WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

The central premise of social capital is that social networks have value. Social capital refers to the collective value of all "social networks" [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other ["norms of reciprocity"].

HOW DOES SOCIAL CAPITAL WORK?

The term social capital emphasizes not just warm and cuddly feelings, but a wide variety of quite specific benefits that flow from the trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation associated with social networks. Social capital creates value for the people who are connected and - at least sometimes - for bystanders as well.

WHERE CAN SOCIAL CAPITAL BE FOUND?

Social capital can be found in friendship networks, neighborhoods, churches, schools, bridge clubs, civic associations, and even bars. The motto in Cheers "where everybody knows your name" captures one important aspect of social capital.

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND NETWORKING

People engage with others through a variety of relationships forming many different types of networks. Social Capital is the resource that stems from these social interactions, networks and network opportunities which take place in specific environments, which in our research was the volunteering experience. There are different types of social capital, based around different types of networks.

Most commonly they are referred to as:

1. **Bonding social capital**
   This relates to relationships with family, friends and peer groups that provide a sense of belonging in the here and now. It is good for 'getting by' in life.

2. **Bridging social capital**
   This is about creating links with people outside our immediate circles, who can help us to broaden our opportunities and horizons. It is good for 'getting ahead' in life.

3. **Linking social capital**
   This relates to relationships between people with varying levels of power. It is good for accessing support from formal institutions. Developing a variety of social networks can therefore provide a number of benefits: from personal and emotional support to giving young people more opportunities, choice and power.
SOCIAL CAPITAL AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

The fact that social capital keeps us safe, sane and secure cannot be understated. Most of us tend to think that institutions or organizations are key to safety. Places like hospitals or systems like law enforcement are thought to keep us safe, but the bold truth is that these systems have never really succeeded in keeping us safe or healthy. Rather, it is the opportunity for relationships that community offers us as well as the building of social capital. Simply stated, your circles of support and the reciprocity they create are the most important element in your safety. In fact, it has been suggested that social isolation, or the opposite of social capital, is responsible for as many deaths per year as is attributed to smoking.

When we consider social capital for people with disabilities, we must recognize the void. We know that people with disabilities still are separated from the greater community and mostly involved in special programs or services designed for them. In these realities, the major outlet for social capital is found only within the borders of the special programs. To this extent then, the relationships that constitute the social capital of many people with disabilities are other people with disabilities. The narrowness of this reality leaves a significant void.

Consider the notion of reciprocity. The more you become connected with your community, the more people begin to watch out for each other. If one day a regular member of your group doesn’t show up, a natural inclination would be to check up on them. This sense of group reciprocity is what leads to individual safety.

If the major social capital outlet for people with disabilities is other people with disabilities, then the reciprocity factor can become narrow. The more narrow the confines of reciprocity the less impact it offers.

Putnam’s ideas of how social capital builds tolerance and lessens pugnaciousness also fit closely to the concept of cultural shifting. Anthropologists have found that for communities to get better, new and different ideas, people or products are necessary. Yet intolerant and angry communities are not as open or as ready to absorb new things. Consequently, cultural shifting is more difficult when communities remain narrow. Social capital helps build tolerance because the exposure to others challenges us to consider new things. This developing openness then has an effect on pugnaciousness. Simply put, if you become more exposed to difference, anger levels have a greater potential to go down.

VOLUNTEERING AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Volunteering could be seen as having links to social capital with its’ integral emphasis on mutual co-operation, reciprocity, trust and opportunities to network. Perhaps the most popular notion of social networking within recent public debate has been identified by Putnam (1993). Within Putnam’s work, social capital has been defined as:

“features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate co-ordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (Putnam, 1995, page 67).
A community or neighbourhood that is considered rich in social capital could be described as a socially cohesive, co-operative, caring community in which people work together for mutual benefit, as such social capital has been seen as:

“both a glue that bonds society together and a lubricant that permits the smooth running of society’s interactions (both interpersonal and among people, groups, and organisations) (Smith, 1997, page 170).

Conversely, a community poor in social capital might be described as one where people become isolated, suspicious of others and reluctant to participate in social, economic and political life. Indeed, a community lacking in social capital is one characterised by the breakdown of the social fabric that binds people together within their communities.

Volunteering contributes both to society and to the volunteer themselves. By providing their time and resources to organisations, volunteers help deliver services, products and opportunities that otherwise might have been provided at a higher cost to the recipient or not provided at all.

Research indicates that volunteering enhances social cohesion, strengthens communities and provides benefits to the volunteer themselves. Volunteering can increase social inclusion, physical and psychological wellbeing and career opportunities.

Volunteering is deeply embedded in most cultures and is manifested in various ways. Volunteering can be defined broadly as the non-profit, non-wage and non-career contributions of individuals for the well-being of their neighbours, community or society at large. Volunteering is the ultimate expression of the willingness and ability of citizens to get engaged and to freely help others and improve society in a spirit of reciprocity.

It brings significant benefits to individuals and communities and helps to nurture and sustain a richer social texture and a stronger sense of mutual trust and cohesion. As stated by Smith, 1997, it is the "glue" that holds society together. It can be stated that volunteerism and volunteers are at the heart of Social Capital.

**VOLUNTEERING AS A WAY OF BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

Unlike specialist “day programs” that reinforce the differentness of people with disabilities, conveying the notion that they are a burden on society, volunteering raises the social capital of such persons. Instead of being passive recipients of welfare and disability support services, volunteering is an avenue in which people with disabilities can have a socially valued role within the community, contribute to the community in a meaningful way, build connections in the community and help break down the intolerance of “differentness” or “otherness”, within our community.
Organisations and fellow workers not only benefit by the contributions made by volunteers with disabilities and having exposure to people who are considered as being “different” from the rest of society, the volunteers themselves benefit by developing new skills and confidence. Volunteering can also be a catalyst for connecting people with disabilities to the community, as well as broadening their social networks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY/REFERENCES

