

It's who you know that counts

Executive Summary

June 2003

The Role of the Voluntary Sector in the Development of Social Capital in Rural Areas

Background

Put simply, the idea behind social capital is that social networks, and the mutual trust they promote, have a value, both to the individual and to society at large. Because voluntary action engages and connects people there is an implicit assumption that it contributes to the development of social capital. During the autumn and winter of 2002 NCVO undertook research with the aim of further clarifying the link between voluntary organisations in rural areas and social capital. This summary highlights the key findings from the research and related policy analysis and focuses on areas of practical learning for both practitioners and policy makers alike in order to support voluntary organisations working in rural areas in promoting and sustaining social capital.

The Rural Context

The Countryside Agency's Rural Services Survey 2002¹ suggests that a perception that rural residents benefit from higher than average stocks of social capital is a significant factor in driving the population shift away from our cities and towards rural areas, noting that: 'a common motivation for the move into rural areas... is the quest for community identity and a more socially fulfilling lifestyle'. However, it also suggests that:

'some rural communities can suffer from a lack of "social capital"... due to a number of factors including closure of community facilities, decline in religious affiliation, physical isolation, loss of local services and an unbalanced rural population in terms of age and social background that can lead to a loss of community spirit and an increase in isolation for some groups.'

Summary of Findings

1. *Developing social capital forms part of the primary purpose of all the voluntary organisations studied.*

Whilst they are unlikely to use the terminology, the development of social capital forms part of the primary purpose of all the voluntary organisations studied. Whether they are involved in delivering health services, advice, mutual support or community regeneration, each of the four organisations provides benefit to the communities they serve through the development and promotion of strong social networks, mutual trust and shared values.

2. *Social capital is used to tackle the challenges that rural areas can create.*

Voluntary organisations both generate and capitalise on existing social capital in order to tackle the specific challenges that rural environments can create for the communities that live in them, and these challenges can even represent an impetus for the development of social capital. Whilst social capital can be just as important in other environments, in a rural context it is linked inextricably to the main problems of rurality: isolation, transport, and access to services.

3. *Social capital facilitates voluntary activity; which in turn generates more social capital.*

The voluntary organisations studied clearly contribute to the development of social capital. However, it is equally clear that they also benefit from existing stocks of social capital. The research findings support the concept of a virtuous circle in which social capital facilitates voluntary activity; which in turn generates more social capital.

"Most people join these things because they want to put something into their communities. There is a huge amount of goodwill and people willing to give up their time for the general good."

"I was asked if I'd like to help out which I did, and it got me out and I got to meeting people, because before that I was stuck indoors all the time and I was getting really miserable and fed up. Now it's turned my life around, which is great."

"They're clearly all wearing many, many hats and we are one of the many, many things they do which is useful, because their contacts are wonderful."

4. *The outcomes of social capital can be negative as well as positive.*

Our research highlights the potential for social capital to reproduce rather than tackle inequalities because those with access to decision making processes and resources build on and strengthen their position to the exclusion of those who do not. In all activities relating to the development of social capital there is a risk that the networks, values and attitudes engendered can become narrow, self-perpetuating and exclusive; and voluntary action is no exception to this rule.

5. *Voluntary action requires a combination of financial and human resources together with social capital.*

The successful development of voluntary action requires a combination of financial and human resources together with social capital. The three forms of 'capital' are interdependent and in combination create an impact which is significantly greater than the sum of their parts. The research findings underline the fact that, in rural areas as elsewhere, no single form of 'capital' whether human, social or financial can be used as a substitute for the other two.

6. *Institutions such as local government have the power to enable or inhibit the development of social capital.*

The study highlights the power of local and national institutions, governance structures and policies to enable or to inhibit the development of social capital. In a rural context this ranges from the impact of national funding programmes to decisions about public transport policy and the development of local structures for supporting and engaging with the voluntary sector.

7. *The sector plays an important role in building social capital by facilitating networks and relationships and making voices heard.*

Our findings also emphasise the important role played by voluntary organisations in facilitating networks and relationships within and between sectors, within communities and between communities and institutions. This demonstrates the role played by the voluntary sector in enabling the bridging and linking activity which is often thought to be more difficult to achieve in a rural context.

What is Social Capital?

Social capital is about who rather than what you know. The basic premise is that relationships foster mutually accepted 'norms' of behaviour and in particular generate reciprocity and trust within groups. These are beneficial because they make the achievement of objectives easier and the resolution of problems more effective. What you know, for example your education, skills and experience is, in the language of the current debate, often described as 'human capital'. You may also come across 'physical capital', which refers to the tools and other physical resources required in order to undertake an activity (for example: computer hardware, meeting spaces, a minibus). And of course there is 'financial capital'. It is argued that each of these forms of capital have a role to play in social and economic development.

