

PRESENTATION NOTES

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Assets Based Community and Economic Development: Implications for the Social Capital Debate

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Social capital is a concept that has become extraordinarily popular in the 1990s. Perhaps its main attraction is that it seems to provide an avenue for addressing the impact of technological, economic and social change on societal well-being. By focusing on the quality of social relationships, levels of trust between people, participation in civic affairs and so on it is an idea that speaks to the concerns of the general public, politicians, policy makers, academics and activists.

In this paper I'd like to reflect on some of the debates about social capital and to do so from the perspective of an academic involved in an action research project with marginalised groups in the Latrobe Valley, about two hours east of Melbourne.

I'd like to start with a story about a meeting I ran several weeks ago in Moe in the Latrobe Valley. This meeting was called because a local retired businessman is offering a large industrial workshed for use as a community resource. The meeting was attended by almost 50 people. There were social service providers who saw the potential for using the workshed to run craft and manual arts programs for their clients. There were individual citizens, mainly retired and unemployed workers and young people, who were interested in using the workshop on a more informal basis for their own hobbies and activities, and for maintaining social connections with others. Happily the building is large enough to accommodate both formal programs run by social service providers and individual and informal activities. A smaller working group of twelve people is now moving the project forward.

As I looked around the room at the people present, it struck me that the meeting was not so much creating social capital where none previously existed. It was harnessing the social capital that already existed in the community of Moe. Certainly some of the individuals present are involved in visible and formal associations and networks, like Rotary and Probus, church groups, health service support groups and so on. But there were also individuals whose networks and connections are largely unseen and unrecognised. For example, one of the unemployed workers has set up a backyard telephone system that connects his neighbours,

most of whom are frail and elderly. Another unemployed worker has established an informal network of volunteers to provide handyman assistance to single mothers and people with intellectual and physical disabilities. These people did not know each other before the meeting so the shed may provide an opportunity for them to make connections with each other and develop some collaborative initiatives. The meeting was tapping into this hidden stream of social capital that already exists in Moe, it was harnessing or enhancing what is already there.

What is important about this story for me is that a town like Moe can be so easily portrayed as devastated by the downsizing and privatisation of the Victorian power industry, as having the social and economic guts ripped out it leaving only the most fragile and tenuous networks of social relationships. Yet what we constantly find in our work in the Latrobe Valley are these hidden and unrecognised networks that might be the basis for enhancing social capital.

It is from experiences such as this meeting that I want to reflect on the social capital debate.

It seems to me that the whole question of social capital is framed in terms of the needs of communities. The debate is about building social capital through different ways of delivering services and programs that address the needs of communities. Some of the key questions that get asked are: What is the best way to meet the needs of communities and build social capital? Will programs build social capital if they are delivered through centralised government? Are local associations and local governments better placed to provide the services that address needs and build social capital?

Coming from the work we are doing in the Latrobe Valley I want to step back from these debates and pose a different set of questions. How compatible is a needs based approach with building social capital? Will focusing on the needs of a community build social capital?

To explore these questions further I want to turn to the assets based community development model (or ABCD) of John McKnight and John Kretzmann from Northwestern University in Illinois. For many years Kretzmann and McKnight have worked with community activists and organisers from inner city neighbourhoods of large North American cities to refine the ABCD approach. They introduce the model through the analogy of a glass with water to the halfway mark. Is the glass half-empty or half-full? The answer is, of course, both. The glass is half-full and it is half-empty. Kretzmann and McKnight remind us that individuals and communities are like the glass of water. We are all half-full and half-empty. Like the half-empty glass we have needs, problems and deficiencies (see Figure 1, Needs Map); like the half-full glass we also have capacities, gifts and resources (see Figure 2, Assets Map).

