Published in final edited form as:

Community Dev J. 2012 April ; 47(2): 168–183. doi:10.1093/cdj/bsr020.

The Contribution of a Social Enterprise to the Building of Social Capital in a Disadvantaged Urban Area of London

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Abstract

There has been much enthusiasm over the past 10 years for the potential contribution of social enterprises to the regeneration of disadvantaged urban areas. This enthusiasm has far outstripped the availability of empirical evidence. This paper reports a qualitative study of one social enterprise, a community café, and its contribution to building social capital in a disadvantaged urban area in London.

The analysis reveals how the café builds ‘bonding’ and ‘bridging’ social capital whilst also addressing ‘downside’ social capital. Overall, the manager of the social enterprise played a considerable role in facilitating the development of social capital, thus emphasising the importance of individuals and their attitudes, skills, and background in urban regeneration. However, the role of the social enterprise in building ‘linking’ social capital was minor. In this instance, more effective mechanisms of community engagement need to be put in place in order to empower local residents and organisations.

Keywords

social enterprise; embeddedness; social capital; urban regeneration; Local economic development; SureStart

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Introduction

Current global economic events have highlighted some of the weaknesses of free market capitalism, leading to the suggestion that it is now, more than ever, time for a creation of a ‘better balance between economic efficiency, ecological sustainability and social equity’ (Amin, 2009: 30). In this context, social enterprises with their attempt to mix social goals and economic efficiency may play an important role in achieving a better balance. This may be particularly the case in disadvantaged areas characterised by weaknesses in public and private sector investment and in financial, physical and human capital.

Social enterprises are deemed to provide a number of benefits for the regeneration of disadvantaged areas. Given their orientation towards meeting social goals rather than maximising profit, some social enterprises are able to operate in areas where there are few incentives for private sector activity. In this sense, some social enterprises can fill the gap between the state and market provision and for this reason have been seen as an important element of New Labour’s much debated ‘third way’ politics. Such commitment has been shared by the Coalition government which has announced plans to create the ‘Big Society’ and put the development of social enterprises centre stage. As Prime Minister David Cameron pointed out in a speech on the ‘Big Society’: ‘*We will identify and work directly with the social entrepreneurs who have the capacity to run successful social programmes in communities with the greatest needs*’ (Conservative, 2009).

However, the definition of social enterprise is problematic and open to significant criticism (Thompson, 2008,) and much academic work has been devoted to defining it (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001). The government defines a social enterprise as “a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners” (DTI 2002: 13). Although this has come to be accepted as a key definition of social enterprise, various debates have ensued in relation to the exact split between economic and social goals which vary substantially across the social enterprise sector in the UK (Jones and Keogh 2006). Whilst the government definition concentrates primarily on the ability of social enterprises to be entrepreneurial and sustainable by generating financial resources, other studies tend to define social enterprises as a more heterogeneous activity which focuses on a range of key characteristics such as an environmental context characterised by diverse stakeholder groups operating in a multi-agency environment, enterprise orientation, the primacy of social aims, and a varied social ownership structure (Peattie and Morley, 2008).

There is also a paucity of empirical research examining the role of social enterprises in regeneration (Evans and Syrett, 2007). One way of examining the potential contribution of social enterprises to the regeneration of their area is through the concept of social capital. The contribution of social enterprises to building social capital is often assumed rather than evidenced, although research in the area is growing (Evans and Syrett, 2007). This article reports on findings from a study designed to assess how a particular social enterprise (a community café located in an estate in South West London) helps to build different forms of

social capital and how this type of enterprise might support the regeneration of disadvantaged urban areas.

Social capital in disadvantaged areas

The concept of social capital has received considerable attention from academics and policymakers alike (Bourdieu, 1985; Putnam, 1993; Coleman, 1988; Woolcock, 2001). Some of the key constitutive elements of social capital include trust, reciprocity and social interaction. Strengthening these elements would appear to offer a number of benefits for urban regeneration including the improvement of economic opportunities (DCLG, 2008), the fostering of high levels of well-being, as well as reduced racial tensions and crime (NICE, 2008). Putnam (1993: 35) argues that “*social capital refers to features of social organisation such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit. Social capital enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital*”.