Outcomes of Social Capital

Studies into social capital range dramatically in scope. Small-scale research at the household and community level has suggested that *'the well-connected are more likely to be housed, healthy, hired and happy'*.² At the same time a growing body of evidence suggests that social capital can have a variety of positive impacts on a larger scale, ranging from economic growth and government effectiveness to improved labour market participation, election turnout, educational achievement, lower crime rates, better public health and a general improvement in perceived quality of life. However, as well as creating positive effects, social capital can also be associated with negative social impacts. Strong social networks and powerful relationships may be of benefit to those within a group but this does not always translate into wider public good: *'powerful communities can have disadvantages – lack of privacy, social claustrophobia, cliquiness and hostility to newcomers'*.³

"[The steering committee] has drawn the usual suspects that you'll find in any community, so you can almost guarantee that your chair person, your treasurer, your secretary will also hold positions of similar authority in other groups... the movers and the shakers if you like."

"Now we've got over the first hurdle, we have got some money and we have something to work with. But more importantly, we have the information about how to go about things."

"The voluntary sector has to be supported... I don't know, where does it go to? It's got to be supported and helped by somebody, whether it's a strong CVS or strong local authority or whatever, it does need links."

"No doubt there will be other issues that come up and I'm sure they'll fight every inch of the way, we'll all try our best to help one another, to make things better and to make things easier with access to and from buildings, out and about within the town itself and generally getting a voice where we can be heard."

Different Kinds of Social Capital

Just as there are different kinds of social relationships there are different kinds of social capital.

Bonding social capital is associated with a sense of common identity and high levels of personalised reciprocity and trust (for example families, close friends and neighbours).

Bridging social capital describes looser ties and is associated with more diverse relationships, sustaining generalised reciprocity and trust beyond those who are familiar or well known (for example work colleagues, acquaintances, other communities).

Linking social capital is associated with access to, and confidence in, governance structures and institutions and relates specifically to 'the capacity to leverage resources, ideas and information from formal institutions beyond the community'.⁴

- All three forms of social capital are considered necessary to a strong community and finding the right balance between the three is seen as critical.
- While bonding social capital helps people to 'get by' in life and enables them to manage risks better, broader ties in the form of bridging or linking social capital are essential for 'getting ahead' and adapting to change.
- Bonding ties provide communities with a sense of identity and common purpose, but without the necessary cross-cutting ties to transcend ethnic, religious, social, geographic or other divides they can also lead to the pursuit of narrow self-interest and to the rejection of outsiders.
- It has been argued that bonding social capital often predominates in rural areas where there is a focus on strong family links and close ties between neighbours within small communities.

Key Themes and Outcomes

1. Different kinds of social capital

In undertaking this research we wanted to explore how the different types of social capital are generated by or related to different kinds of voluntary sector activity. Each of the organisations studied contributes to some extent to the three types of social capital. However the relative strength of these different types of social capital varies in each group and depends significantly on an organisation's objectives and the activities they engage in.

Although bonding social capital (based on common identity) often represented the basis on which the organisations were founded, none of the organisations is self-sufficient. Bridging (based on more diverse relationships) and linking (relationships with government, institutions and power structures) are both decisive in helping the organisations develop and achieve ongoing sustainability. All three forms of social capital support, and to some extent rely on, the existence of the other two. However bridging and linking social capital are more challenging and resource intensive, and require greater levels of capacity building support to sustain.

Our findings emphasise the potential benefits of developing an understanding of the three different kinds of social capital, the dynamics between them and the challenges and opportunities associated with them. This is true not only for voluntary organisations working on the ground with rural communities, enabling them to assess, evaluate and develop their working practices, but also for local and national policy makers who wish to better understand and promote the relationships between social capital and voluntary action.

2. Communities of place versus communities of interest

Rural policy makers can tend to assume that rural communities are homogenous and that community of place correlates to common identity whereas rural communities themselves may be more likely to focus on local differences. What constitutes difference and what 'local' means in any given context is open to debate. It is important therefore that we avoid making generalised assumptions about the homogeneity of rural communities.

In the four organisations surveyed community of interest is as crucial a determinant in the development of social capital as community of place, in many cases more so. In identifying sources of common identity most interviewees identify shared values rather than shared localities.