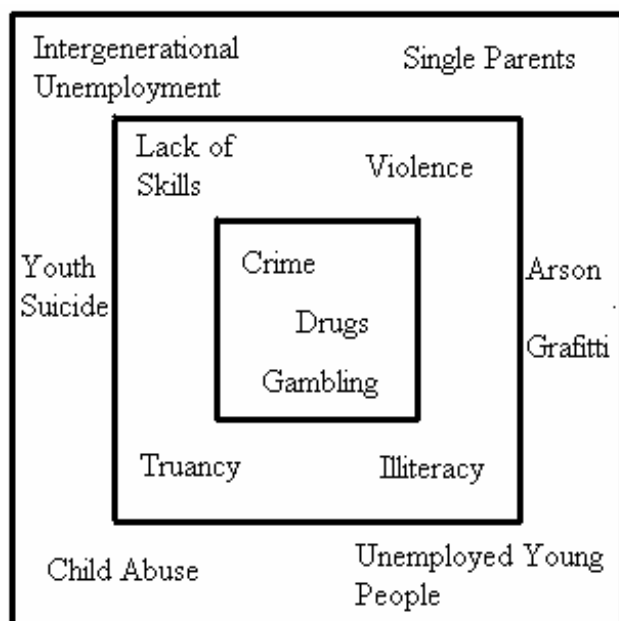


Figure 1: Needs Map
(Adopted from Kretzmann & McKnight 1993, 3)

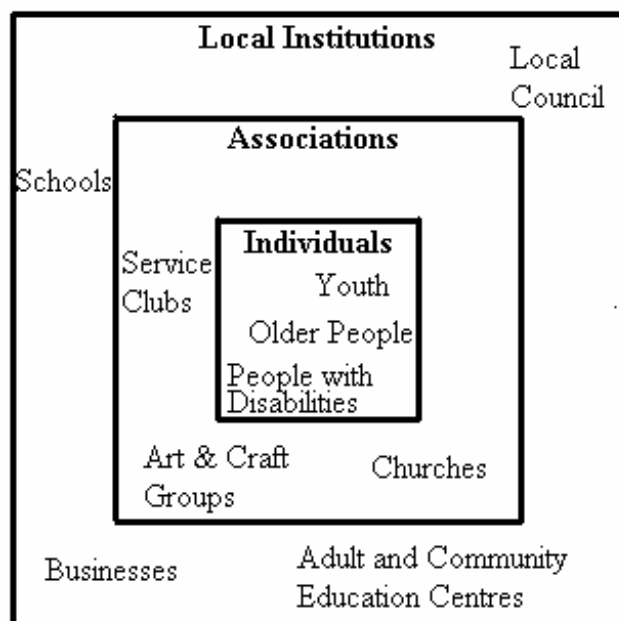


Figure 2: Assets Map
(Adopted from Kretzmann & McKnight 1993, 7)
(It is important to note that according to Kretzmann and McKnight individuals are the most important asset of any community, while associations and local institutions are the secondary assets)

Kretzmann and McKnight's argument is that all communities, even those most devastated by economic changes, are gifted, resourceful and capable. Unfortunately communities that have borne the brunt of economic restructuring and where there are crucial and pressing issues are all too often portrayed only in terms of the needs map. The skills, gifts, capacities, dreams, aspirations and desires of individuals and communities fade into the background.

The distinction between needs and assets is important because the needs-based approach gives rise to very different policies and programs than an assets-based approach. From the scale of a local neighbourhood to a nation, a community that is represented as needy is likely to find itself on the receiving end of all sorts of services and programs designed and delivered by outside experts. The effect of this model of service delivery is to position people as passive recipients dependent on service providers to address their deficiencies and their needs.

A community that is depicted as resourceful and gifted will be more likely to draw upon and harness the capacities and creativities of local people to address issues and solve problems. Outside assistance and resources from government agencies, institutions and other organisations are still going to be required but the agenda is more likely to be set by the community of people most directly affected. The effect of this approach is to position people as active and engaged citizens.

So what are the social capital implications of the needs versus assets approach? To what extent does an emphasis on needs stymie opportunities for social interaction and the building of connections? To what extent does an emphasis on assets create the conditions for social relationships and networks to take root and flourish?