The characteristics of the main forms of social capital discussed in the literature: bonding, bridging and linking are summarised in table 1.

Bonding social capital refers to relationships between family members, close friends and neighbours. It may be particularly useful in protecting and promoting health in early childhood and frail old age. Bonding social capital is said to help people ‘get by’ and includes having someone to turn to for help with practical things, like lending a bowl of sugar or childcare (Putnam, 2000; Buck et al 2002). Although disadvantaged areas have been shown to suffer from low levels of social capital overall (Putnam, 2007), levels of bonding social capital are likely to be quite high (Cleaver, 2005). The sense of belonging to a homogenous group where individuals have a common affiliation along ethnic or religious lines is also considered to represent bonding social capital (PIU, 2002).

Bridging social capital refers to relationships at two levels: between individuals and between groups of individuals of different ethnic, geographical and occupational background. At the individual level, bridging social capital can help somebody to find a job or access new opportunities (getting ahead) beyond those available to individuals through their family, friends and those belonging to the same ethnic group (Cleaver, 2005). While bonding social capital is grounded mainly in relationships with family and friends, bridging social capital is rooted mainly in the creation and maintenance of networks of relationships outside the immediate circle of family and friends, which can help with finding jobs and creating new entrepreneurial opportunities (Servon, 1998).

At the group level, bridging social capital can be useful in creating cross community interaction. Low bridging social capital at this level is often used to explain poor labour market performance of some ethnic groups who are deemed to have little bridging social capital, albeit high levels of bonding social capital (PIU, 2002). These groups rely too heavily on ethnic ties which might limit their networks and constrain their chances to find a job.

Putnam (1993) argues that civil society can play a key role in the accumulation of bonding and bridging social capital by fostering trust. Civil society is defined as groups and voluntary

organisations that act independently of the State and the market, and it is argued here, social enterprises belong to this. Some social enterprises such as community cafés have the potential to promote both bonding and bridging social capital by providing a physical infrastructure where people from different backgrounds can meet and by employing local people who often have experienced particular problems.

However, the relationship between bonding and bridging social capital may also have negative consequences, the so-called ‘downside’ social capital. Social capital might internalise its benefit to particular ethnic or other groups and exclude others (Kay, 2005), creating an environment in which bonding social capital is much stronger than bridging social capital (PIU, 2002). Thus, interaction across ethnic groups might be difficult (Etzioni, 1994). A recent study by Putnam (2007) on American towns and cities found that increasingly diverse communities lead to increased levels of distrust of neighbours. Thus, stronger group level bonding social capital might actually lead to increased problems within the community.

A further limitation to the potential positive contribution of bonding and bridging social capital is that they might have little effect where there is no access to power and resources, the so-called ‘linking’ social capital. ‘Linking’ social capital consists of relationships between individuals in the community and individuals covering positions of power in order to ‘leverage resources, ideas and information’ (Woolcock, 2001: 72) that will help to ‘scale up’ the effort of individuals or groups in the community to solve problems. Thus, Putnam’s conceptualisation of social capital needs to acknowledge that the basis of social capital are inherently about power and this is particularly important in the context of regeneration as power is an important influence on the outcomes of regeneration initiatives (DeFilippis, 2001).

The community café as a social enterprise

The focus of this article is on the impact of a community café - as a type of social enterprise - and the extent to which it contributes to creation of social capital. This section is providing the background and context in which the café operated. The community café is located within an estate in South West London in close proximity to Heathrow airport. For statistical purposes, the estate is considered as a Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) and is in the top 13% most deprived LSOAs in London.

The café was opened in 2006 and is located in the community centre which hosts a library, Surestart¹ services and other activities such as a youth club.. The community centre is an important part of the recent history of the area. It was rebuilt and opened in 2006. Prior to this, the building was larger but in poor physical conditions so the council, Surestart and the library formed a partnership to develop a new community centre.

