

Exploring the viability of community-based sustainability initiatives in Perth with a lens of social capital

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ABSTRACT: The contributions of community-based initiatives towards achieving various sustainability aspirations have been increasingly acknowledged in recent decades. Several national and state level environmental strategies in Australia have extensively promoted such initiatives in order to further sustainability agenda. For example, community gardens are community groups run and managed by local residents as a response to global issues such as climate change, peak oil or concerns over pesticide residues in food produce. Similarly, Friends groups in general are established by local residents in order to care for the degraded or threatened bushlands and wetlands. However, little attention has been paid to the viability of community-based sustainability initiatives (CBSI) themselves. This paper responds to this gap and explores the viability of two different CBSI in Perth with a lens of social capital. In one case study, the majority of the respondents in Hilton, WA considered that a community garden would not only enhance the suburb by adding a “community feel” to the neighbourhood but also foster intra-group social capital by promoting additional activities in green spaces and become more resilient to global environmental issues. The other case study relates to one of the local environmental groups known as Friends group in Kenwick, WA which not only relied on intra-group social capital towards organising activism against a plan to develop nationally significant wetlands but also utilised inter-group social capital towards restoration and ongoing management of the wetlands. Based on above case studies, this paper contends that government strategies that promote on-the-ground sustainability work may benefit by taking into account the significance of intra-group and inter-group social capital for the viability of CBSI.

Keywords: *Community-based sustainability initiatives, Community garden, Friends group, Social capital, Perth*

Introduction

Community-based initiatives that are often led by community groups have played an important role around sustainability issues in Australia. Awareness of global issues such as climate change is gradually increasing (see Corbett and Durfee 2004) and there is also an increasing recognition that community-based actions is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change. As such, community environmental groups, the schools, places of worship or sporting groups have the potential to promote pro-sustainability behaviours at the community level. Fielding (2008) suggests that citizens involved in environmental groups are more likely to be associated with stronger intentions to engage in activism arising from a mutual concern. For example, community gardens run and managed by community groups tend to be grassroots initiatives in response to global issues such as peak oil or concerns over pesticide use rather than driven by government or businesses (Glover 2004), and they can provide a model of sustainability in action (Holland 2004). Community gardens are increasing in popularity in Western Australia although this concept is not new elsewhere in the world or in other Australian capital cities e.g. the earliest community garden was recorded in Melbourne in 1977 (Hering, nd). Similarly, Friends groups in general are established by local residents in order to care for the degraded or threatened bushlands and wetlands. Friends groups are engaged in the ongoing stewardship of the local environment, ranging from the management

of urban nature reserves to the mounting of public campaigns to curtail further degradation of the environment (Dhakal 2010).

It is estimated that there are at least five thousand community groups of different types that are engaged in various community-based sustainability initiatives (CBSI) across Australia (Youl et al. 2006). Several national and state level environmental policies and funding mechanisms in Australia, such as the National Landcare Program and the Natural Heritage Trust, have extensively promoted various CBSI in order to further sustainability agenda. Needless to say, the contributions of community groups towards achieving various sustainability aspirations have been increasingly acknowledged in recent decades (Dhakal and Paulin 2009). However, little attention has been paid to the viability of CBSI themselves. This paper responds to this gap and explores the viability of two different CBSI in Perth with a lens of social capital. For the purpose of this paper, social capital refers to the relationship within a group (intra) and between a group and other agencies (inter) such as networks and government agencies.

The aim in this paper is to explore the attributes of a community garden and a Friends group in Perth, WA. The paper begins with a concise overview of community groups, followed by the notion of social capital and its significance in the context of CBSI. The methodology used in the study, and two case studies are presented next. The paper concludes with the contention that the sustainability planning in cities like Perth should take into account of the contributions of CBSI.

