

SOCIAL CAPITAL: THE CHALLENGE OF INTERNATIONAL MEASUREMENT

REPORT OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE CONVENED BY THE ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT AND THE UNITED KINGDOM OFFICE FOR NATIONAL STATISTICS, LONDON, 25-27 SEPTEMBER

Background

1. All OECD countries were invited to send representatives to this conference¹, and 22 countries did so. Representatives also attended from the World Bank and UNESCO alongside 9 specially invited experts. Countries were represented at the meeting through central statistical offices, through ministries of education and labour, and by academic experts. This diversity of representation reflects the way in which policy interest in social capital measurement cuts across the whole of government – with social capital policy issues being salient, for example, in health, education, local economic development, immigration, crime prevention and many other social policy fields.

2. The conference agreed some steps designed to improve the international comparability of social capital data, and agreed to further interchanges and a meeting whose task will be to develop and agree guidelines for international comparability and explore other options, including the development of a short question module. This paper provides an overview of the conference papers and the outcomes of the conference. A separate note by the Rapporteur John Helliwell provides an account of the conference proceedings and is available on request.

Conference objectives

3. In a number of OECD countries, initiatives are under way to measure social capital. Often, these initiatives emerge from central statistical offices, as part of broader programmes of work on social indicators, while other initiatives are based in other parts of government, at local or neighbourhood level or in independent research programmes. Social capital is commonly measured through survey questions enquiring about levels of trust, informal social contacts and community and political participation. There is

1. The OECD's programme of work on social capital, organised through the Centre for Educational Research and Innovation has two components. The first component is a sequence of policy seminars, arranged in collaboration with countries, with the first seminar to take place with Sweden next year on the topic of schools and social capital. The second component involves an attempt to improve the measurement of social capital, particularly internationally, and this conference was organised under this heading.

much scope to share experience and good practice more widely, both improving these measurement efforts, and enhancing international comparability.

4. Against that background, the objectives of the conference were:

- To share good practice internationally in the measurement of social capital, and to identify the scope for convergence of measurement instruments;
- To identify suitable instruments which are being, or could be used, to compare social capital across countries;
- To seek agreement on next steps in the international measurement of social capital.

Papers prepared for the conference

5. Participating countries were offered the opportunity of preparing papers on social capital measurement within their country and 16 countries did so.

6. Some countries reported programmes of work explicitly concerned with the measurement of social capital. Thus:

- Australia, Canada, Finland, New Zealand and the United Kingdom described co-ordinated programmes of work, led by central statistical offices, designed to improve the measurement of social capital. Thus Statistics Finland has assembled a database of existing social capital data, Statistics New Zealand has developed an agreed framework for measurement, and the UK Office for National Statistics has developed a harmonisation programme, designed to ensure convergence of different measurement instruments.
- Canada and the United States described targeted surveys of social capital. The United States Social Capital Community Benchmark Survey was a one-off privately funded survey, undertaken in 2000, 2001 and 2002. Statistics Canada plan a survey of social capital for 2003.

7. Other countries described measurement activity, which, while not explicitly labelled as social capital measurement, addressed one or more dimensions of social capital measurement. Thus:

- Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Greece, Japan, Switzerland and Turkey described surveys on different aspects of community participation and volunteering;
- Some countries, like Spain and Turkey, noted the availability of information from labour force surveys which bear on social capital;
- Other countries, including the Netherlands and Switzerland, described the use of international instruments like the World Values Survey and the International Social Survey Programme to obtain information about social capital alongside national survey instruments;

8. Other themes include:

- Canada, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand and the United States noted how time-use surveys can be used to capture data about participation in community activities and social life;
- Many countries described specific smaller scale studies directed at one or more aspects of social capital. For example Australia described a study of social capital in five communities in New South Wales, Belgium a survey of social participation and networks in Flanders and the Dutch speaking population of Brussels, France a study of the telephone as a means of social integration, and Greece a survey of associational involvement in the Athens area.

9. Expert papers were provided by Petr Mateju, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, and Yutaka Tsujinaka, University of Tsukuba, Japan, on measurement issues in Eastern Europe and Japan, and from Tom Healy, National Economic and Social Forum, Ireland, on broader issues of international measurement, including experience of international surveys. David Halpern, of the UK Prime Minister's policy unit, spoke about the policy and indeed political importance of social capital, and the value which internationally comparable data on social capital would have in that context. The meeting was chaired by Barry McGaw for the OECD, and by Len Cook, the UK National Statistician and Karen Dunnell, Director of Social Statistics for the UK Office for National Statistics. Other expert contributors included Robert Putnam, Harvard University, David Robinson, Victoria University, New Zealand, Michael Woolcock, World Bank, and Karen Wright, London School of Economics.

