

OECD/ONS CONFERENCE ON THE MEASUREMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

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RAPPORTEUR'S SUMMARY

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1. This report summarizes the proceedings of the OECD/ONS conference on the measurement of social capital. It will not deal directly or specifically with the content of the country papers and other pre-prepared papers, since these are electronically available. The focus instead will be on the main flow of the resulting discussions, and especially on their implications for further progress in achieving the purpose of the conference- to increase the range and quality of internationally comparable measures of social capital. The initial draft of the report was distributed to all participants, and has been revised to reflect their suggested revisions.

2. There were delegates from 21 OECD countries, reflecting a widespread interest in the topic. To keep the size of the meeting small, countries were generally limited to one or two representatives. There was a wide range of interest and familiarity with the range and content of previous research on, and measurement of, social capital. In addition, because moving forward to pointed discussions of what to measure and how to measure it involves an even wider range of skills and knowledge to be brought into play, it was to be expected that the discussions would to some extent reflect wide variations of viewpoints and backgrounds. This report will bypass that part of the discussions concerned mainly with raising shared understanding of terms, concepts and previous research. However, the extent of these discussions suggests that it might be useful, as part of preparations for further meetings, to facilitate more advance preparation

at the national level to enable delegations and discussions to start from a higher level of shared understanding of the previous research and measurement efforts. This probably means bringing together survey and subject specialists, not forgetting the need, expressed by several delegates to this conference, to keep sufficient contacts with actual or potential policy users to keep the survey designers and other data collectors well informed about why social capital data would be useful and how they might be used.

3. In opening the conference, Len Cook of the ONS noted that the time was ripe for a collaborative international approach to the measurement of social capital, given the existing strong framework for such international cooperation among national data gathering agencies, and the work already done by the OECD. He also noted that social capital and public policies may be interdependent. Hence social capital might alter the effects of any given policy change- e.g. where social capital is better, then policies may also work better. This makes the study of social capital more important, but also more complicated.

Theme 1: Social Capital Measurement and its Challenges

4. The opening paper by Tom Healy was built on the earlier OECD study on the Wellbeing of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital, of which he had been a lead author. His paper concentrates on the next steps, and is accompanied by a survey of existing sources of internationally comparable data on social capital. The discussion was opened by Karen Wright, who noted, in addition to raising several of the issues noted below, that many of the key issues currently under discussion were dealt with extensively by Aristotle with great prescience. Following the general discussion sparked by the Healy paper, there were highly informative country reports presented in less than three minutes each, an impressive feat chaired by Karen Dunnell. Among other things, the country reports revealed a wide range among countries, and among departments and agencies within countries, of experience, knowledge, and interest in the measurement and use of data relating to social capital. Since there was a substantial overlap of the points raised in these two parts of Theme 1, the main points can usefully be integrated into a single report, making use of the eight-point list proposed by the chair and extended and amended in subsequent discussions.

5. Main questions discussed under Theme 1, as proposed by the chair, and expanded (as shown by bracketed material) in subsequent discussions.

- 1) How does social capital relates to policy: who are the key users of the data? (To the extent there were diverging views on this issue, they ranged from those who thought a firm list of agreed concepts, users and purposes should precede any measurement to those who saw the current interest in internationally agreed questions to be only a slight extension of decades of asking these and similar questions in both government and private surveys, both national and international. For those holding the latter view, the many users of existing data on related subjective and objective measures were thought to be especially interested in securing a higher degree of international comparability to help in setting benchmarks for the goals and consequences of national policies.)
- 2) Can surveys be co-ordinated and integrated to achieve greater comparability? It is especially important to be able to link annual surveys with more comprehensive periodic surveys, and to provide more detailed investigations of particular groups, problems, and regions.
- 3) How has social capital been discussed in the academic arena, and how this is transported to the public arena?

- 4) Does social capital mean different things at different ages, and for different ages? (See 8 below)
- 5) What about the sub-national level? It important to identify the location of respondents, so as to be able to be able to interpret their responses in the context of community-level variables.
- 6) Can we develop a question bank, with starred items? (How should we manage the tension between comparability between countries and sensitivity to local and national differences? Should there be separate lists of questions for inclusion specifically to achieve internationally comparable data?) (Starred items to be based upon successful experience and testing, and chosen to include also promising new items to be used in part for testing purposes.)
- 7) How do we use micro data with more macro items? Can individual-level and societal-level variables be appropriately measured to enable the effects of social capital to be established? (See 2 above)
- 8) Are new forms of social capital supplementing or displacing old forms? (In the context of this and point 4, there was a suggestion from Greece to develop participation questions designed to include new forms of social capital, many of which are likely to be especially relevant for the young.)