Although they do not refer to the social capital debate Kretzmann and McKnight characterise the ABCD approach as "relationship driven", in that it involves the constant building and rebuilding of relationships between and among individuals, associations and institutions (see Figure 2). This approach would seem to be highly compatible with social capital processes such as the building of webs of networks that rely on trust-relationships and openness to working with different groups. Certainly our experiences in the Latrobe Valley suggest that the assets-based approach has enormous potential for harnessing and enhancing social capital. So what I'd now like to do is outline the Latrobe Valley project.

Community Partnering Project

The Community Partnering Project is a joint initiative of Latrobe City and Monash University. It is funded through an Australian Research Council grant in which the industry partner, the Latrobe City, contributes half the funding. A small amount of funding support has also been provided by Australian Paper and Loy Yang Power (one of the privatised electricity companies operating in the Valley).

One of the guiding principles of the project is the assets-based approach of Kretzmann and McKnight. The emphasis has been on the skills and capabilities, dreams and aspirations of groups hardest hit by economic changes in the Valley and who are most familiarly defined in terms of needs, problems and deficiencies. Given that the downsizing and privatisation of the State Electricity Commission (the SEC) in the late 80s and early 90s resulted in a loss of over 8,000 jobs from a workforce of around 40,000, the Community Partnering project has especially sought out groups like ex-SEC workers (many of whom have been unemployed

since the downsizing of the industry), unemployed young people (many of whom would have once worked in the power industry) and sole parents (many of whom have experienced the break-up of relationships because of the pressures of unemployment).

Along with the assets-based approach, two other guiding principles have shaped the project. The first of these is concerned with the relationship between community and economic development. Instead of seeing community and economy as two separate and opposed spheres of activity, the “community economies” approach focuses on the potential for community-based projects to develop more explicit and formal economic practices without losing sight of social and even environmental values. This is a bottom-up form of economic development in which economic initiatives “percolate up” from an emphasis on community and the social.¹

A third guiding principle shaping the project is the use of an action research model involving diverse groups of people working together to develop and implement solutions. So alongside university researchers and council staff, three community researchers have been employed to work on the project. The community researchers are an unemployed ex-SEC worker, an unemployed young person and a sole parent people each with first hand experiences of the hardships facing marginalised groups. Instead of being the subjects of a research project these three members of the team are research collaborators, whose insights and contributions have been absolutely fundamental to the success of the project. The use of community researchers is consistent with the assets based approach: instead of seeing community members in terms of their lack of research skills, the emphasis is on the understandings, skills, interests, commitment and passion that marginalised groups might bring to a project such as this.

Project Steps

The project started with the community researchers talking to people who have been hard hit by changes in the Valley about their skills, talents and ideas that might be the basis for community-directed initiatives. The researchers worked through agencies and programs such as TAFE numeracy and literacy classes, adult education classes, neighbourhood houses, work for the dole schemes, youth groups, life skills groups and men’s groups. What they were confronted with was having to turn the constant reiteration of needs and problems into a recognition of possibilities and potentialities. Consider this conversation between Yvonne, one of the community researchers, and an ex-SEC worker. The encounter starts with an initial focus on problems in the community and the absence of solutions and actions by others (presumably bodies such as council, university, state and Federal government):

¹ The Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association in the South Bronx in New York is an outstanding example of a community economy enterprise. The association was formed in 1977 by 33 residents of Kelly Street in the South Bronx who were protesting the demolition of their housing. An initial funding grant enabled the residents to purchase and renovate their housing. As a not-for-profit community development corporation the association has gone on to build more than 2,500 apartments for low-income residents, and upgrade other housing in the local area. It has 120 full-time employees and a Board of Directors made up primarily of neighbourhood residents. In 1997 the association opened its own high school and a central part of the curriculum is participation in community development activities. The association has also formed a multi-million dollar partnership with the Natural Resources Defense Council to create the Bronx Community Paper Company and build the largest manufacturing plant in New York since World War II. The company will recycle half of New York City’s waste paper (the urban forest) using state of the art environmental technology, and will employ over 1,500 local residents.

