

What Makes Communities Tick?: Exploring the Relationship Between Local Government and Social Capital

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Abstract

While there are many commentators in the area of social capital, there are very few documented examples of practice at an international or national level that directly relate to Local Government. The Local Government and Social Capital Action Research Project (LGSCARP) was a pilot project in 2003–04 between the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) and the UQ Boilerhouse Community Service and Research Centre (CSRC) at the University of Queensland in conjunction with five participating local governments — Waggamba Shire Council, Maroochy Shire Council, Broadsound Shire Council, Thuringowa City Council and Mt Isa City Council.

The LGSCARP was essentially an exploratory exercise that sought to 'demystify' social capital and its important implications for local governments in Queensland. The project deliberately did not seek to impose any singular understanding of the concept of social capital but rather attempted to align some of the claims of social capital theory with the practice of local governments, focussing specifically on their community development activities. Nonetheless, there were a number of common findings that emerged over the course of the project, namely the importance of leadership, communication, learning, measurement and collaborative partnerships.

The key retrospective question that lingers about the LGSCARP was "What difference would it have made to have described it instead as a *community development* action research project?" The truthful response is probably not a significant amount but that said, the LGSCARP team remained adamant that focussing a project specifically on social capital enabled a broader perspective than that afforded by the language of community development. The latter has been in the lexicon of local government for some time and although its popularity waxes and wanes, we would argue that to have named this as a community development project would have been to focus too narrowly on the role of local government alone rather than the broader community. By positing social capital building as a whole-of-community exercise, we believed that this exploratory research was able to at least temporarily divert some attention away from local government's role in such initiatives by speaking directly with communities and then following this step, re-engage local government in an honest assessment of what might be possible and what might not. To this end, the

LGSACRP benefited from not joining the ever-present stream of community consultation projects that invariably focus on a very specific issue requiring a here-and-now solution. This is not to imply that the LGSCARP was not highly aware of the need to produce tangible outcomes, but rather to acknowledge that the project was not constrained by working to set of instrumentally defined objectives.

Another retrospective issue that remains is the extent to which the LGSCARP was a product of the five participating local governments or in other words, whether a different set of five would have produced qualitatively different outcomes. Again, the honest response to this question is that it would be odd if a different set of local governments did *not* produce fundamentally different outcomes. The extent to which the findings from the LGSCARP are able to be generalised, however, is less an issue than the fact that any small sample of local governments in Queensland struggles to represent the exceptionally diverse range of urban, outer urban, regional, rural and remote local governments. Given the original brief, it was an obviously ambitious agenda to try and work with five local governments but although it diminished the length of time that the project team could spend with any one council, it did allow for at least some of this diversity to be captured. An alternative course for the project when it was first envisaged was, of course, to identify a small sample of local governments in a strong position to begin measuring social capital and thus shedding some quantitative light on the extent to which local governments contributed to its creation and maintenance. This may well be a strong future research strategy but such an approach may well have exacerbated the divide between those local governments only beginning to look more closely at community well being and social capital and those well advanced in their assessment methods.

The paper also traces developments post-LGSCARP through 2004–05 in furthering the links between local government in Queensland and social capital theory and practice. Some of the key focus areas here will be various training and learning events, attempts to benchmark community wellbeing measures and the often frustrated efforts to integrate local government work on social capital with similar state and federal government initiatives. The aftermath of the March 2004 local government elections in Queensland — with an unprecedented number of new councillors commencing duties — offered a tremendous opportunity to position social capital firmly on the agenda of local governments. It is hoped that the LGSCARP has provided some strong evidence to assist efforts to sustain the momentum and interest in social capital. As one of the project's advisory committee members put it upon hearing of the draft project report's title, "What could possibly be more important for a local government than to understand what makes its communities tick?"