The community café shows some key characteristics of a social enterprise: firstly, it operates in the open market place by selling food and drinks to the local community. Secondly, it

¹SureStart is a government programme that deliver education, childcare, health and family support for children under five years of age across some of the most disadvantaged areas of the UK

fulfils a number of social aims: it provides a space to local residents where they can meet and interact and offers volunteering and job opportunities to lone parents, the elderly and people with mental health problems. However, in terms of its governance, the café is entirely staffed with people that are paid through public sector funding (Surestart) and its current ownership is also public. Moreover, trade currently covers only the cost of purchasing inputs such as food and beverages. Thus, while the café can be considered a social enterprise because of its trading and a social/environmental mission, it does not benefit from any degree of autonomy as it is owned and funded through the public sector rather than autonomously owned (Borzaga and Defourny, 2001). Some commentators might consider this as a public sector venture. Yet, the manager of the café has consistently demonstrated entrepreneurial behaviour in attempting to expand its customer base, and providing a quality product at a low cost. Moreover, in order to keep the café open, a newly setup local regeneration organisation, revealed its intention to take ownership of the social enterprise. This showed an important move towards autonomy, a move that was dictated by the need to maintain viable service provision in face of declining government funding. We concluded that the café fulfils the key requirements of a social enterprise and therefore research proceeded to examine its role in building social capital.

Research methodology

The research draws upon two distinctive sets of data to analyse the contribution of social enterprise to building social capital in an urban disadvantaged area of London. In December 2008, 15 qualitative face to face interviews were conducted for the study. These were carried out with a range of stakeholders directly or indirectly involved in the managing of the café including the manager, volunteers, public sector officials, customers, and members of local organisations. Interviews with clients of the café were biased towards women with children and elderly people, mostly women.

These data were supplemented by information obtained from 58 residents of the local estate who participated in a community engagement exercise in the design of *Well London*². Based on the ‘world café’ model, a novel qualitative method that attempts to highlight and capture the lived and varied perceptions and experiences of people living within communities (Brown and Isaacs, 2005), residents were asked ‘what do you understand to be the health needs of your community?’. Methodologically, the approach can broadly be described as a self-facilitating focus group investigation characterised by understanding ‘individuals as multi-dimensional and socially rooted beings’ (Aldred 2009: 5). A key theme to emerge from the world café event was the need for greater community building (Bertotti et al, 2009) which is highly pertinent to the concept of social capital.

The world café event introduced the lead author (MB) to key stakeholders involved in the running of the social enterprise. Subsequent meetings with these led to the suggestion of undertaking research to examine the social impact of the community café on the local area. The research process was not initially guided by any particular theoretical framework as

²‘Well London’ (WL), a large five-year programme which aims to promote the health and well-being of people living in 20 of the most deprived Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in London. Primary data were collected through an event that attracted about 58 residents to take part in a community engagement event.

interviews were conducted to help the development of the social enterprise rather than in the interest of developing a research project. However, interviewees' responses appeared to offer an interesting perspective with more general lessons to be learnt. Responses fitted particularly well with notions of social capital which provided a theoretical framework to analyse the data.

A qualitative approach was particularly well suited to examining how elements such as trust, reciprocity, and networks operated within the relationships between people involved in running the café and local residents/clients. It was evident from the beginning that polarised views were likely to be expressed by interviewees in relation to the role of the café and the community centre. This justified further the use of a qualitative approach which provides the opportunity to probe participants and uncover different perspectives (Bryman, 1988).

When novel views emerged from an interview, these were used as the basis for additional questions for subsequent interviews in order to make sure that these did not represent an isolated opinion of a single interviewee.

The contribution of the social enterprise to the creation of social capital: advantages and disadvantages

The production and re-production of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital

The literature on social capital emphasises the beneficial effects of encouraging networks of support and reciprocity on the community as a whole in terms of reducing crime (especially violent crime) and encouraging the creation of networks that might lead to employment and improvements in health (Putnam, 2007). Interviews conducted by the Well London programme revealed that the vast majority of residents living in the study area showed concerns about the lack of networks and 'community spirit':

Need to encourage more people to talk to each other (community resident, world café).

