Investing in each other and the community: the role of social capital

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In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in the concept of social capital and its impact upon society. Social capital is closely associated with community spirit and cohesion, and while definitions vary, the main aspects of social capital are citizenship, neighbourliness, trust and shared values, community involvement, volunteering, social networks, and civic and political participation.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development defines social capital as ‘networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups’. Social capital concerns people’s networks of friends, neighbours and colleagues and the values and trust that people share which help them work together for collective benefits or shared goals. Social capital has both direct and indirect consequences for a wide range of positive social and economic outcomes in areas such as health, education, crime and well being.

Social capital is difficult to quantify for a number of reasons and no single measure or index exists. Firstly, social capital is made up of many different aspects and therefore studies of social capital tend to focus on a range of indicators rather than a single measure. Secondly, many of the indicators of social capital such as trust in people, and people’s values or norms of behaviour, are subjective and intangible, and cannot easily be measured. Finally, there are few longstanding surveys in the United Kingdom which attempt to measure indicators of social capital. However, recently the General Household Survey (GHS) and the Home Office Citizenship Survey have collected data on many of the key aspects of social capital.

Trends over time

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of civic culture with high levels of social trust, and political and civic participation. Indicators of social capital such as civic engagement, social trust, political trust and participation, and perceptions of local neighbourhoods have, however, demonstrated mixed results over recent years.

The United Kingdom has a history of dense civic networks with clubs, unions, leagues, societies, commissions and committees set up for a host of social, political and environmental activities and causes. In general, average membership levels among most kinds of voluntary organisations have risen at least enough to keep pace with population growth since the Second World War. Some types of voluntary organisations, such as environmental organisations, have experienced very high levels of growth in membership. The National Trust had a membership of 3 million in 2002, which is more than ten times the number in 1971 (Table A.1). This represents a significant growth in membership, well above the 5 per cent growth in the United Kingdom population over the same period. There has also been a boom in the formation of new sports clubs. The number of clubs affiliated to the English Football Association rose by 23 per cent in 20 years, from 37,461 clubs in 1975 to 46,150 in 1995. However, for certain types of voluntary organisations, particularly women’s organisations, membership levels are in decline. Membership of the National

Table A.1

Membership of selected environmental organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>Thousands</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Trust</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Society for the Protection of Birds</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Trust</td>
<td>214</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wildlife Trusts</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World Wide Fund for Nature</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Trust for Scotland</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodland Trust</td>
<td>..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenpeace</td>
<td>..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramblers Association</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends of the Earth</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Council for the Protection of Rural England</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
2 Latest Civic Trust data is for 2001.
3 Includes the Royal Society for Nature Conservation.
Source: Organisations concerned
Federation of Women’s Institutes have fallen by 46 per cent over the last 30 years from 442,000 in 1972 to 240,000 in 2002. Trade unions also experienced a drop in membership from a peak in 1979 of 13.2 million to 7.8 million in 2000.

Research indicates that organisational membership and social trust, or trust in other people, are closely linked. Findings from the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) suggested that those who join in and belong to organisations tend to be more trusting of other people, and vice versa. The survey also suggested that it is the act of belonging to a group, rather than the type of organisation or activity, which makes people more trusting in others. The World Values Survey and the BSA both asked the following question of adults: ‘Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people?’ A similar question was asked in the 1959 Civic Culture Study. Data from this study and from the World Values Survey show that there was a decline in social trust in Great Britain from the late 1950s to the early 1980s. In 1959, 56 per cent of adults agreed that ‘most people can be trusted’, but by 1981 this had fallen to 44 per cent. BSA data indicates that this was followed by a period of stability. Over the next two decades, between 1981 and 2000, the level of social trust remained stable, with 45 per cent of adults agreeing that ‘most people can be trusted’ in 2000.

The decline in social trust from the late 1950s to the early 1980s was matched by a similar decline in political trust. The BSA asked adults in Great Britain the following question: ‘How much do you trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party?’ The proportion of respondents who ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ trusted British governments fell from 39 per cent in 1974 to 16 per cent in 2000. Similarly there was a decline in electoral turnout for local, national and European elections, especially in the last decade. The turnout for the 2001 UK general election was 59 per cent, which was the lowest turnout for any post-war UK general election (Figure A.2).

