

WHAT IS PEACEBUILDING?

The Concept of “Social Capital”

Many of us have used the word ‘social fabric’. We mostly talk about the social fabric that is ‘torn’, which then raises the question of how it can be ‘re-woven’ (and by what ‘weaver’)? You may even use the concept of ‘social capital’. Used and analysed already earlier by e.g. Pierre Bourdieu and James Coleman, the concept became especially popular through the work of Robert Putnam on democracy in Italy and on the sense of community in the USA. (see Putnam 1993; 1995, 2000 and Smith 2007).

Bourdieu’s understanding of ‘social capital’ relates to elites: privileged individuals maintain and strengthen their position by using their connections with other privileged people. He sees the ‘dark side’ of social capital, i.e. its exclusive nature towards those that are not ‘part of us’. Another darker manifestation of strong ‘social capital’, especially in the sense of ‘bonding capital’ (see below) can be the high degree of social surveillance and pressure to conform to the established norms and worldviews of the group one belongs to. From that point of view strong ‘bonding capital’ may narrow rather than expands one’s geographical and mental horizons.

Robert Putnam by contrast sees social capital present at all levels of society, and emphasizes much more its positive side, i.e. as the basis for ‘social belonging’ and constructive social interaction and association.

PUTNAM ON SOCIAL CAPITAL.

“Whereas physical capital refers to physical objects and human capital refers to the properties of individuals, social capital refers to connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called ‘civic virtue’. The difference is that ‘social capital’ call attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.” (Putnam 2000:19)

« First, social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily ... People often might be better off if they cooperate, with each doing her share. (...) Second, social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly. Where people are trusting and trustworthy, and where they are subject to repeated interactions with fellow citizens, everyday business and social transactions are less costly... (...) A third way in which social capital improves our lot is by widening our awareness of the many ways in which our fates are linked. (...) Joiners become more tolerant, less cynical, and more empathetic to the misfortunes of others. When people lack connection to others, they are unable to test the veracity of their own views, whether in the give or take of casual conversation or in more formal deliberation. (...) The networks that constitute social capital also serve as conduits for the flow of helpful information that facilitates achieving our goals...” (Putnam 2000 as quoted in Smith 2007)

Subsequent critiques pointed out that 'social capital' may actually be strong *within* a group but exclusive to that group, and therefore create a negative dynamics (e.g. a youth gang on the streets of Los Angeles rivaling with other youth gangs or neo-Nazis in Germany or Russia attacking 'foreigners'). This reflection led to a further useful conceptual distinction between '*bonding capital*' and '*bridging capital*', the first referring to the strong ties and solidarity *within a group*, the latter to the possibility of having strong *ties to people whose primary groups are other than your own*.¹ People who have or can establish relationships across groups that are potentially in opposition to each other, are what Anderson has called 'connectors' (Anderson 1999).

Bridging capital, relations with people that do not belong to what might be our primary social group and with whom we do not share our primary social identity, is made possible when people recognize that they have multiple 'identities'. If I see myself only as e.g. a Bosnian Croat, then I may feel antagonistic against Muslim Bosniacs and Bosnian Serbs. But if I can also see myself as a social conservative, an engineer, a fan of volleyball and of jazz music, then I also have things that I can share with others in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Other possibilities for common ground are a shared gender, or similar age (and therefore similar generational culture), enjoyment of the mountains or of fishing or of good food. Recognition that I – and others- have multiple identities, allows for a multitude of cross-cutting ties and relationships that create a dense 'social fabric'. A strong society probably has both a lot of bonding capital and of bridging capital. Effective peacebuilding would lead to more bonding but especially more bridging social capital.

While there has been tremendous volumes of talk in recent years about 'fragile states', and hence much investment in rebuilding 'the state' (see below), it is only more recently that more attention is being drawn to the 'state of the society' (e.g. Zoellick 2008). So as peacebuilders, how do you assess the 'state of the society', i.e. the degree and nature of its social capital? And if you find perhaps deep levels of distrust, fragmentation, division, individualism, then how do you go about creating or recreating some degree of social cohesion? Is this something that an external actor can contribute to? Under what conditions and how?

¹ Woolcock went beyond Putnam's distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' capital and added 'linking capital'. If bonding is the strong identification with those that are seen to be 'close' i.e. part of the groupings that one belongs to and that tend to define primary identities, then bridging capital for Woolcock relates to the ties we have with people that we do meet with certain regularity though don't necessarily know very well, such as acquaintances, colleagues at work etc. Linking capital then refers to the relationships – and assumptions that shape those- with the multitude of people that are largely 'strangers' to us.

References:

Putnam, R. 1993: *Making Democracy Work*. Civic traditions in modern Italy. Princeton, Princeton Univ. Press

Putnam, R. 2000: *Bowling Alone*. The collapse and revival of American community. New York, Simon and Schuster

Siisiäinen, M. 2000: "Two Concepts of Social Capital: Bourdieu vs. Putnam." Univ. of Jyväskylä, Dpt. Of Social Sciences and Philosophy (paper presented at International Conference on 'The Third Sector' in Dublin)

Smith, M. K. 2007: 'Social capital', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm

Zoellick, R. 2008: *Fragile States. Securing development*. Presentation at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Geneva, 12 September 2008
(<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/NEWS/0,,contentMDK:21898896~pagePK:34370~piPK:42770~theSitePK:4607,00.html>)