Community groups

The unit of analysis of this paper is the community group led CBSI. Ross et al. (2002) describe these groups as the drivers of community collective activity where volunteers are engaged in sustainability initiatives across private land (such as farms) or public area (such as urban nature reserves) with or without the support from government agencies. Community groups in general are not-for-profit and non-governmental by nature and often identified as a part of the 'Third Sector', or 'Charity', 'Civil Society', 'Nonprofit Sector', 'Voluntary Sector' among others (Lyons 2001). The engagement of community groups in running and managing various CBSI arises from the urgent need to address a particular economic or environmental or social issue. The contributions of community groups led CBSI have been particularly instrumental in ensuring environmental sustainability in cities such as Perth where two-third wetlands/bushland have been lost in the past 150 years and the remnant ecosystems are continually under threat from potential redevelopment (Davis and Froend 1999, Stenhouse 2004). However, yielding desirable sustainability outputs often depend on sustained inputs in the forms of long term commitment from community members and access to adequate human and financial resources. While Commonwealth funding mechanism such as the Natural Heritage Trust and state level environmental program in WA such as Bush Forever and Urban Nature have supported community groups led CBSI on an *ad hoc* basis, securing the future of community groups has become increasingly difficult for a couple of reasons.

First, a recent policy shift at the regional-scale environmental approach has substantially reduced the availability of funding opportunities and other support for locally operating community groups (Paulin 2007). It is obviously hard to maintain enthusiasm and motivation in volunteer-dependent community organisations without the availability of adequate financial resources (Gooch and Warburton 2009). A second related challenge is that the voluntary contributions of community organisations are generally under-appreciated by the state agencies (Safstrom and O'Byrne 2001). Clearly, when volunteers feel that they are the

ones addressing the sustainability issues that the government authority has neglected but get little thanks for their efforts in return, the business of recruiting and retaining volunteers becomes more difficult. Consequently, community groups generally operate in challenging circumstances where the availability of essential resources to sustain initiatives is uncertain (Gibb and Adhikary 2000; Roberts 2001). Of some relevance in this context are three theoretical foundations that help explain why and how groups identify the availability (or the lack of it) of resources internally and acquire or exchange resources externally in order to fulfil their goals.

First, resource mobilization theory proposes that optimum use of existing group resources is vital for the viability of collective action, and that is why it is important for actors engaged in collective action (i.e. community groups) to harness internal relationships in order to identify and appraise the availability (or the lack of) of resources (McCarthy and Zald 2001). Second, resource dependence theory assumes that the availability of essential resources to fulfil group missions is scarce and for this reason, groups are inclined to establish external relationships in order to secure the essential resources they need (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978). Third, social network theory assumes that the relationships between groups are more important than the attributes of individual groups, and for this reason, groups maintain relationships with each other in order to influence the flow of resources in their favour (Wasserman and Faust 1994). These three theories are complementary to each other in the sense that all three stress the significance of relationships for groups to either in identifying the availability of resources or overcoming resource scarcities. It is in this context, the notion of social capital is reviewed next.

Social capital

The central idea behind the notion of social capital is that social ties or relationships are valuable for the longevity of community groups. However, social capital remains an ambiguous concept with multiple descriptions and dimensions and these ambiguities are briefly reviewed below.

One of the early proponents of social capital, Pierre Bourdieu (1986) described social capital as ‘the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationship of mutual acquaintance or recognition’ (p. 248). Robert Putnam (1995), who is often credited with popularizing social capital in recent decades, portrayed social capital as ‘features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (p. 67). Third, Francis Fukuyama (1995) emphasized ‘trust’ as a major characteristic of social capital and described it as ‘the capability of people to work together for the common purpose’ (p. 45). Last but not the least, an advocate of the network theory of social capital, Nan Lin (2001) characterized social capital as ‘resources embedded in social networks accessed and used by actors for actions’ and ‘actors access social capital through interactions, to promote purposive actions’ (p. 25).

On top of varied descriptions above, social capital also comprises of multiple dimensions. Granovetter (1973) distinguished the nature of relationships according to the intensity of ties; strong ties (with close family and friends) and weak ties (with acquaintances). He suggested that while strong ties provide more intense social support, weak ties increase access to diverse information, resources and jobs. Building on Granovetter’s assertion, Gittel and Vidal (1998) and Putnam (2000) distinguish between the ability of actors to access network resources from within as *bonding* social capital and from outside as *bridging* social capital. In

the context of community groups, bonding social capital refers to internal or intra-group relationships. It basically represents the connections within a group, such as between leaders, members and staff. Bridging social capital refers to external or inter-group relationships. It primarily characterises connections between groups, such as between the group and government agencies. Bonding or bridging characteristics of social capital are considered to be particularly significant for community groups to 'get by' or 'get ahead' respectively (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Woolcock and Sweetser 2002).