One particular gentleman in a literacy class was quite obviously very frustrated and pessimistic. He was quite vocal and kept presenting me with stumbling blocks. “Look what they have done?” “What are they going to do about it?” “What’s the use.” “No-one is going to be bothered.” “People will want to be paid”. I tried to address his issues without being confrontational. I tried to be sympathetic and understanding. We talked a bit about the problems in our community. I agreed with what he had to say It was evident that we had to almost exhaust that line of thinking before moving on.

At this point there seems to be little evidence of trust or connectedness, and the prospects for harnessing social capital seem slim. But when discussion shifts to his own skills and interests, a very different tone is achieved and possibilities for building connections and working with others open up.

He is very good with his hands and knows a bit about cars. I asked, hypothetically, if there were a group of single parents interested in learning about car maintenance, and if I could arrange a venue and possible tools, would he be interested in sharing his skills and knowledge? “Yeah. I’d do that no worries” he said. I asked him would he expect to be paid for his time. “No. I wouldn’t do it for money” he replied. I asked “So do you think you’d get anything out of it yourself?” “Yeah. I suppose I’d get some satisfaction out of it cause I like to help people like yourself”. So I really tried to turn it around and have him answer or resolve his own questions and issues.

This conversation encapsulates the early experiences of the community researchers. Focussing on the needs and problems of the Latrobe Valley taps into feelings of distrust, bitterness, blame and resentment that make movement in a new direction impossible. But when focussing on the assets, feelings of valued capability, joy in abilities seen in a new light and a generosity of spirit are engendered, and new potentialities emerge.

The initial conversations about people’s skills, talents, dreams and ambitions have been followed with a series of workshops and events where people had the opportunity to explore the possibilities further. One of the elements characterising this stage of the project is the use of food-based events where people work together making pizzas, baking scones and so on. The fun and pleasure of cooking and eating produces a lively atmosphere and people start to throw ideas around and build crazy dreams about what might be possible. Out of these events a host of ideas have emerged for community-based enterprises based on people’s skills and aspirations. The project is now at the stage where groups have formed around common areas of interest to turn the dreams into reality.

One very popular idea was for a community garden. So one of the founders of a community garden project in Melbourne was invited to come and speak at a nuts and bolts ‘how to’ workshop. The workshop was attended by a diverse range of people: ex-SEC workers, housewives, people with learning problems, Work for the Dole participants and a group of mainly young people from a lifeskills course who came along for the free lunch. The community garden speaker from CERES spoke about how a small group of volunteers started to transform a 7 hectare land-fill site on the banks of the Merri Creek in Brunswick (in inner Melbourne) into a community environmental park that now includes community gardens, free-range chickens and animal farm, composting and recycling projects, alternative energy projects, bee-hives, education and training centre, commercial café and commercial nursery.

Over the twenty year period CERES has flourished into a not-for-profit incorporated association with a \$1.6 million budget, 150,000 visitors each year, and 25 full-time equivalent positions. CERES is exemplary of the community economies that I spoke of earlier.

So inspired was the group by the visitor from CERES that two field trips were very quickly organised. The fields trips proved to be pivotal for the community garden. They made the ideas and possibilities real but perhaps more importantly they gave this disparate group of people the time and space to talk with each and begin the process of establishing connections and relationships.

Joan: "It flawed me, CERES, with their chickens and their bees and their recycled water and the excitement and the fun of the group. I really enjoyed the bus tour . . . You found yourself thinking. But what really got me was the crowd - it's a mixed group of people . . . [and] they're trying so hard to do something and we're talking about for the whole community. You're talking about elderly citz, street kids, your drug addicts, correctional services, Work for the Dole."

Jake: "And then the bus trip and when we got back it was like wow these definitely are the people on the bus trip that are going to be part of the community garden . . . It was different though, we were all just definitely unique, I thought that. And everyone got on friendly. And I'm certain that for a while after that trip everyone kept meeting and most of them are all still around. I know when I came after the bus trip I was saying to Fiona, "I sat back with this lady and she was telling me all these things that are happening in her life." [*turn tape over*]. . . When we got there you could just tell that it was something more than just a bus trip for people. It was to start thinking and get ideas. And the whole thing was an opportunity for us to get to know each other a bit and you can hear what others are interested in."