However, some other forms of political participation have increased in recent years. According to the BSA, political action increased from the mid-1980s to 2000, with a peak in political involvement in the early 1990s. In 1986, 34 per cent of people had signed a petition, this rose to 53 per cent in 1991 and then fell to 42 per cent in 2000. Eleven per cent of people had contacted an MP in 1986, compared with 17 per cent in 1991 and 16 per cent in 2000. The number of people who had gone on a protest or demonstration steadily increased from 6 per cent in 1986 to 10 per cent in 2000. The Liberty and Livelihood March in September 2002 highlighted active political participation in the United Kingdom, as an estimated 400,000 people marched in protest through the streets of central London. The main focus of the protest concerned opposition to a proposed ban on hunting with dogs in England and Wales, but the march also incorporated other grievances from rural communities.

People’s perceptions of their local neighbourhood give an indication of the
strength of community spirit and neighbourliness. Since 1984 the British Crime Survey has asked adults in England and Wales the following question: ‘In general, what kind of neighbourhood would you say you live in? Would you say it is a neighbourhood in which people do things together and try and help each other or one in which people mostly go their own way?’ In 1984 the proportion of respondents who perceived their neighbourhood as one in which people ‘go their own way’ or one where people ‘helped each other’ were broadly similar, roughly 40 per cent each (Figure A.3). However, in 1992 there was a sharp increase in the proportion of respondents who perceived that in their neighbourhood people mostly ‘go their own way’ to 49 per cent. At the same time there was a corresponding fall in the proportion of respondents who thought that most people ‘help each other’ to 31 per cent. This illustrates a possible decline in community cohesion. Since 1996 the proportion of neighbourhoods where people are perceived to ‘help each other’ has risen slowly to 36 per cent by 2000, while those where people are perceived to ‘go their own way’ remained stable.

Demographic and geographic trends

Within the broader national picture it is possible to find significant variations in the presence or absence of aspects of social capital between both people with different socio-demographic characteristics and people living in different geographical areas. The way in which some people gain benefit and advantage through social capital, while others do not, is of great interest to planners and policy makers. While the relationship between different groups of people and different indicators of social capital is complex, some key characteristics of people demonstrating high or low levels of social capital can be identified.

In 2000/01 the GHS included a module on social capital. Data were collected on indicators of social capital in Great Britain relating to five main areas: civic engagement; neighbourliness; social networks; social support, and people’s perceptions of their local area. Many of these indicators were found to have statistically significant relationships with people’s demographic characteristics.

Age has a major impact upon indicators of social capital. Young adults aged between 16 and 29 were found to be the least neighbourly (see Table 13.5 on page 226) and least likely to be civically engaged. Compared with adults aged 30 or above, they had lower levels of reciprocity (in terms of doing favours for and receiving favours from neighbours), were less likely to speak to neighbours, and were more likely to trust fewer neighbours. Trust in neighbours rose steadily with age. Seventy five per cent of people aged 70 and above trusted most or many of their neighbours compared with 39 per cent of those aged 16 to 29 (Figure A.4). Young adults, however, had more active social networks, as they were more likely to see and phone friends more frequently than older adults. Adults aged 30 and over, however, were more likely to be involved in their local communities: they were more likely to be involved in local organisations; be better

Figure A.3

Community spirit in neighbourhoods

1 Respondents were asked, ‘In general, what kind of neighbourhood would you say you live in? Would you say it is a neighbourhood in which people do things together and try and help each other or one in which people mostly go their own way?’

Source: British Crime Survey, Home Office
informed about local affairs, and feel more
civically engaged than younger adults.

Many indicators of social capital, such as civic
engagement and friendship networks do not
vary between men and women. However, for
indicators that do vary by sex, women are most
often characterised as having higher levels of
social capital than men. Women have more
social support and are more likely to be able to
call upon a greater number of people for help
in a crisis. Women, in comparison to men, are
also more neighbourly as they are more likely
to know and speak to more people in the local
neighbourhood and are also more likely to
trust neighbours. Men, however, have better
perceptions of their local area and are more
likely to feel safe walking alone after dark in
their local area than women. In 2000/01, 31 per
cent of women reported that they never went
out alone after dark compared with only 8 per
cent of men.