Community groups are more or less social entities created and sustained by relationships enabling collective actions that wouldn't be possible through individual efforts alone. Consequently, Pennings and Lee (1999) suggest that since groups are embedded in a web of social relationships, social capital of groups constitutes a distinctly collective asset that might be mediated by the individuals involved in groups i.e. leaders or staff. It is however important here to acknowledge that multiple contexts, definitions and dimensions associated with the notion reify rather an intangible concept. Social capital after all is underpinned by the outcomes of relationships within (intra) and between (inter) groups and is often dependent upon strategies to initiate and maintain such relationships. Nonetheless, social capital is an abstract notion and unlike financial capital or human capital, does not consist of resources held by individuals or by groups but of processes of relationships leading to desired outcomes (Bankston III and Zhou 2002). Hence, social capital is construed as a metaphor that encapsulates intensity and intentions of intra-group and inter-group relationships.

A growing body of literature has associated social capital with the vitality of community groups (Passey and Lyons 2006; Saxton 2007) and the capability of community groups to yield better sustainability outcomes (Pretty and Ward 2001). The utility of social capital in overcoming community-based challenges has been recognised by the leading advocate of social capital, Robert Putnam (Putnam 1995; Putnam 2000). Putnam not only argues that social capital can improve the efficiency of collective action by facilitating cooperation but also suggests that existing levels of social capital can determine the success or failure of collective actions. Since community groups that are not able to acquire necessary resources and mobilise acquired resources have a weaker prospect of being viable this paper proposes that having a stronger level of intra as inter group social capital positively influences the capability of community groups to overcome resource scarcities to run and manage CBSI.

Methodology

Based on Yin (1984), descriptive case study as a research method has been adopted for an empirical investigation of how community groups utilise social capital to sustain CBSI. Case study is particularly useful in understanding a group phenomenon because the method is open to the use of theory or conceptual categories that guide the research and analysis of data (Meyer 2001). This paper draws from two different case studies from two separate studies carried out between 2007 and 2009. The first case study is based on interviews and observations of the newly formed community garden in Hilton (within the City of Fremantle) and how a small group within the community group is the vital 'glue' in developing social capital in this instance. The second case study draws on one specific case study of a Friends group in Kenwick (within the City of Gosnells) of a 2008 survey of community groups undertaken to develop a broader understanding of the linkages between organisational social capital and information and communication technologies for strengthening local environmental stewardship in the Perth region of WA.

Case Study 1: Hilton Community Garden

Community gardens are those located in public spaces and are defined as ‘public’ in terms of ownership, access and some degree of democratic control (Ferris et al 2001). As with many other grassroots initiatives, community gardens can address global issues at a localised level in that they can act as a focal point through a common environment (Linn 1999; Schmelskof 1996 in Glover 2004). Community gardens, as localised entities, connect people with their neighbours through a mutual interest in gardening. The sharing of common goals and values adds to the sense of community, which is further drawn together by the uniqueness of the area or attributes (Florida 2005). Some examples experienced by community members and gardeners include having a much improved sense of belonging, particularly from those in minority groups (Shinew et al 2004) and a greater sense of social well being in the community (Kaplan 1973). Therefore, community gardens fulfil many of the domains of social cohesion as suggested by Forrest and Kearns (2001) in that they provide opportunities to build social capital. Community gardens, as with community groups highlighted earlier, also rely on grassroots engagement rather than hands on management by local government (Glover 2004). One such example is the Hilton Harvest Community Garden.

The idea to establish the community garden in Hilton, a suburb within the Fremantle municipality, 30 kms south-west of Perth (the capital of Western Australia) came from a group of residents concerned about peak oil and its implications for future food security. In addition, there were some residents who had previously completed a ‘Living Smart’ (a community environmental education program) workshop and felt that the suburb might benefit socially in having a space where residents could meet and engage with each other. After an initial meeting in February 2009 to ascertain level of interest from the general community, a proposal for a community garden was sent to the Fremantle council for their consideration.