One of the key ways in which social capital can be a useful tool for voluntary organisations to evaluate their work and relationships is in the focus it places on exploring ideas of common identity and issues of diversity at the local level.

3. Bridging, linking and influencing

A focus on the work of the sector in the context of social capital draws attention to the wider role of the voluntary sector in society. It highlights the importance of the relationships voluntary organisations can foster across sectors, between organisations, within communities and between communities and power institutions. One of the questions addressed by the research is whether voluntary organisations in rural areas are successful in building the cross-cutting ties that allow them to engage in wider public debates. We find that the more an organisation is able to form ties with similar organisations in the sector; to co-operate and to act as a group, the more they are likely to have an influential role on behalf of their communities.

However, amongst the rural voluntary organisations surveyed, the arena for this activity is quite narrow, with few organisations exerting influence beyond the district in which they work. Much of the activity that focuses on developing cross-cutting ties is driven by the immediate need to survive rather than by broader strategic aims.

All of the organisations studied demonstrate some success in forming alliances and relationships with other organisations, and influencing wider public debates, but at the same time they all stress the challenges and capacity issues posed by undertaking this kind of activity. Capacity building support is required to facilitate bridging and linking social capital.

4. Social capital, rurality, access and isolation

The greater distances, dispersed populations, smaller settlements, extended travel times and associated transport issues which characterise rural areas can all have specific impacts on the development of social capital. Individually and collectively these issues can significantly exacerbate the experience of both physical and social isolation within rural communities, limit the development of social networks and hamper voluntary activity. Rural isolation limits both access to key services and the capacity to develop and maintain social links and networks. At the same time these challenges can emphasise the importance of social networks and provide an impetus for the development of social capital. The voluntary sector often plays a key role in generating and capitalising on social capital within rural communities in order to address the challenges rural life can entail.

In many cases the role adopted by the sector in rural areas is that of bridging the access gap for those members of the community who are unable to access mainstream services. In recent years there has been an increasing policy focus on encouraging rural communities to act as social entrepreneurs and support a range of 'hard to deliver' services, which are often provided by the public and private sectors in urban communities. Voluntary agencies can also play a crucial role in influencing local and national policy agendas in order to improve the extent and quality of rural service provision.

All of these roles demonstrate the importance of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in the effective delivery of rural services and highlight the capacity of the sector to generate social capital in order to tackle the access issues that impact upon rural communities. However, support is required to enable rural voluntary organisations to develop this capacity.

"I think a very wide mix of different people [have taken part] including people living in council houses, and people living in big houses with well paid jobs. I think there is a lack of people who come from the southern and the northern end of the village."

"I think they would really value having our contribution, because we are very much listening to the community and in touch with the community."

"So where do you actually get that voice if you don't support your own local disabled association, because if you haven't got them there's not many other groups you can actually go to, and listen to and gather that information."

"If there was transport more people could come and we could travel further afield, we could get together with another Association, that would be rather nice I think, an activities thing together, but we can't do it while we're stuck in one place with lack of transport."

"The implications are great for those suffering from rural isolation, or for bringing people into the economy of the town to go shopping and things like that."

"That was a major, major factor in coming here was transport was provided and childcare was provided."

5. Organisational sustainability

Each of the groups studied relies heavily on a small number of like-minded enthusiasts who are often highly committed and over-stretched. Burnout of active members, especially those with specific responsibilities in the organisation, can be a threat and the reliance on a limited pool of individuals raises concerns around dependency, knowledge management and sustainability.

One of the important issues highlighted by this finding is the importance of skills development within the rural voluntary sector, whether for volunteers or paid staff, because it appears that the development of skills and knowledge have the potential to create significant ongoing benefit both for the sector and for the development of social capital more widely.

6. Whose Social Capital is it anyway?

In answer to the question 'whose social capital is being developed?' our research found that there are evident deficits amongst the most excluded groups. Even where organisations are aware of these gaps, engaging with a wider cross section of the community is often a slow and challenging process. Funding programmes that are linked to a requirement to demonstrate broad engagement are successful in raising the profile of these issues but capacity building support is required to enable organisations to rise to this challenge effectively.

Whilst the organisations which are engaged in the delivery of services to the wider community clearly engage with a wide cross section of their communities, those organisations that focus their activities within a specific community (whether of interest or locality) show a tendency to be more limited in the diversity of the groups they engage with.