New points added in the general discussion.

- 9) It is important to see that the policy process itself can either create or destroy social capital. Hence there should be some form of social capital audit, or some other way of measuring and monitoring the extent to which the design and delivery of policies affects social capital. (Robinson).
- 10) As part of the process of identifying the need for and uses of social capital measurement, there is a need in some countries to find reliable continuing sources of financial support for key surveys.
- 11) In addition to potential financial limitations, it is necessary to consider the limitations on the number and patience of interviewees (i.e. respondent burden), and the resulting difficulties in establishing representative samples.
- 12) In response to some comments suggesting a need for more conceptual discussions before starting large-scale international measurement, Putnam and Woolcock both noted that previous decades of related research had involved a productive back-and-forth relation between empirical measurement and the development and testing of hypotheses and concepts. Austria emphasized the resulting need to start soon with the process of asking some core questions in as many countries as feasible, in the expectation that there is much that can be learned along the way. In this view, experience provides the most efficient way of improving the collection and analysis of comparative data.
- 13) It is useful to combine survey-based measures of social capital at the individual level with parallel studies at the community level, case studies of particular events, and experimental studies of the sort long used by psychologists and increasingly employed by other social scientists to test the linkages among attitudes, motivation, and behaviour in different social contexts.

- 14) While there was general agreement that subjective questions on the nature and radius of trust were different from objective questions about the nature and frequency of participation in organized and unorganized social activities, both were worth asking. This was seen to be true whether trust is seen to be part of a broad definition of social capital or alternatively as a consequence, or even a precursor, of the formation of other forms of social capital. (It was also noted by several participants, and widely agreed, that nothing in the concepts and measurement of social capital implied that such capital would always be put to socially productive uses, any more than is true for physical or human capital. That being the case, some participants wondered why the possible malign use of social capital is more frequently mentioned than is the case for human and physical capital, or environmental capital for that matter. This may reflect the passage of time, as there were heated debates in earlier years about whether there was any meaningful way to measure physical capital stocks. Going further back, there have been debates over centuries about where new technologies embodied in physical capital would destroy jobs, ways of life, and social structures.
- 15) On the distinctions and linkages among the three types of social capital highlighted in the OECD Well-Being of Nations report and in Tom Healy's paper (bonding, bridging and linking), there was agreement on the importance of the conceptual distinction between bridging and bonding, and of the value of attempting to develop measures that might help to distinguish among these types. However, some initial empirical research suggested that those involved in typical bonding-type activities may be more, not less, involved in bridging connections, as well, holding other factors constant. One hypothesis, presented during a tea break, for explaining this result is that many organizations thought to be of a bonding form, e.g. ethnic social organizations, labour unions, and professional associations, often include people who differ from one another in many or most other aspects of their lives, so that the so-called bonding group also creates important bridges across other potential divides.

Theme 2: How Can We Compare Social Capital Across Cultures?

6. There were three papers under this theme: a report from the UK Home Office, a conceptual discussion based on Japanese experiences and perspectives, and a paper on the forms and consequences of social capital in the transforming societies of Eastern Europe and the former USSR. There was lively discussion in all cases, covering the interesting specifics of each case, as well as the broader implications for national and international measurement of social capital. This report will concentrate on those issues of most relevance to the aims of the conference.

7. Since the results from the recent Home Office survey were not yet publicly available, the presentation by Gurchand Singh comprised a combination of some relevant findings of the Crickle Report on the 2001 racial disturbances in the UK and some discussion of the types of data and analysis that might help to understand what went wrong. Analysis thus far indicates that for a mixture of reasons there were strong cleavages between racial groups in these towns, with almost no bridging forms of social capital between the two groups. The consequences of the lack of contact were exacerbated by competition for scarce employment. The discussant, David Robinson, made a distinction between case studies of the sort being carried out by the Home Office in these communities and broader studies of the formation and consequences of social capital. A balanced research agenda, he argued, should include both. The implications for internationally comparable measurement of social capital would thus be likely to include asking common questions in case-study communities and in the society at large, with as much as possible in common across countries, along with some international sharing of the methods and results of the case studies. Several delegates pointed out that many urban areas in OECD countries had high and growing shares of recent immigrants with different religious, social and ethnic backgrounds. This suggests that surveys of social capital in these areas will likely require careful attention to sample size and distribution

across population groups. It also suggests the importance of asking questions that relate to linkages among groups with different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, although several delegates noted that there were sensitivities in their countries about asking such questions, and inevitable complexities in the interpretation of answers. For example, a low density of linkages between ethnic or religious groups could reflect either cleavage or different opportunities, with those in more homogenous parts of a country having fewer opportunities for increasing the diversity of their contacts.