After several months of negotiation for land, it was finally suggested that the local primary school may be a more appropriate site for the garden following the appointment of a new principal at the school in 2010. Since the community garden is also intended to incorporate gardening and other social activities for all residents, it is hoped that the social engagement and cohesion can be improved between different cultures and age groups. The community garden was approved for commencement on the unutilised end of the Hilton Primary School oval in June 2010.

Granovetter’s (1973) idea that stronger ties have the capacity to forge stronger ties may be tested in this garden, whose success to date has been reliant on a small sub-set of members. Even though fundraising events (e.g. festivals or film nights) have been well supported through attendance by overall community, active participation (e.g. through volunteering to assist with helping at events or at working bees) at present is limited to between twenty to forty financial members (and committee members). The lack of a broader membership and volunteer base may be attributed to the location of the garden i.e. its close proximity to the pre-primary school as well as the primary school. Therefore, the garden’s *visibility* to parents dropping off children may encourage active participation from them, as present regular volunteers of the ‘working bees’ comprise of parents with children attending either the primary or pre-primary (or both) schools. One of these members highlighted in an interview that “mums could be in charge of the watering roster because they were there dropping off their kids everyday anyhow”. Therefore, it is clear that there is a sense of social cohesion

amongst particular residents (e.g. women with children attending either the pre-primary or primary school).

This poses the question of whether residents with no school-age children or those who have lived in the suburb since the suburb was built in the post-war era may feel excluded from this garden, despite the intentions of the community garden to promote social cohesion. Such issues are not an easy task to resolve as Smith and Kurtz (2003) suggested that the nature of community gardens themselves can pose scale-related spatial problems in that gardeners may not feel connected to others in the garden.

The lack of a broader community involvement is not necessarily a concern as the garden is still in its infancy stage and further engagement may arise once the garden is fully established. If social capital is indeed intangible and comprises of a series of communications leading to desired outcomes, then there is a likelihood that this current small subset of active participants will increase if young families continue to move into the area. As such, even though as this community garden grows and develops, there may be more opportunities to build social capital and common values as suggested by Hancock (2001) and Wakefield et al (2007).

Local and/or state agencies have a role to play in maintaining social capital by contributing financial resources to help sustain community gardens such as the one in Hilton. At present, the garden receives no funding from the Education Department (whose land they occupy), and some financial assistance (one-off payments) from the local council to assist with major infrastructure costs. The majority of the funds have been derived through grants and fundraising, and there is some concern amongst committee members that too much energy is spent on funding sources rather than enhancing social capital. The failure of a community garden in Fremantle (Sustaining Settlements) in 2004 (Davison 2006) is a reminder that community gardens can 'lose their way' by focusing on financial viability rather than building social capital.

Case study 2: Friends of Brixton Street Wetlands

The Friends of Brixton Street Wetlands was established in 1992 in order to garner community support against the proposed destruction of the wetlands for housing development. Brixton Street Wetlands is located in the suburb of Kenwick, 14 kms south west of Perth. This wetland is spread over 30 hectares and is of outstanding botanical significance. It is home to more than 300 species of plants which is equivalent to more than 20% of Perth's flora in only 0.005% of the area (Phillimore 2003). The convenor of the group credits the group's persistent activism to the strong trustworthy relationships between 10 – 12 people core volunteer activists. The activism to save the wetlands prevailed over the plan to develop the area and ultimately persuaded government bodies to recognise the importance of one of the remaining significant wetlands in Perth. Consequently, the wetland is now enlisted into the Register of the National Estate of the Australian Heritage Commission, the Directory of Important Wetlands in Australia, and the Bush Forever sites within the Perth region.