Amongst all four organisations in our study, the majority of volunteers are past retirement age. National statistics suggest a slow trend of decline in the numbers of younger volunteers and this may be emphasised in rural areas where populations are ageing at a more rapid rate than elsewhere. All of the organisations in this study express a desire to recruit younger volunteers but few have been successful in doing so. In a society with increasingly hectic lifestyles, with more people in full time employment, more people working longer hours and more people likely to work beyond the current retirement age, voluntary organisations may need to explore different forms of engagement for those who have less time to give. This would reduce the significant pressure on existing supporters and is vital if organisations wish to engage with a more representative cross-section of the community.

Existing capacity building activity is primarily targeted at members who are actively involved in the groups we studied, who already demonstrate high levels of both human and social capital. This support often fails to address the wider issues of community participation and the engagement of service beneficiaries. Those delivering capacity building support do not always appear to clearly distinguish between building organisational capacity and the slower process of building community capacity. This failure to distinguish may lead to unrealistic expectations of the capacity of both voluntary organisations and communities.

Initiatives that aim to promote social capital, community engagement and participation need clearly to define whose social capital is being developed, who is being empowered and, crucially, for what purpose.

"We are stuck, we're limited, [the President] tried to retire a bit so we made her vice president, but she's still working flat out now, she has that way, she'll do it until she dies."

"I think as the years go by, is that they will lose very, very valid members of the committee, probably through seeing their own personal projects through and then retiring, and suddenly find it's not only the project that has gone but a lot of other skills that went with it."

"People like us don't make up the bulk of [the Village], we have to carry these people along with us."

"I think the decisions if they're made by the community itself, all the community has had an opportunity to contribute to the process, it can only be a good thing. A lot of funding we're looking at can only be got via the community."

"I don't think it matters necessarily that the people who are the driving force are of a kind, which by and large they are..."

"What we have so far failed to do I think is to find young people to take part, and we need that. We need the energy of the young, we need the different viewpoints, we don't just want [Village] to be run by a lot of elderly fogies whose ideas and whose standards, whatever, are different from the young people of today."

"A lot of things do tend to be organised by the people who have time on their hands."

"We've not been into, some of the housing estates for example, social housing, where those people are not going to come out of their own free will... If we were really critical we're still not a representative community organisation and may never get to that stage."

The Case Studies

During the autumn and winter of 2002 NCVO undertook research with the aim of further clarifying the link between voluntary organisations in rural areas and social capital. To do this we interviewed a cross section of the staff, volunteers, members and beneficiaries of four voluntary organisations based in rural areas of the South West. The aim was to identify a range of organisations undertaking diverse activities and with different aims and objectives. They were also based in a range of rural environments from a large market town to a small village. The four case study organisations were:

A Disability Association: a volunteer run and led self-help group providing mutual support, social activities, transport and training for people with disabilities and their carers. Founded within the last five years it is based in a market town.

A Healthy Living Centre Partnership: this healthy living centre is based in a large village and run by a voluntary sector led cross-sectoral partnership of organisations. Target groups include people with mental health problems, people with disabilities, the unemployed and those who are isolated due to their rurality as well as the wider community within a ten-mile radius of the centre.

An Advice Centre: situated in a major market town, this small, independent advice centre serves the whole district. The centre provides free advice and support on a range of issues through its network of volunteer advisors.

A Community Group: this relatively young organisation is based in a small village and is open to all residents of the village and the surrounding parishes. Its aims are to develop a regeneration strategy for the area and to establish a voluntary organisation to implement that strategy. The group is entirely volunteer run and led.

This report forms part of NCVO's programme of research and policy development, focusing specifically on the needs of voluntary organisations working in rural areas. We aim to increase awareness and understanding of the scope and impact of rural voluntary activity and develop and promote policy to support the work of the voluntary sector in rural areas. NCVO's rural work is funded by the Countryside Agency.

The main objective of this research is to explore how social capital is generated by, or related to, different kinds of voluntary sector activity within rural communities and to identify areas of practical learning for policy makers and voluntary organisations working in rural areas.

If you would like to find out more about NCVO's rural work or comment on our findings please contact Holly Yates on 020 7520 2559 or email: holly.yates@ncvo-vol.org.uk. You can also find out about the progress of NCVO's rural work at www.ncvo-vol.org.uk. For a copy of the full report priced £10 (£8.00 NCVO Members) please ring 0800 2 798 798 or email: publicationsorders@ncvo-vol.org.uk

¹ Available at <http://www.countryside.gov.uk/ruralservices/keyservices.htm>.

² Woolcock, M. (2001) 'The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes', *Isuma* 2: 1.

³ Countryside Agency (1999) *Living in the Countryside: The needs and aspirations of rural populations*.

⁴ Woolcock, M. (2001).