8. The Japanese paper described difficulties in translating some social capital terms into Japanese, since some of the more obvious expressions had already been used for other purposes, e.g. social capital is sometimes used to describe public infrastructure. On the substantive side, it was noted that the workplace provides an especially large part of the networks and support systems of Japanese men of working age, so that it was necessary to take these networks fully into account when designing questionnaires. Some delegates viewed the international diversity of languages and cultures as limiting that scope for cross-national data and analysis, while others were more inclined to argue that cross-nationally comparable data enable the first steps to be taken in calibrating the extent and nature of cross-national, and cross-cultural, differences in the forms and consequences of social capital.

9. The Czech paper on social capital in transition societies provided a good example of the importance of the distribution of social capital among members of a society. The author argued that when the Berlin Wall came down, old structures collapsed, and new opportunities arose. In facing these new opportunities, some citizens of the successor societies were much better placed than others (possessing more of what the author referred to as Bourdieu-type social capital), to chase emerging opportunities. The initial highly unequal distribution of power and opportunities, and the absence of functioning private and official trust and norms, has led to increasing inequality of distribution of income and future opportunities.

10. In discussing the latter two papers, Robert Putnam set the stage by sketching a nested hierarchy of possible definitions for social capital, with the narrowest being the networks emphasized in the Czech paper as Bourdieu-type social capital, with this narrow ('lean and mean' in his terms) definition enclosed within a series of larger definitions, including: networks+reciprocity, networks+trust, networks+trust+norms, and finally networks+trust+norms+institutions. Empirical researchers use mainly networks, with or without adding norms. Social capital is not limited to or especially embodied in, civil society organizations such as NGOs. Neither is social capital, as defined in current research, limited to networks with positive effects. Ten years ago, there was a debate about whether networks can have only good effects. They can have both, all researchers would now agree. Putnam also suggested revising some of the standard participation questions for international use. The purpose of the revisions would be to ask questions that were more likely to be equally applicable in different societies. He also suggested ways of combining cross-national and nationally specific questions so as to achieve cross-national comparability while still highlighting nationally specific features of social capital. His specific suggestions are reported below, as part of the discussion of the next steps.

Theme 3: The Future of International Social Capital Measurement

11. The morning and afternoon discussions on this theme were based on parts 1 and 2 of the OECD Secretariat paper. The starting point for the presentation and discussions was the set of four options for future work:

- 1) One agreed question module
- 2) Agree on a question module for use by countries now wishing to collect internationally comparable data

- 3) Guidelines to increase international comparability of individual questions and question modules
- 4) Do nothing by way of international agreement

12. It fairly quickly became evident in the discussions that many delegates preferred to treat these options not as mutually exclusive alternatives but as complementary. For example, everyone seemed to agree that guidelines for question design and even answer codes for questions would be helpful whether or not there were specific common questions asked in all countries. More substantively, some aspects of options 1 and 2 were seen to complement option 3, with guidelines and specific questions being mutually supportive. One version of this strategy, advocated specifically by Belgium, would involve some specific questions asked in common very soon in as many countries as have existing surveys in which such modules could readily be included. At the same time, additional questions would have some common elements plus additional components chosen to amplify or refine the basic questions so as to map a region's or a nation's particularities, or to enable the answers to the internationally common questions to be more easily linked to other survey or administrative data. Common questions should not displace nationally-specific questions. They are intended to be mutually enriching.

13. The purpose of the guidelines is to provide common standards for coding options and other details vital to international comparability. They would also help to keep the range of supplementary questions from becoming confusingly diverse. They would also serve to identify the issues of fundamental interest. A mixed strategy of this sort seemed to lie behind the discussion contributions of many of the national delegations. Several noted that their initial preference for option 3 over the others would be dominated by a mixed strategy, which had not previously been explicitly offered. It was also noted by the chair, Barry McGaw, that one likely and helpful feature of a mixed strategy is that it permits those countries ready and willing to ask comparable questions now to start doing so, with others to join if and when their resources and interests permit. The initial collaboration on common questions would permit the early surveys to be more useful, while also providing valuable experience to permit subsequent improvements by the time a larger group of countries is ready and willing.

