

## **Government's Relationship with Social Capital: Weekend Fling, On and Off Affair, or Life Long Romance?**

A Dialogue between **Geoff Woolcock** (Program Leader, Social Capital & Local Communities, Community Service & Research Centre, The University of Queensland) and **Mike Salvaris** (academic and social policy researcher)

Ever since social capital emerged as a significant sociological concept in the 1980s and 1990s, liberal western democratic governments have increasingly adopted not only the academic discourse of social capital but also utilised its fashionability to justify major social policy decisions. In this dialogue session, Geoff and Mike will deliberate on the reasons why this trend has emerged, the normative intent behind such thinking, and importantly, the implications for governments and communities in the applied practice of this thinking. In particular, the pair will concentrate on the ramifications of a social capital "agenda" for local governance and the rapidly increasing pressure on communities to "own" their issues and problems, an agenda that appears to principally be led by proponents of small government, many of whom are government leaders. The discussants will draw on their substantial experience in working with governments and communities in various community building initiatives across the nation, some of which have been specifically named social capital projects. The dialogue will be followed by an open discussion amongst participants at the session.

## **Community Building and Social Capital: a Conversation**

Presentation by Geoff Woolcock and Mike Salvaris  
LGCSAA National Conference, Townsville, 29-7-03

1. Geoff, there's a lot of talk about social capital these days, especially from governments. What exactly does this term mean?
2. Where did it come from? And what's the theory behind it?
  - a. (Putnam, theories, research work, argument etc)
  - b. (UK Community building)
3. What are the key features of social capital in practice?
4. Some of this might sound pretty familiar to people who were around in the 1970s. Is this stuff new? And if not, what was it before?
5. What is the problem that social capital is meant to be addressing?
  - a. (decline in communities, trust etc)
6. How is social capital supposed to work in practice – how will it fix these problems?

7. What does the evidence say: does social capital work in practice?
8. We've also heard a lot from governments about 'community building'. What is that all about? And is it related to social capital?
9. Why are governments so enthusiastic about social capital and community building? Are their reasons all good ones?
10. What are likely to be the main long term benefits of current policies emphasizing social capital and community building?
  - a. (gets people talking about importance of communities again)
  - b. (restores a missing element in policy making)
  - c. (is at least the right language to get through to business and government)
11. What might be some of the problems and drawbacks?
  - a. (legitimizes small government and disinvestment in communities)
  - b. (diverts attention from real culprits causing decline in communities: i.e., structural causes of disadvantage)
  - c. (exaggerates importance of this one approach against other equally legitimate and older ones)
12. How does all this impact on local governments? They seem to be expected to carry quite a few of these programs.
13. So all in all, if people really care about local government and local communities, how should they feel about social capital and community building:
  - a. Wholeheartedly support it?
  - b. Support it with qualifications? If so, what?
  - c. Reject it?

## **Introduction:**

A very warm welcome to this session on social capital and local government.

It's presented to you by the well-known Mr Salvaris, from Victoria, in the white corner. And ... *a certain Dr Woolcock from Queensland*, in the black..

As you will have gathered, our beloved President Jenny Merkus and her committee wanted this session to be something more than a dry academic seminar. It is, after all, a real and lively topic. She called it 'a conversation, but I think what she had in mind was something more like academic mud wrestling.

Now we agree that academics are too stuffy and we're all for more entertainment. But things seem to have got out of hand.

It all began with the title of our session. Some of you will be aware that, in a pathetic attempt to draw attention to their otherwise mediocre work, many academics spend days dreaming up exciting titles for their articles – indeed, often more time than they spend writing the article itself.

The title that we chose was 'Government's relationship with social capital; weekend fling, on and off affair or lifelong romance?'

Little did we think at the time about the seething undercurrents of repressed sexuality at conferences like this.

Word quickly got around. Rumours began to spread. Someone said they'd heard we were going to perform in spangled g-strings. Even, god forbid, the Full Monty. Someone else who'd heard Jon Hawkes' talk suggested that we rename the session 'The Six Phalluses of Sexual Capital'. There was talk of mission statements and missionary positions.

The whole thing had become a complete shambles.

So we have to apologise to those of you who came here with such feverish expectations. You may be disappointed and you should get your money back now.

The truth is we're just a couple of knockabout academics. We work with communities. We can sing you a theory, and juggle the facts. But sadly, we're not the Chippendales.

So let's start by explaining the issues in our title. Dr Woolcock, what on earth did you mean by describing the government's relationship with social capital as: a weekend fling; an on and off affair; or a lifelong romance?