We need more activities to put on locally for the community to get together, things like barbeques (community resident, world café).

Against this characterisation of the area by local residents, the first contribution of the community café to the creation and strengthening of social capital was the provision of a facility where people could meet and talk. Responses from customers and informal observations show that about 90% of café sales came from people living locally. The vast majority of these tended to spend more than thirty minutes in the café. A substantial number of local residents came to use the library and SureStart services located within the same building and became customers of the café as a result. Almost all interviewees used the café as a meeting point, noting that it was one of the few meeting points in the area. Mothers as well as elderly people used the café consistently to meet and interact with other people on the estate and, in some cases, from outside the estate. The café provided an ideal environment because of its friendliness, a relaxed environment that suited some groups, particularly elderly people. As one elderly interviewee put it:

I come three times a week, because I meet my son and we both drive the school children bus (café customer).

The food is good but more importantly people are good. She (the manager) does anything you want. You can ask and it is all fresh. And they are very friendly. She will try to please you (café customer)

This suggests that the café contributes to building networks between residents within the area which in turn may promote community cohesion. At the most basic level, the café helps with the development of local networks of support and reciprocity between customers who are, for the most part, residents of the estate. This is an example of how the social enterprise can facilitate the building of bonding social capital between individuals. The community café also created volunteering opportunities. Five volunteers were involved in the running of the café. They came from a variety of backgrounds: two had experienced mental health problems, two were single parents and one described herself as an elderly person with problems of isolation. All volunteers had in common a strong enthusiasm and attachment to the café as it gave them the chance to socialise with other people.

I was not working before and the café and working in the back garden is good for me. I sleep better and want to maintain my self-confidence up (café volunteer)

All volunteers benefited in different ways from working in the café. Work and interaction with people was important for people with mental health problems in order to raise confidence and to provide a daily routine. These responses illustrate the direct contribution of the social enterprise to improving bridging or 'get ahead' social capital. As a result of the café, volunteers could interact with other people, engage in useful work and build skills and confidence which could potentially lead to find paid employment.

The channels through which volunteers were recruited are of particular importance in examining how social capital is built in these areas. The most effective way of recruiting volunteers was through personal contact between the manager and customers in the café. Often, such contacts were informal and facilitated by the natural friendliness of the café manager. As the manager recalled:

Volunteer 1, 2 and 3 were users of this building. And they could come and buy a cup of tea and get chatting to me and then they came and spent a couple of hours in the kitchen and it developed like that (café manager)

This was confirmed by one of the volunteers

When they got the library open, I came in to use the library. I started to chat with X (the manager of the café) and that is the way it started (café volunteer).

This way of recruiting volunteers suggests that social capital might be built through the dynamism of particular individuals within the social enterprise who are able to engage in networking activity, build trust with residents and offer tangible opportunities. A further contribution of the social enterprise to the building of 'get ahead' social capital was occurring more informally through the work of the manager outside the social enterprise. She reported:

I spent 7 years at home on benefit and it was quite difficult to get out of that situation, mentally speaking. You become quite used to it. And it is quite a hurdle, it is quite a jump to make, so I have had several friends that are still in that situation. Two of which I have gone into work. So perhaps at an inspirational level perhaps. I think I have been quite an inspiration to couple of my friends, and some volunteers (café manager).

The manager went through a difficult period but this contributed to build her self-confidence. The manager is a single mother who had not worked for seven years prior to running the café. Managing the café represented a considerable challenge particularly after spending several years raising children. As the manager pointed out

It was quite a learning process to re-learn to communicate with adults in a professional environment after my children (café manager).

As a result, developing the café into a successful social enterprise was an extremely important personal challenge and early success resulted in raising the individual's self-esteem and confidence. The initial success with the social enterprise and understanding the day to day issues of living in the estate made the manager's effort to build 'get ahead' social capital more successful. However, the effective work of the social enterprise in building some dimensions of social capital were partially offset by two problems which under a social capital framework can be classified as an excess of bonding social capital and a lack of linking social capital.