Since the 'how-to' workshop in October and the bus trips to CERES the group has formed an incorporated association called Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens (or LV CEG). A Committee of Management has been elected and it includes unemployed workers, retirees, housewives, people of non-English speaking background and several of the young people who came along for the free lunch. Latrobe City has voted unanimously to support the group's proposal the community gardens be established on a three hectare site close to the shopping area of Morwell, planning permission has been obtained, and working bees have started to clean up the site. Site groups have formed with responsibility for specific tasks such as fund raising for insurance coverage; developing health and safety guidelines; and planning an opening event. Last week the Federal government announced the the garden had received almost \$30,000 under the Family and Community Networks initiative for a long-term development plan, and training in the management and operation of the garden. The group's long-term vision includes the development of a range of community and economic initiatives:

- ◆ individual garden plots where people can grow their own produce
- ◆ larger shared garden plots for community groups
- ◆ raised garden beds for people who have trouble bending over
- ◆ composting and water recycling projects
- ◆ mud-brick and straw bale building projects; and
- ◆ free-range chickens.

One of the things that characterises the group involved in the community garden is the networks of largely unseen and unrecognised connections they have. For example, one of the members says that for the past nine years she has had little social contact and has stayed mainly within her own home. Joan may seem to have little in the way of social capital but during this period she's been an active op-shopper collecting trinkets that she uses to build miniature theme gardens in her backyard. Joan knows many of the op-shop volunteers and now actively promotes the community garden when she is op-shopping encouraging other people to come along and have a look at what is happening. Another member, who attends numeracy and literacy classes, helps out elderly people in Morwell by mowing their lawns. Like Joan, he also promotes the community garden at every opportunity. The project harnesses the skills and interests of people who are embedded within their own informal web of relationships and connections and offers them the opportunity to join with others and work collectively to develop a community-focussed enterprise.

It seems to me that there are very few opportunities for marginalised groups to contribute in this sort of way to their community. Because they are so often defined in terms of their needs, deficiencies and lack they are serviced by other groups. The groups that do build community resources tend to be professionalised associations like Rotary and Apex or very specialised interest-based groups like the model rail club. The Latrobe Valley project is opening up a new sort of space and very different roles for people who are marginalised and disadvantaged. The role of the Community Partnering project team in this sort of process is to support the group's endeavours and assist them realise their dream.

A second idea that people are working on focuses on the reuse of off-cuts, seconds and other so-called "waste" materials from business and industry. The idea took shape in November and December 1999 as Santa's Workshop, a community workshop space where local residents could make large Christmas decorations for the outside of their homes and the main streets of Morwell. An ex-SEC worker who decorates his house each year for Christmas volunteered to share his skills, Latrobe City providing the building, and local businesses donated off-cuts of timber, mistints of paint and other materials and equipment for the workshop. Here's what Keith who volunteered to share his skills had to say about the workshop:

I thought the idea would have been that people would come along, make their thing and then they'd be gone, but we've had people . . . that have been there every day. It's been terrific . . . we've all sort of gotten along really well and I've made a few friends out of this myself.

From its inception as Santa's Workshop a group has formed to develop the Creative Reuse Centre. The Centre will collect "waste" materials from business and industry, and sort and store the materials ready for use by pre-schools, kindergartens, schools, hobby groups, families and individuals in creative and inventive activities. The Centre will also continue to run Santa's Workshop each year and other events such as invention and tinkering workshops. The goal is for the centre to operate on a cost-recovery basis.² In order to contribute to the achievement of this goal, Latrobe City is auspicing the centre until February 2002. Two of the unemployed workers who were involved in the first Santa's Workshop are now preparing for the opening of the second Santa's Workshop as Work for the Dole participants.

² Reverse Garbage Truck similarly operated on a cost-recovery basis for many years. It employed staff to run three centres in different parts of Melbourne.