There were some variations by socio-economic
group. People in the managerial and technical
group were most likely to feel civically
engaged. People in the managerial and
technical, and non-manual groups were also
more likely to have higher levels of reciprocity
among neighbours. They were also most likely
to have satisfactory relatives networks, defined
by the GHS as having seen or spoken to
relatives at least once a week and having at
least one close relative who lived nearby.
People in the professional social class were
least likely to have a satisfactory relatives
network.

Marital status and household type shows a
significant relationship with a number of
indicators of social capital. Married couples
exhibited the highest levels of social capital.
They were more likely to be trusting of their
neighbours and enjoy high levels of reciprocity
with them and were also most likely to have
higher levels of social support. Eighty four per
cent of married people had three or more
people to turn to in a crisis. Divorced or
separated people had the lowest level of social
support, 72 per cent had three or more people
to turn to. This group were also least likely to
enjoy living in their local area. Single people
were less likely to be civically engaged and be
less neighbourly than other groups, but they
were more likely to have satisfactory friendship

networks. It should be noted, however, that
marital status is strongly related to age. For
example, 75 per cent of single men and
women are aged between 16 and 34, while 84
per cent of married people are aged 35 or
above. High proportions of lone parent
households were likely to have both
satisfactory friendship and relatives networks.
Non-related households, such as people in flat-
shares, were least likely to know, trust and
speak to neighbours, and low proportions also
reported having a satisfactory relatives
network.

High educational achievement is strongly
related to civic engagement, social trust,
neighbourliness, social support and how
people perceive their local area. People with
qualifications were more likely than people
without qualifications to be better informed
about their local area and more likely to be
involved in a local organisation. Despite
knowing and speaking to fewer neighbours,
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People with qualifications were more likely to be trusting of their neighbours and more likely to do and receive favours from neighbours. Educational achievement is also linked to social support. Eighty-six per cent of people with an A level qualification or above had three or more people to turn to in a crisis, compared with 77 per cent of people without any qualifications. Those with qualifications were more likely to have a better perception of their local neighbourhood, and were also more likely to feel safe walking alone after dark in their local area.

Few social capital indicators are found to have statistically significant relationships with factors such as income or employment status in the GHS data set. However, certain relationships do exist. People’s employment status appears to affect how people perceive their local area, as those in employment were most likely to feel safer walking alone after dark in their local area than economically inactive people, and the unemployed were least likely to enjoy living in their local area.

Data from the ONS Omnibus Survey\(^1\) in 2001 also suggested that employment status had an impact upon volunteering. Those who were employed were more likely than the unemployed to do voluntary work, and the economically inactive were the most likely to be involved. In terms of income, people with higher incomes were more likely to feel safe walking alone after dark in their local area, but were also likely to have the poorest relatives networks. The people most likely to have satisfactory relatives networks were in the middle income ranges, followed by the people on the lower income.

People’s level of education, employment status and income are all closely related. People with higher levels of education are more likely to be employed and have higher incomes than people with lower levels of education. Income is closely related with tenure and the type of area in which people live. The level of deprivation in an area has an impact upon indicators of social capital. According to the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey, people in the least deprived areas participated much more in civic and social activities, and both formal and informal volunteering, than those people who lived in more deprived areas.

People with higher incomes tend to own their own homes, while those on lower incomes tend to rent, either privately or socially. GHS data indicate that homeowners had higher levels of social capital than people who were either social or private renters. For example, 15 per cent of homeowners had responsibilities with a local organisation, compared with only 8 per cent of renters. There are also differences between private and social renters. One indicator of neighbourliness is the amount of reciprocal help that neighbours give each other. Fifty-eight per cent of homeowners, 42 per cent of social renters and only 34 per cent of private renters were found to have high reciprocity. Private renters do, however, enjoy living in their local area more than social renters, although the people most likely to be satisfied living in their local area were homeowners.

Tenure and length of residence are closely related. The majority of private renters stay in a residence for less than five years, while the vast majority of homeowners stay in a residence for over five years. The length of

Figure A.5

Satisfactory relatives and friendship networks: by length of residence, 2000/01

Great Britain

Percentages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of residence</th>
<th>Satisfactory relatives network</th>
<th>Satisfactory friendship network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–4</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5–19</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 or more</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Those described as having a ‘satisfactory relatives or friendship network’ were those people who saw or spoke to relatives or friends at least once a week and had at least one close relative or friend who lived nearby.