Another dimension of bonding social capital: downside social capital

When relationships are based on ethnic homogeneity, bonding social capital might be too strong, preventing relationships across ethnic groups and producing racial tensions which counter the proposed benefits of social capital.

Relations between the established white English group and the rest of the community have been strained for a number of years. The area is characterised by a diverse ethnic minority population and a core group of predominantly white English people who have lived there for over 30 years (Hounslow CAW, 2008). A number of respondents suggested that white English groups boycotted the community centre because they considered SureStart as only serving the needs of Asian people in the area. Asian and other ethnic minority groups were perceived to have taken over the running of the community centre and the social enterprise was suffering as a result. For some groups this perception was considered to be wide-ranging and extreme:

Ninety per cent of the young mums, white young mums, would not come here because they say 'it is all for the ethnic we are pushed at the back'. I am not going in there, it is full of ethnic (white British café volunteer).

This quotation illustrates the strength of bonding social capital and how it can result in this group effectively boycotting the community centre. The relationship between ethnic groups in the area was also reported to be far from ideal by residents participating in the Well London World Café:

There is little understanding about other cultures or tolerance (community resident; world café)

A lot of new faces, so don't know who is behind me. Foreigners do not communicate (white British café customer)

These quotes show how bridging social capital is rather low with relationships between different ethnic groups characterised by racism rather than co-operation.

The lack of linking social capital

An alternative or complementary explanation to the above racial explanation for the boycott of the community centre was put forward by some of the (white English) interviewees. Since its construction, the management of the new community centre had been in the hand of SureStart, a government run initiative that was reported by some interviewees as favouring the needs of local ethnic minorities over the needs of white English groups. The relationship with the community centre was seen as antagonistic and framed in terms of 'community versus government'. Some interviewees also reported the lack of consultation about the re-building of the community centre. One participant expressed their frustration and disappointment with the final building:

There was a huge building, it was huge. They had youth groups on there every day. The space was much larger than it is now, maybe three times bigger. People aren't happy with this building. They lost it all. When the plan first came out for this building, they put all the plans for us to look at. The plan was a lot bigger than this [actual size of the building]. And they kept saying, we have run out of money, we have run out of money. It is at least two thirds smaller than it should have been. And it has been taken away from us. This is now owned and run by Surestart. But what is Surestart? Ah just another government quango (member of the local resident association)

The above viewpoint was not shared by the SureStart official who was interviewed. This interviewee reported that the old community centre was inefficient and old, and the youth club was almost entirely white

And the old building was the symbol of white supremacy. And this new building is a challenge to that because it has not got the same stigma attached to it (Surestart official).

A lack of linking social capital can shed light on these problems and solutions. The views of the white English group, and perhaps the community as a whole, were not adequately taken into account in the development of the new community centre. Greater access to decision makers – linking social capital - would have enabled the community to have their 'voice' heard.

Discussion

This paper has reported the results of a study designed to examine the contribution of one social enterprise to building social capital in an urban disadvantaged area of London. The residents argued that the area was characterised by a lack of community spirit and stressed

the need to build more opportunities for interaction. The evidence presented in the paper suggests that the café was somewhat successful in providing a space for people to meet. The type of social capital built was mainly of the 'bonding' type as the café mainly facilitated interaction between family and close friends and as a result enhanced residents' ability to 'get by'.

In another way the social enterprise also contributed to building bridging social capital through the employment of volunteers and informally through the dynamism and commitment of the manager who provided a role model for some people. The manager of the social enterprise played a key role in building social capital. Although at a small scale, the manager was able to create a better balance between bonding and bridging social capital by brokering relationships between different segments of the community. This individual showed dynamism and in-depth understanding of the experience of people living in this area. This understanding is an invaluable role model for other people and can facilitate the establishment of networks across ethnic groups. In order to increase bridging social capital, the most dynamic people in the community could be supported and encouraged to run social enterprises. Moreover, the work of these individuals could be sustainable over time through the income generating activities of the social enterprise.