Conference proceedings

10. John Helliwell, for the University of British Columbia, served as rapporteur and his summary of the conference proceedings is attached. Among the issues discussed were:

- continued debate over the concept of social capital and how that debate might relate to measurement;
- the strong political and policy interest in social capital in many countries;
- the need to work quickly, partly to allow national measurement programmes to take account of the international dimension;
- the way in which social capital concepts might often need translation to adapt measurement tools to different national contexts;
- the availability of a range of data from existing international surveys, such as the World Values Survey, the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) and the International Adult Literacy Survey;
- the availability of some national instruments for measuring dimensions of social capital, and the need to take account of this, when for example, considering how to measure change over time;
- the different potential units of analysis for measurement – including whole communities as well as individuals;
- the large effect of age on the form and extent of social capital, and the consequent requirement to reflect this in measurement instruments;

- the need to link academic experience and expertise on social capital with national statistical offices;
- the importance of linking the policy context to measurement, for example by taking account of the different types of social capital which might be related to outcomes in different policy fields, or by developing tools to evaluate the impact of policies and programmes on social capital;
- the variable relationship between social capital and equity;
- the distinction between activities where substantial advances could be made on the basis of international comparisons, and those lesser priority areas where there would simply be interest in sharing experience internationally.

Outcomes of the conference: agreeing steps towards better international measurement

11. Much of the conference was devoted to discussion of proposals for harmonising measurement instruments so as to improve international comparability. This discussion was aided by an earlier discussion by email, in advance of the conference proper. Two main issues were addressed – first, the need to break down social capital into separate ‘dimensions’, or measurable chunks, before pursuing measurement of each separate dimension; second, the need to decide on what broad approach to international harmonisation should be followed.

The dimensions of measurement

12. The OECD secretariat proposed that social capital be measured under the following headings or ‘dimensions’:

- Community participation through organised groups (including voluntary work)
- Informal networks (including providing and receiving voluntary help, as well as informal social networks)
- Trust
- Other cross-cutting indicators – such as bonding (within groups) and bridging (across groups, and indicators of ICT-based networks; indicators of the proxies and consequences of social capital, such as well-being and formal political participation.

13. These dimensions were agreed as a basis for further work, but it was suggested that other dimensions, including perceptions of the local neighbourhood, social capital arising through networks in families, schools and workplaces should be given consideration in future measurement efforts. The need to link these dimensions to the diverse requirements of policy was noted.

Choosing an approach to harmonisation

14. There was some debate over whether the work should go forward on the basis of a short set of agreed questions which could be applied in different countries, or whether to improve international comparability through the agreement of guideline definitions and indicators. It was noted that:

- certain questions, including the World Values Survey question on trust, have become well-established, have been used cross-culturally and cross-nationally and appear to work relatively well;
- issues of cultural and linguistic translatability, and the context-dependence of measurement instruments, would need to be carefully considered when looking at both questions and guidelines;
- countries were at very different stages in the development, at national level, of social capital measurement instruments;
- guideline definitions of concepts like ‘volunteering’ might be applied to other forms of research as well as household surveys;
- guidelines would be consistent with flexible application in national measurement programmes, taking account of local needs and requirements.

15. It was agreed that future work would seek to develop guidelines for social capital – covering matters such as data definitions and key indicators, while also exploring the option of a short agreed question set.

A further meeting to pursue the conference outcomes

16. To pursue the work it was agreed to pursue further interchanges between interested countries and hold a further meeting, reporting back subsequently to countries and the CERI Governing Board. The central objective would be to develop guidelines and explore the option of a short question set, as indicated above. However, in addition:

- noting the existence of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), which provides a rolling programme of household surveys in many OECD countries, those involved in the further meeting would approach ISSP with a view to the inclusion of a social capital module in a future survey;
- given the range of existing internationally comparable data on social capital from surveys such as the World Values Survey, the meeting would explore the option of collating and analysing existing international social data, taking account of resource implications;
- noting the UK ONS ‘question bank’ which allows people collecting data on social capital to readily access the range of questions already posed on the same topic, the meeting would explore the value of an international social capital question bank, taking account of resource implications.

Dissemination

17. The papers prepared for the conference represent a very important source of international information on the measurement of social capital, and they will shortly be published on the Internet by the OECD.

18. The “SIENA” informal meeting of senior government statisticians, which will take place in London on November 4-6 2002, will devote a day to the discussion of social capital. This meeting will take a paper on the outcome of the London UK-OECD conference to be presented by the OECD secretariat, providing an opportunity to spread the word about the event, and get it on the agenda of national statistical offices.