FROM THE READING ROOM

Rebuilding Communities

Bradley Myers

A Dynamic Balance: Social Capital and Sustainable Community Development
Ann Dale and Jenny Onyx, eds.
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After attending the Forum's annual meeting, which focused on the rebuilding efforts in New Orleans, I found myself thinking about the aspects of community that do not involve moving dirt and putting up structures. In New Orleans, the floodwaters not only washed away buildings and infrastructure, but also seriously impacted all of the intangible things that turn a collection of buildings into a community. How do you rebuild a place's social structure, and what impact should that social structure have on the decisions made in rebuilding the physical structures?

A Dynamic Balance: Social Capital and Sustainable Community Development, edited by Professor Ann Dale of Royal Roads University in Victoria, British Columbia, and Professor Jenny Onyx of the University of Technology in Sydney, Australia, examines these intangibles, or social capital, and looks at their relationship with the general concept of developing sustainable communities. Most of the research in the book focuses on rural communities in Australia and Canada rather than places as urban as New Orleans, but the lessons learned apply equally to all communities. As the editors explain, urban areas are simply more complex, really consisting of multiple, overlapping communities, but research on urban social capital was beyond the scope of this book.

Perhaps the biggest problem in presenting this type of material, a problem that pervades so much of social science scholarship, is the difficulty in defining the concepts. (One of the authors notes that the academic world contains a "definition industry" that has "expanded at a rapid pace.") Social capital, Onyx tells us in the introduction, has "many definitions." Rather than select among them, Onyx provides several and concludes that multiple definitions do not represent a weakness in the field but instead show that social capital "is a complex and multi-layered concept." How-

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ever, it is not necessary to be well-versed in the subtleties of the definitions to comprehend the essays that follow. The "most commonly used definition," that social capital is "those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks[,] that can improve the efficiency of society of facilitating coordinated actions," proves more than satisfactory in making the essays intelligible.

The second concept discussed in the book, sustainable development, although also susceptible to multiple definitions, is defined for purposes of this book as

> a process of reconciliation of three imperatives: (1) the ecological imperative to live within global biophysical carrying capacity and maintain biodiversity; (2) the social imperative to ensure the development of democratic systems of governance to effectively propagate and sustain the values that people wish to live by; and (3) the economic imperative to ensure that basic needs are met worldwide.

The book takes these two concepts and examines the ways they interact and demonstrates how sustainable development is only possible when buttressed by social capital. The book organizes its fourteen chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion by the editors) into four parts: Vision, Connections, Actions, and Assessing Progress. This structure is similar to that used by the UBC press for its entire series Sustainability and the Environment. The organization of the chapters provides a good flow to the book's information, particularly for a novice to this area of scholarship.

After Onyx's helpful introduction provides the needed definitions, presents the subject matter, and lays out a road map for the book, Part 1, Vision, containing just one chapter, tackles the threshold question of whether social capital and sustainable community development have any relationship at all. It should not be surprising that Dale, the author of the chapter, concludes that a relationship exists. But Dale does a good job of deconstructing social capital and its necessity for sustainable community development. Realizing the three imperatives of sustainable development requires connections and communication across the spectrum of community actors. Social capital provides the tools for implementing this communication.

Part 2, Connections, contains two chapters. Professor Vivienne Wilson of Royal Roads University provides some deconstruction of the concept of sustainable development by examining the interrelationship of ecological and social systems. The conclusion is that the health of our ecological system will dictate the nature and success of our social systems. For example, if more people try to live on land than the land can support, the population controls of hunger, poverty, disease, and social strive will follow.

Professor Stuart Hill of the University of Western Sydney provides a similar analysis for the concept of social capital by showing how it can draw upon the social ecology work of the last half century. Hill concludes, somewhat pessimistically, that "global forces" work to undermine social capital in communities. He does express the hope that expanding the

boundaries of social capital and sustainability to allow for input from a diverse body of scholars might increase the chances of implementation.