Source: General Household Survey, Office for National Statistics
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The time people have lived in an area is a particularly important factor in terms of the strength and breadth of people’s social networks. The longer a person has lived in an area, the deeper roots they have in that community and the more likely they are to be civically engaged, belong to local organisations, look out for and help neighbours, and enjoy living in their local area.

Figure A.5 highlights the relationship between the number of years people have lived in an area and satisfactory relatives and friendship networks. Both the proportions of people with a satisfactory relatives network and those with a satisfactory friendship network steadily increased with the length of residence. The proportion of people with a satisfactory relatives network almost doubled from 34 per cent for those who had lived in their residence for less than five years to 65 per cent for those who had been in their residence for 20 or more years. Satisfactory friendship networks also sharply rose from 53 per cent of those in a residence for under five years up to 72 per cent of those in a residence for twenty or more years. Satisfactory friendship networks also sharply rose from 53 per cent of those in a residence for under five years up to 72 per cent of those in a residence for twenty or more years. There was a greater increase in the proportion of people with a satisfactory relatives network than a satisfactory friendship network after 20 or more years of residence.

The BSA also highlighted the length of residence as an important factor in civic participation. In 2001 20 per cent of people who had lived in a neighbourhood for 6 to 10 years belonged to at least one community organisation. This was double the proportion for people who had lived in an area for less than one year.

Volunteering and people who volunteer are strong indicators of social capital. The ONS Omnibus Survey showed that 32 per cent of adults aged 16 and over had volunteered at least once in the past 12 months and 54 per cent of those who had volunteered had done some form of voluntary activity in the previous four weeks. Volunteers share similar demographic characteristics to those who engage in other activities relating to social capital. ONS Omnibus Survey data indicate that women were involved in more voluntary activities, and volunteer more often, than men. This was despite having less ‘free time’ than men according to the UK 2000 Time Use Survey. The ONS Omnibus Survey also showed that men and women took part in different types of voluntary activity. Women were much more likely to personally raise or collect money and give practical help, while men were more likely to give non-professional advice and serve on committees (see Table 13.4 on page 226 for more details). Voluntary activity also increased steadily with age. Sixty four per cent of adults aged 70 or over had volunteered in the last four weeks, compared with 46 per cent of adults aged 16 to 29. As well as the benefits to society associated with doing voluntary work and the potential benefits for social capital, the economic value of formal volunteering has been estimated at over £13 million a year.

As well as people’s socio-demographic and economic circumstances affecting aspects of high and low social capital, where people lived in Britain also had an impact. GHS data indicated that there was a strong correlation between the region in which people lived and indicators of social capital. Government Office Regions are the smallest geographical levels at which GHS data can be analysed. Despite these being large geographical areas, there were marked regional differences for many indicators of social capital. The highest levels

| Table A.6 |
| Characteristics of people with high and low social capital |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High social capital</th>
<th>Low social capital</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lives outside London region</td>
<td>Lives in London region</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged 30 and above</td>
<td>Aged 29 and below</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly educated</td>
<td>Little/no education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher income</td>
<td>Lower income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least deprived area</td>
<td>Most deprived area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeowner</td>
<td>Private renter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5+ years of residence</td>
<td>0–4 years of residence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Office for National Statistics from the General Household Survey, 2000/01
of trust in neighbours were found in Scotland and the South West of England. Regions where people had the lowest trust in neighbours were the West Midlands and London. The most consistent finding was that people living in the London region tended to have less positive indicators of social capital in terms of being less neighbourly, having poorer friendship and relatives networks, and being less civically engaged than people in other regions.

**Benefits of social capital**

The general characteristics of people with high and low levels of social capital are summarised in Table A.6. The characteristics highlighted provide a summary, and are not in any order of significance. People who have high levels of social capital can be expected to benefit from a wider range of opportunities and positive social and economic outcomes than those with lower levels of social capital. Extensive academic research has associated links between social capital and economic achievement, health, education, crime and quality of government.