However, social capital can also show a negative side. The racial tension in the area is rooted in an excess of bonding social capital in particular ethnic groups. Such strong ethnic group bonding prevents individuals' interaction across ethnic groups which limits bridging social capital at the group level. In relation to this, the social enterprise was less able to have an impact, although it achieved some results by convincing a white resident to become a volunteer in the café and in doing so set in motion a process of involvement of other white English residents.

The racial tension was also compounded by the lack of involvement of part of the community (or perhaps all) in defining the plans of construction of the community centre. Greater access to decision makers – linking social capital – would have enabled the community to have their 'voice' heard. In such instances, the social enterprise had little power to act.

Individuals and communities need to be able to access decision makers who have access to resources and knowledge. Despite the emphasis of the New Labour government on community involvement as a way to empower communities, the findings of the study presented in this paper suggest that involving the community has not always been successful. The involvement of the community in the development of the new community centre appears to have been limited to just a brief consultation at the initial planning stage but with little real say in deciding the ultimate course of events.

Conclusions

The case study examined in this paper has contributed to our knowledge of how social capital might be built and maintained in disadvantaged urban areas through social enterprises. The contribution of the manager of the social enterprise was significant in

enabling the development of social capital not just through the running of the social enterprise but also informally by acting as a role model for others to follow. It is important to consider this evidence in the context of the recent move towards a 'Big Society'. The Coalition government plans to train 'community organisers' to help citizens to become more involved in neighbourhood groups. In the poorest areas, these will be given grants to address local issues (Conservative manifesto 2010). The evidence from this research shows that the local knowledge and links of social entrepreneurs in the community could improve significantly the work of community organisers. This 'inside' knowledge could improve the organisation of community activities and provide an interesting view on the issues that need to be confronted. It is, however, important to note that such knowledge is not just an outcome of the activity of the social enterprise but is also due to the fact that the manager of the social enterprise lived in the estate and understood these issues, thus the recruitment of community organisers should prioritise local residents who are more likely to possess such knowledge.

Beyond the importance of individuals, resources and training, the evidence of this research shows that given the lack of linking social capital, the problem might be about access to 'power'. Thus, individuals, resources or training might not be enough without the pursuit of an appropriate 'localist' agenda that places the concerns of communities at the heart of policy making and crucially connects such communities with those responsible for policy decision making. Some steps in that direction have been made by New Labour (e.g. participatory budgeting) and appear to have been taken forward by the 'Big Society'. There are, however, a range of problems with this, particularly the issue of representativeness which is severe in the urban context characterised by highly ethnically diverse groups and inequalities in wealth and skills (JRF, 2009).

An important more conceptual consideration concerns the extent to which the notion of social capital needs further development particularly in terms of the differentiation between bonding and bridging social capital at the individual and group levels. This is because strong bonding social capital at the individual level (e.g. in the family) might preclude bonding social capital at the group level (e.g. benefits from belonging to a specific ethnic group). For example, the notion of 'amoral familism' (Banfield, 1967) argues that some places are characterised by an excess of trust within the family (an excess of bonding social capital at the individual level) and little or no trust outside it which would translate in lack of bonding social capital at the group level. Thus, a framework of analysis based on social capital should clarify the distinction and implications of discussions about individual and group levels.

Finally, whilst the article has attempted to make some general points about social capital and the important role played by some individuals, it is also important to highlight that caution needs to be paid to generalising these findings from one case study alongside the need for more substantive consultation with non-users which might have added greater understanding of different perspectives.

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Table 1

Forms, definition, benefits and absence of social capital

Types of social capital	Definition	Examples of key benefits	Absence of SC at individual/ group level
Bonding (get by)	Family members or ethnic groups, close friends, neighbours	Care and health in early childhood and frail old age; having someone to turn to for help; child care; creation of interest groups	Isolation and depression
Bridging (get ahead)	Across ethnic groups, occupational, and geographical backgrounds	Looking for employment, political mobilisation of interest groups; business relations; lower business crime	Racial tensions, unemployment, poor business networks
Linking	Relationships between communities and institutions such as government at different levels of access to resources and power	loans, links with people of different social classes	Disempowerment; lack of civic engagement

Source: authors