A third initiative being supported through Community Partnering is a circus enterprise for unemployed young people. A one-day workshop has already been run by trainers from Circus Oz. Unexpectedly, one group of young people who attended the workshop already have their own incorporated association called Triple O, and they perform mainly at friends' parties (indeed, the group was initially formed at a party when a number of young people discovered their shared interest in circus and street theatre performance skills). Out of the workshop more young people have joined Triple O, and the group have run their own brainstorming session to come up with ideas for future training activities. Along with developing their own skills for performances, the group has placed a high priority on working with younger children and teaching circus skills. Community Partnering is now working with Triple O to get funding to run the training sessions and support the development of this youth-directed enterprise.

The final initiative being supported through the Community Partnering Project is the workshed in Moe that I talked about at the beginning of the paper.

Reflections on Social Capital

I'd like to conclude by offering three reflections from the Latrobe Valley project that bear on discussions about social capital. Through a process of focussing on assets the Community Partnering project has tapped into a vein of informal, individual and largely unseen social networks and relationships. The potential of this already existing social capital is being harnessed for a series of collective projects that aim to contribute to the community and economic resources of the Latrobe Valley. The Latrobe Valley can easily be portrayed as a debilitated and devastated community with extreme needs and problems. The risk of such a representation is that focuses on the things that people don't have and casts into shadow the networks and assets that might be the basis for innovative endeavours like the Creative Reuse Centre, Community Environmental Gardens or Triple O.

The second comment I'd like to make is that the Latrobe Valley project is supporting the ideas that marginalised group are interested in. It is not concerned with identifying the needs, or the deficiencies or the lack of the people involved. It is starting with interests, wants, desires and passions. And interestingly the strongest want of the people involved is to contribute to the Latrobe Valley community – whether through building raised garden beds for older people to use, showing other people how to make large Christmas decorations or teaching circus skills to young people. From this starting point the project has positioned marginalised groups as the instigators, planners, dreamers, doers, directors, workers and managers of their own initiatives. This involves undoing the familiar representation of marginalised groups as beneficiaries of someone else's community or economic development project, recipients of social service programs delivered by someone else, or subjects of someone else's research study. For social planners, community development workers, social service providers and social researchers this means a rethinking of our role and our professional identities. It is about handing over control of projects to other people and taking a back seat role as a supporter or assistant. It seems to me that if professional bodies are serious about building social capital than it is precisely this sort of approach that prepares the ground for relationships of trust and active citizenship to take root and flourish.

One of my concerns about the way in which social capital has been taken up is the emphasis that is given to measuring and monitoring. I'd argue that studies to measure and monitor

social capital do not build social capital. Indeed more often than not these studies end up emphasising the social capital that is not there, or the social capital that has been lost or eroded through changing social and economic circumstances. Again we find ourselves caught in a needs based approach focusing on lack, and inevitably thinking about the professionals and experts that need to be called in to provide services and programs. As I've outlined in my talk today I'm not convinced that a needs based approach can build social capital; whereas an assets based approach, harnessing the assets that are in a community, seems much more conducive to the building of social capital.³

And finally I'd like to comment on the process used in the project. It seems that the emphasis on harnessing the informal networks and connections that already exist in the Valley and the emphasis on people's passions, desires and wants allows for a sense of play and fun to enter into the process. Whether through bus trips, circus workshops or food-based events, people have had the opportunity to make connections through social and informal settings. Out of this approach people have been able to explore potentialities and play around with different ideas and possibilities. The outcomes like the community garden and the reuse centre are serious in their intent to address issues in the Valley, but the process used allows for feelings of hopefulness, creativity and joy to be expressed and acted on.

References

Asset-Based Community Development

John Kretzmann & John McKnight, 1993, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*, The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Institute for Policy Research, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois (Chapt. One available online at <http://www.nwu.edu/IPR/publications/Introd.building.html>)

Community Economies

See: <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/projects/cep/>

³ This cautionary stance towards projects of measuring and monitoring social capital is not to say that projects should not be evaluated, but I think this can be done in a way that actually contributes to the building of social capital. For example, training a group of unemployed young people in multi-media technologies so they can document the impact of an assets based project is likely to enhance the skills of young people and provide insights into a process oriented approach.