At the individual level, the economic benefits of high social capital include helping people to find employment. The majority of jobs are found by networking, people use the help and knowledge of friends and ‘friends of friends’ to find work (see also Figure 4.24 on page 86). Extensive and diverse social networks are linked with lower unemployment, faster career advancement and higher pay. As well as helping out in the job market, having high levels of social capital is also good for your health. Research has shown that people who are more socially connected and have more social support, live longer, recover quicker from illness, suffer less from mental health problems, and engage less in behaviours damaging to health such as smoking.

Social capital and education has a reciprocal relationship, since social capital influences educational attainment and people’s level of education also influence aspects of social capital. The physical presence of adults in a family, and especially parents’ attention and engagement with a child, are shown to have a big influence on educational achievement, child development and the transition to adult life. A person’s peer group and neighbourhood may also have an influence on education in both a positive and negative way. The influence of others and other aspects of social capital can also help combat crime. In areas of high social capital, people’s social norms, values and sanctions act to discourage anti-social or criminal behaviour. People with high levels of social capital are less likely to commit, or be a victim of, crime and are more likely to act to prevent criminal activity.

Benefits of high social capital can also be felt on a larger community or national scale. Social capital can benefit business by helping to facilitate the flow of information and lowering transaction costs through increased trust and the use of networks. Rates of crime, and especially violent crime, are closely linked to levels of social trust at a national level, and national differences in educational attainment are also strongly linked to variations in social trust. Research also indicates that high social capital helps to create and maintain democracy and encourage good government. Strong social capital provides people with a framework for organised opposition to non-democratic regimes, and for existing democracies, social capital through organisations and associations helps to ‘teach tolerance, promote compromise, stimulate political participation, and train leaders’. As well as an aid to democracy, aspects of social capital are also linked to the quality and effectiveness of government. Better quality, less corrupt and more effective governments are strongly linked with high levels of trust and civic engagement.

Negative outcomes of social capital have also been identified. Negative effects occur when social capital is used as a private rather than a public good, or when people or groups are isolated from certain networks. For example, criminal gangs are often characterised by strong internal social capital, which facilitates their illegal activities to the detriment of society. A cartel is an example of how a group of businesses may join forces to limit competition or fix prices, which would then have a negative impact upon other businesses and consumers. Social capital may also help to divide rather than unite communities. In strongly sectarian societies, high levels of social
capital may be found within groups, but very little social capital may be found between them.21 The civil disturbances in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham in the summer of 2001 were largely attributed to strongly divided and segregated communities. In some instances it could be argued that the stronger the social capital within a group, the greater the hostility to outsiders.22

**Conclusion**

Social capital has become a highly visible feature of policy debates, and has begun to influence areas of UK legislation. Recent government schemes have been designed to encourage greater involvement in and commitment to society. From September 2002, citizenship became a compulsory part of the National Curriculum in schools in England. The Millennium Volunteers scheme was set up to encourage 16 to 24 year olds to volunteer in their local community. For older people, the Experience Corps, launched in 2001, aims to attract 250,000 new volunteers aged over 50 by 2004. Through such schemes, the Home Office has set a target of increasing voluntary and community sector activity, including increasing community participation, by 5 per cent between 2001 and 2006.23

Social capital is a highly complex subject and has a wide range of implications for different groups of people living in different places. People also rely on different types of social capital at different points in their lives. In childhood, for example, children are heavily reliant upon their families’ social capital. In adult life, however, social capital plays an important role at times of job search. Many of the aspects of social capital, such as social trust and civic engagement, have long been considered to have important impacts on society. However, the term social capital has given researchers, planners and decision-makers a new common language in which to consider and convey these issues. Research on the multitude of beneficial social and economic outcomes created by high levels of positive social capital has encouraged policymakers to consider how social capital can be created and maintained to benefit people and their communities.

**References**

5. Sport England website (www.sportengland.org/resources/info/basic.htm)
6. National Federation of Women’s Institutes
7. Certification Officer’s Annual Reports (www.dti.gov.uk/emar/tables.pdf)
9. World Values Survey (cited on p.182 in reference 8)
10. 1959 Civic Culture Study (cited on p.182 in reference 8). Wording of the survey question was as follows: ‘Some people say that most people can be trusted. Others say you can’t be too careful in your dealings with people. How do you feel about it?’ (cited on p.431 in reference 3)
11. 1974 Political Action Study (cited on p.204 in reference 8)
12. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance