

URBAN SOCIETY

SOCIAL CAPITAL



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Social capital has been defined by Harvard University's Robert Putnam as the working product of interpersonal networks, contacts, knowledge and related human resources. Taken together these are valuable assets that individuals and groups can use to address a wide range of needs and interests, acting as a counterweight to the negative effects of globalization and uneven access to new information and communications technology.

These collective assets are often found among women, people living in poverty, youth, ethnic minorities, and other socially excluded groups - often as a result of the solidarity and a shared identity brought about by exploitation. Collective action varies from small initiatives to improve pit latrines in Indian slums, to global mass movements organized to advance women's rights and leadership.

Likewise, governments at all levels increasingly recognize the positive role played by social capital, using planning and budgeting instruments to open up decision-making and to include marginalized sections of society, thus rendering cities more inclusive.

Traditions of collective action

The strength of social capital, along with government efforts to support it, varies by region and sub-region. In Central and South America, there is a long tradition of collective action, and women, ethnic minorities, and the urban poor are organized not only in individual communities but also in federations at the national and regional level. The particular character of this social capital reflects older agrarian cultural practices, particularly among ethnic minorities who have migrated to urban areas. Governments have traditionally treated organized action as a threat to the state, yet today are increasingly keen on popular participation as the cause of growing peace and reconciliation in the region.

In South and Southeastern Asia, as well as in Southern Africa, savings groups provide a good example of social capital. Comprised mainly of poor women, such groups save and lend small amounts of money on a daily basis, thereby strengthening trust, solidarity, and collective identity. People have formed networks of such saving groups and formed organizations such as Slum Dwellers International (SDI), comprised of 14 national federations. Unfortunately, support is uneven within governments. Court decisions relating to forced evictions or women's rights may diverge from stated government policy, which itself may not be effectively translated into practice at the provincial or local level.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, ethnic and religious identity, as well as economic survival strategies shape the form of social capital. However, ethnic identity is vulnerable to political manipulation - both nationally and at a micro-level - through patriarchy and patronage. High levels of poverty brought about by structural adjustment and poor governance make social capital a means for economic survival. In some African cities, slum dwellers and women's groups are able to develop solidarity networks which transcend ethnicity, merging faith, gender and economic survival with clan and familial identities. In Africa some governments still regard the emergence of organized action by women's groups, federations of slum dwellers and youth as a threat, while others view such movements as a vital resource for popular democracy and development. As with Asia, however, in Sub-Saharan Africa there is a gap between stated policy and practical action.

In European cities, social exclusion is on the increase since 1990. High unemployment, weakened welfare states and international migration have helped create new excluded populations, and social capital is less developed among these groups, largely because they are facing new social conditions. Forms of social

organization and collective action are emerging however, and NGOs are adjusting their work accordingly, supporting excluded groups at all levels to advance their rights. As in other parts of the world, governments in Europe have responded differently. The European Union both limits the ability of member states to pursue pro-poor policies while at the same time opening up the possibility of collective action against xenophobia and authoritarianism.

Social capital and communitarianism

In North America, forms of collective action among the socially excluded are on the decline. Some observers attribute this to the information technology revolution along with the resulting economic prosperity experienced by the region for the past 10 years. Others locate the decline of social capital earlier than this, though the decline has to be seen as relative. For over a century North America has maintained a tradition of popular participation and community organizing, especially among excluded populations.

Despite economic prosperity, and some argue, because of it, social exclusion persists in North America. Large segments of the African-American, Latino, Native-American, and working class populations, especially women, are not recognized as part of mainstream society. While the state upholds their rights and provides legal recourse, forms of discrimination prevent many from exercising full citizenship.

The United Nations City Summit in Istanbul was an important milestone in the recognition of the role played by social capital, since Civic Engagement and Governance were included among the principles in the *Habitat Agenda*.

Continuing a communitarian tradition in North America

In today's era of the Internet and television, it is widely believed that Americans sit in their homes and offices, isolated from their communities and neighbours, shunning civic activities, and unwilling to get involved. However, according to a recent survey conducted by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change, 77 percent of Americans feel connected to their communities and say the local quality of life is excellent or good. Two-thirds feel optimistic that their community's best years lie ahead.

This positive sense of community translates directly into action. Some 111 million Americans volunteered their time to help solve community problems during the past 12 months, with more than 60 million volunteering on a regular basis. Seventy-eight percent of respondents have donated money to local charities, religious organizations and other non-profit groups. Seventy-seven percent have helped out a neighbour, and 59 percent have discussed a community problem with friends or co-workers.

Americans rate non-governmental institutions above those run by their elected officials. In fact, the federal government ranked 14th on a list of 15 possible problem solvers in communities. The top problem solvers are local police, local religious centres, NGOs, friends, neighbours and parent and teacher organizations at local schools.



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