Part 3, Actions, presents case studies, applied research, and proposals for organizational structure examining a variety of spontaneous and governmental social capital development measures. These chapters demonstrate not only the difficulty in trying to mold existing social capital networks into useful practical tools, but also the problems authorities face in trying to create social capital networks. Collapsing the research and insight of so many accomplished scholars into a few sentences runs the risk of truly misrepresenting their work, but I want to mention at least a few of the chapters that I found particularly interesting.

Jo Baraket of the University of Melbourne raises the question of using community organizations as a tool to build social capital and the best structure for those organizations to use. Four structures are identified with various degrees of power concentration. Pyramidal, where power is concentrated in a single leadership group, and coalitional, where power is dispersed among multiple actors and organizations, prove to be the most effective in generating social capital, although there is concern with the pyramidal structure that broad community concerns may not be achieved due to the focus on the narrow interests of the control group.

Paul Memott and Anna Meltzer of the University of Queensland and the Central Land Council at Alice Springs in Central Australia capture this problem particularly well in their discussion of social capital in the Australian Aboriginal community of Wadeye located in remote northwest Australia. The community had both "informal networks," i.e., family, kin, neighbors, etc., and "formal networks," i.e., civic groups, work associations, other structured bodies, etc. The authors refer to the formal organizations, which drew their organizational structure from mainstream Australian institutions and society, as "whitefella style" networks. My impression, however, is not that the community rejects formal organizations, but rather that it recognizes their differences. In fact, the community members surveyed felt that formal organizations were better equipped to take ownership of problems in order to help members of different informal organizations work together. The most important factor in making these formal organizations work was Aboriginal control and leadership, but with sufficient checks and balances to prevent overdominance by some leaders. So although government, or even large national or international organizations, can try and induce the creation of dynamic local organizations that will create social capital and benefit the community, it must do so with the understanding that it cannot control where that organization might go or how it will choose to express itself.

Professor Grant Sheng of Royal Roads University demonstrates this problem particularly well in his discussion of the failure of the Canadian Nuclear Fuel Waste Management Program. He credits the failure of the twenty-year Can$500 million research and development program not to technological flaws but rather to a lack of broad public support. Despite

considerable time and expense, the general public seemed mostly unaware of the process for determining a location to store nuclear waste until it was nearing its conclusion. By the time public awareness arose, mostly, it appears, through the activities of groups opposed to the storage of nuclear waste, the program had not developed the necessary public trust or social networks that could have resulted in success. Unfortunately, Sheng does not address the question of whether the failure of the program may actually demonstrate the ability of a small, dedicated, and well-organized group to defeat a program through the use of its own social capital.

Part 4, Assessing Progress, contains a single essay, written by James Tansey, a senior research associate at the Maurice Young Centre for Applied Ethics and the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability. The focus here is on the implementation of sustainable development policies. His conclusion is that large international attempts to implement sustainable development programs will not be as successful as those at the regional or, hopefully, bioregional level. He cites the Georgia Basis Futures Project, an attempt to involve the public in the development of southwest British Columbia, as an example of one method of bringing social capital into the implemention of sustainable development. However, the description of the public response indicates, unfortunately, that the project was not very successful. The two major problems were the desire of decision makers and politicians to control the nature and extent of public participation and the, perhaps not unrelated, lack of public engagement.

Dale's conclusion is that sustainable development, which she and all the authors assume is necessary to maintain the planet's long-term ecological health, can only be implemented through the use of social capital. The various social dichotomies—rich and poor, urban and rural, etc.—will only be able to reach agreement regarding their individual responsibilities if they are able to communicate with and trust one another. I finished the book wondering what the various authorities in charge of the sundry aspects of rebuilding New Orleans were doing, if anything, to take into account the wishes, desires, and strengths of the people who live, and lived, in the damaged neighborhoods. If they fail to do so, they may end up rebuilding a city, but neglecting to rebuild a community.