14. To provide a specific example, the following list was assembled from Putnam's specific example questions, supplemented by Healy's complementary suggestions, presented as part of the conference summary, and thereafter amended in the general discussion.

Core questions as suggested by Putnam:

- Rather than measuring types of organizations, how about measuring the frequency of contacts of various types, e.g:

How often during the past twelve months did you:

1. attend a public meeting?
2. meet with a community leader?
3. have friends to visit in your home?
4. visit in the home of someone of a different race?
5. socialize with co-workers off the job?
6. attend religious services?
7. volunteer?
8. attend a film or concert with friends? (added to illustrate something for the under25s)

- On the trust dimension: canonical trust question plus

How much do you trust:

1. Neighbours?
2. Co-workers?
3. whites, african-americans, latinos etc?
4. strangers?

- (The canonical trust question, asked in hundreds of surveys since it was first used by Almond and Verba almost fifty years ago, is: 'In general, do you think that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful when dealing with people?')
- Both the associational and the trust questions were of a form described in discussions as 'stem and flower'. The stem is the base of the question, "How many times in the last year have you..", and the 'flowers' are the specific activities listed below. Putnam suggested that there should be some flowers that are asked about in each national survey, with others added to specific national surveys as the national surveyors and researchers thought fit and necessary to assess the frequency of contact through associations of particular importance to them. The stem and flower arrangement accepts this combination of core and add-on questions fairly well, since the time taken by adding another category of association is small, and the answers to the common flower items are not likely to be influenced by whatever may follow in the list.

15. From Tom Healy:

- Outcome variables are essential, including life satisfaction measured on a ten-point scale (used in the WVS and elsewhere), and subjective health status on the five point scale used in the WVS and most other surveys.
- Additionally, it is important to establish a number of personal attributes, ideally by questions with the same wording and the same response categories for all countries. These should at a minimum include: age, income, educational attainment, marital status, gender, employment status, (perhaps also the welfare system or other social safety nets), some measure of the length of residency in the current dwelling or neighbourhood. To establish a fuller set of measures of community-level variables, it will be important to obtain each respondent's location by census district or equivalent geographic locator. This should permit concordance to be established with other place-based measures of community structure.

16. In the general discussion of these questions, it was suggested by the UK that there should be some common questions about the strength of ties at the community or neighbourhood level.

17. In the general discussion of these sample questions, and earlier, several other key points were emphasized:

- It is important to make as many links as possible between government and private surveys, in terms of core questions asked and identifying information obtained, so that the results can become mutually enriching. Independent surveys can often be more timely, and can include questions that governments might not feel able to ask in official surveys.
- The biggest gains are likely to flow not from special-purpose surveys of social capital, however useful these may be, but from including a few key social capital and well-being questions in many surveys which have diverse goals. The key reason for this is that social

capital has important effects in many realms, and the well-being questions are key to assessing the consequences of many policies. For example, Barry McGaw suggested, and others agreed, that it would be desirable to include such questions in PISA and other surveys of educational attainment, where the social capital data are surely likely to be relevant. There was also considerable discussion of including social capital questions in the ISSP.

18. After lunch, the discussion turned to the specifics of the next steps. There was a sense of less engagement in the 3rd theme than in the first two, as noted and queried by the Norwegian delegate. She suggested that one implication of this might be the continuing need to be reminded of the relevance and importance of the issues at hand, to provide motivation for the hard slog through the negotiation of questions, samples, and finance, all complicated by too many demands for scarce time and resources. In addition, the rapporteur suspects he may have been too soporific immediately before lunch. There might also be a parallel to be drawn with the reticence that sometimes appears when a large bill appears on the table requiring some distribution among the drinkers. The delegations differed considerably in their backgrounds and interests, and most were probably not in a position to commit their countries to anything specific by way of future measurement activities. However, conference participants were agreed that the broad parameters of measurement discussed at the conference provided a basis for further work. They also agreed to future exchanges and a meeting designed to spell out the next steps in more detail.

19. The meeting ended with thanks by the delegates to the ONS and OECD hosts and organizers, and to the paper givers and discussants. To put some perspective on the time needed to make progress, it was noted that the three versions of the Magna Charta housed in the British Library across the street were spread over ten years, each version acquiring more clarity, precision and official recognition than its predecessor. 1215 is the year recorded in history books, but it was only the starting point; the same might be said of this first OECD meeting on the international social capital measurement.