After the initial successful policy level outcomes, the group lost some of its older volunteers to age, disease and death, and had trouble getting younger volunteers who are prepared to work for nothing. That is when the group started to explore opportunities beyond remaining core activists and established good relationships with government agencies and environmental networks. In recent years, the group has been working closely with the Department of Environment and Conservation in minimizing the bushfire risk, planting

seedlings, removing rubbish, and controlling weeds. The group has also partnered with the state agency for technical matters such as preparing the management plan of the wetlands and jointly applying for funding e.g. for fencing the wetlands. A strong inter-group relationship with other similar groups ranging from the local birdlife conservation organisation to the herbarium society has been particularly handy to acquire a large number of helpers on a few occasions a year, e.g. tree plantation and seed collection. For instance, group's relationship with the environmental networks has been particularly valuable in recent years and a convenor of the group recalled the importance of inter-group relationship with the networks in an interview:

Our affiliation with the South East Regional Centre for Urban Landcare (SERCUL) goes back several years. We cannot always keep track of the events ... you know ... when and where the funding opportunities are ... things like that ... and people there [SERCUL] are always helpful in letting us know [about the funding]. They are good bunch of people ... they always support us with [organising] various community awareness activities. This year we have invited the frog doctor to give a talk at the Kenwick community centre with their support ... hopefully we will also be able to raise funds on that day.

The Friends group was established directly through local community commitment to safeguard the wetlands in the early years and has kept on going as a result of encouragement from state agencies to provide more formal representative groups across neighbourhoods. This Friends group was formed as a result of a strong bonding social capital – the notion and practices of volunteering where neighbours as well as local community members provide time and energy in order to care for, conserve, preserve, maintain and educate the community about the wetlands. However, what kept the group going was the direct consequence of its relationship with other groups, non-governmental organisations, and government agencies – bridging social capital. It is clear that ability of the group to utilise inter-group relationships is particularly significant in acquiring human and financial resources and these findings are consistent with a view of that ability to harness relationships with bridging organisations, such as peak bodies and networks is crucial for the continued existence of community groups (Brown 1991; Edwards and McCarthy 2004).

The fact that government agency has provided the financial support as well as established long term partnership (after the rocky start) with the group reflects on mutual interests of agencies and community groups in CBSI. These are the issues which state agencies have been either unable or unwilling to solve (or are even the cause themselves) on their own, thereby motivating community members to take action. Unlike the argument that environmental degradation can only be curtailed through either government initiatives or privatisation (Hardin 1968), the case study of Friends of Brixton Street Wetlands suggest that other Friends groups in Perth have the potential (not exclusively but in harmony with government agencies and the private sector) to, a) compensate for the inadequacy in the market and/or government mechanisms to address the local environmental concerns, and b) provide a forum for community members to undertake CBSI and/or persuade agencies to take appropriate action.

Conclusion

While the exploratory nature of this paper was limited in scope, it did contribute towards filling a gap about the significance of social capital for the viability of community groups led CBSI. The intent of the paper was to assess whether or not investment in social capital pay

dividend by helping community groups to sustain. Two case studies revealed social capital did influence the capability of community groups to acquire resources and keep going. However, the way two groups utilised social capital was different. For instance, Hilton Community Garden relied on intra-group social capital to get by whereas Friends of Brixton Street Wetlands relied on inter-group social capital to thrive. This finding certainly supports the view of social capital as a necessary ingredient of community groups that can do 'more with less'. Depending on the scope of community group's objectives and activities, it might well be the case that not every single group needs to build and maintain intra as well as inter group social capital. However, the findings definitely put community groups with more social capital in both fronts in a better position to fulfil their objectives and thrive. Since community groups have a greater interest in the local commitment towards sustainability challenges; future sustainability strategies can benefit from tapping in the ability of community groups to utilise social capital. The role played by community groups is vital for the future of community-based sustainability initiatives, especially, in raising awareness, informing public policy and carrying out on ground work. This role should be supported and encouraged by agencies and in so doing recognising that the complexity and variety of community groups need to be accommodated (Dovers 2000). These range from the needs of the more bureaucratic and well connected 'Friends' groups, down to the smaller 'community gardens' which the case study suggested do not have the same desire or the capability to build and maintain social capital beyond their own group. While further studies in order to unpack how greater investment in social capital influences the sustainability of CBSI is necessary, in the time being, government programs that provide long term strategic funding (instead of existing ad hoc and short term ones) has the potential to enable community groups in retaining or attracting volunteers.

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