflict is higher if people suffer discrimination and marginalisation from social, economic and political opportunities.

<sup>24</sup> See seminar report no.4: intergenerational connections

<sup>25</sup> See seminar report no.3: diversity and cohesion



## Conclusion: Altogether now?

Society currently faces multiple challenges. Climate change, resource depletion (peak oil etc.), growing inequality and increasing diversity provide a backdrop to the current economic and financial crisis. In a context of 'super diversity'<sup>26</sup>, democratic solutions to these huge challenges require that *disagreement success* becomes the norm; where individuals and groups who hold conflicting interests and values are able to explore rather than avoid difference. Implicit in this is a societal responsibility to bridge.

In an ideal world the question of 'altogether now?' would have a simple answer; yes, all groups, communities and individuals should be encouraged to bridge either by connecting to others or by increasing the diversity of their members, volunteers and stakeholders. However, this issue can not be viewed in a vacuum. Inequality, in various guises, marks our society. Power is not equally dispersed and considerations of power and inequality make any simplistic answer to the question 'altogether now?' untenable.

The relationship between bonding, bridging and linking social capital is not a simple one. The challenge is to find the appropriate balance between all types of social capital and to ensure that bonding activities do not lead to isolation. Throughout the seminar series, there was mention of initiatives that related bridging to bonding and linking social capital, particularly those concerned with power and empowerment. The intergenerational, community-university partnerships and citizen organising examples highlight how bonding, bridging and linking can interact simultaneously.

Civil society has always brought people together in associational life in a number of different contexts and for a diversity of needs, causes and interests. The first step in associational life is always bonding whether that be around an interest such as football, a place or an identity or all three combined. We must not lose sight of this dynamic in associational life and the added value this brings to many individuals, groups and communities.

The seminar series also showed that bridging can be incidental and/or fun; it goes beyond explicitly addressing identity and difference. Civil society associations bring different individuals and groups together around social activities which appeal to a greater number of people. Sporting and cultural activities can be key tools for encouraging bridging interactions.

The drivers of change in society<sup>27</sup> suggest that the imagination, skills, methods and processes that civil society associations use to build bridges will be in greater demand in the future. External parties including government and funders can and should encourage civil society associations to explore how they can contribute to bridging. However, ensuring that such initiatives do not undermine the voluntary dimension of civil society (or the missions of associations) will continue to be a key challenge for all those who wish to see more bridging.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank those who took part in the seminar series, especially the speakers whose insights were invaluable:

- Seminar 1: building bridges – Prof. Margaret Harris (IVAR) and Catherine Howarth (London Citizens)
- Seminar 2: social capital and dimensions of equality – Sughra Ahmed (Islamic Foundation) and Zohra Moosa (Fawcett Society)
- Seminar 3: diversity and social cohesion – Nick Johnson (Institute of Community Cohesion) and Nick Acheson (University of Ulster)
- Seminar 4: intergenerational connections – Vicki Dare (Department for Children, Schools and Families), Mariano Sanchez (University of Granada) and Sally Chandler (Manchester City Council)
- Seminar 5: bridging the learning divide – Tom Schuller (NIACE) and Angie Hart (University of Brighton) and Sally Hiscock (Brighton and Hove Community and Voluntary Sector Forum)
- Seminar 6: a more civil society? - Duncan Morrow (Northern Ireland Community Relations Council) and Simon Keyes (St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace).

<sup>26</sup> Vertovec, S (2007) New complexities of cohesion in Britain

<sup>27</sup> Carnegie UK Trust Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society (2008)  
The state of civil society to come





NCVO (National Council for Voluntary Organisations) is the largest umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector in England. We work to support the voluntary sector and to create an environment in which voluntary organisations can flourish.

NCVO has over 7,000 members involved in all areas of social action at the national and local level. With over 280,000 individuals and over 13 million volunteers working for our members, we represent and support almost half the voluntary sector workforce. It is a highly effective lobbying organisation and represents the views of its members, and the wider voluntary sector to government, the European Union and other bodies.

NCVO research aims to support the development of effective policy and practice in the voluntary sector by building a robust evidence base. A number of its research projects have explored the relationship between voluntary organisations and social capital. The seminar series addresses some of the questions on bridging social capital raised by these projects.

To find out more about NCVO go to [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk)

To find out more about NCVO work on social capital go to [www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/socialcapital](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/socialcapital) or contact [research@ncvo-vol.org.uk](mailto:research@ncvo-vol.org.uk)

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The Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society in the UK and Ireland, chaired by Geoff Mulgan, was established by the Carnegie UK Trust to strengthen civil society. The goals of the Inquiry are to:

- Explore the possible future threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025
- Identify how policy and practice can be enhanced to help strengthen civil society
- Enhance the ability of civil society associations to prepare for the opportunities and challenges of the future.

The Inquiry began its work by conducting an extensive futures exercise to gather people's insights regarding possible threats to and opportunities for civil society, looking out to 2025. The findings of this work are documented in two reports: *The state of civil society* and *Scenarios for civil society*.

The Inquiry's interest in the theme of bridging social capital stems from three key faultlines identified from its futures work: the growing isolation of the poorest, increased pressure on social cohesion and the need for the social justice and environmental agendas to intersect. Bridging will be a key tool in helping address these faultlines.

To find out more about the Inquiry go to [www.futuresforcivilsociety.org](http://www.futuresforcivilsociety.org) or contact [info@carnegieuk.org](mailto:info@carnegieuk.org)