

Module One

THE DIMINUTION OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN AMERICA

WHAT CAN RELIGIOUS LEADERS DO?

Social Capital Worksheet

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Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. Networks of civic engagement, such as neighborhood associations, sports clubs, and cooperatives, are an essential form of social capital, and the denser these networks, the more likely that members of a community will cooperate for mutual benefit. This is so, even in the face of persistent problems of collective action (tragedy of the commons, prisoner's dilemma etc.), because networks of civic engagement:

- foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity by creating expectations that favors given now will be returned later;
- facilitate coordination and communication, and thus create channels through which information about the trustworthiness of other individuals and groups can flow, and be tested and verified;
- embody past success at collaboration, which can serve as a cultural template for future collaboration on other kinds of problems;
- increase the potential risks to those who act opportunistically that they will not share in the benefits of current and future transactions.

Social capital is productive, since two farmers exchanging tools can get more work done with less physical capital; rotating credit associations can generate pools of financial capital for increased entrepreneurial activity; and job searches can be more efficient if information is embedded in social networks. Social capital also tends to cumulate when it is used, and be depleted when not, thus creating the possibility of both virtuous and vicious cycles that manifest themselves in highly civic and uncivic communities.

The concept of social capital is meant to respond to a variety of problems in the United States today, though clearly its relevance and supporting research is international in scope. These include:

- **Inner-city Ills** Urban renewal and public housing policies, along with the exodus of black middle classes from the inner city, have depleted stocks of social capital available, and thus impaired school performance, job referral, drug- and crime-avoidance, and self help. Equal opportunity strategies and social welfare programs are unlikely to succeed unless they can be coupled with ways to replenish remaining stocks of social capital, such as those

represented by the black church. Broader economic development strategies, and ones targeted at specific regions and ethnic groups, also compel attention to models in the U.S. and abroad that are based on social networks and industrial districts.

- **Vitality of Democratic Institutions & Civic Life** The growing disaffection of citizens from their public institutions may be related to a decline in civic engagement, and contrasts with earlier periods when Americans had plentiful stocks of social capital. The key to making American democracy work, Alexis de Tocqueville noted in his classic *Democracy in America*, has been the propensity of Americans to form all kinds of civic associations. (See, for example, Tocqueville's [Political Associations in America](#).)

Forms & Examples of Social Capital

There are many forms of social capital, and the challenge is to locate and mobilize those forms that can contribute to public problem solving and democratic participation. This means not only making clear distinctions between those forms of civic association that are illiberal and exclusivist, and those that are not. It means understanding how homogeneous forms of social capital based on common racial, class and ethnic ties can complement heterogeneous forms that create broader linkages across these boundaries, and how policy designs and institutional partnerships can provide the needed supports.

In short, this entails modernizing the Tocquevillian heritage in ways appropriate for a society that is increasingly diverse and complex. Some examples are the following:

Congregation-based Community Organizing Perhaps the fastest growing form of community organizing today, congregation-based organizing mobilizes existing stocks of social capital in church networks, and generates new stocks across denominations and (sometimes) across ethnic and racial lines. It relies on one-on-one relationship building as the foundation stone for locating and developing community leaders and building trust through a mutual understanding of self interest and values. Political strategy on the larger stage of urban politics also plays a key role in mobilizing social capital in order to empower disadvantaged communities, lay effective claim to resources, and hold elected leaders accountable.

And, increasingly, congregation-based organizations also seek to develop new social capital in complex, ongoing partnerships with business allies and public officials, such as COPS and Metro Alliance's Project QUEST job training program in San Antonio and BUILD's attempts to bring an organizing dimension to the Community Building in Partnership project in the Sandtown-Winchester section of Baltimore. The QUEST model also uses church networks to recruit job trainees and vouch for their character and commitment, thus utilizing academic insights on job search networks for an explicit organizing approach to the problem of a changing local

economy. (See, for instance, [East Brooklyn Churches Build Nehemiah Homes](#) and [Baltimore's Commonwealth of Schools](#).)

Civic Environmentalism Civic environmental projects have developed at local, state, and even national levels over the past decade and a half, sometimes on the foundations of national regulatory approaches, and sometimes in response to their deficiencies. Local Leagues of Women Voters, for instance, have developed community education programs on groundwater pollution in an effort to enhance awareness among the general public and within key civic, political, and business institutions, and have used this as a basis for an action agenda entailing specific institutional commitments and new forms of voluntarism, such as elders trained as community monitors. (See, for instance, [Rockford League Educates Public for Groundwater Protection](#).) Civic organizations in the National Estuaries Program, such as Save the Bay in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, engage in similar community education to change norms, develop new sources of monitoring (e.g. fishermen), increase public support for bonds to improve infrastructure, broker good corporate citizen reputations, and collaborate on innovative production and workplace training practices to reduce toxics. (See, for instance, [Save the Bay Develops Civic Approach to Estuary Protection](#).) Working with the EPA's Design for the Environment Project and public interest groups, national trade associations in printing and dry cleaning utilize their networks to generate voluntary development, testing, and diffusion of alternative production techniques to reduce toxics, save jobs and keep smaller businesses competitive. (See, for instance, [Printing Trades Collaborate to Reduce Toxics](#).)

Participatory School Reform Various school reform approaches are noteworthy not only for their participatory pedagogies, but for their conception of the schools as the hub of networking of community actors that can support the reform process and the educational experiences of children. The [Algebra Project](#) District 4 in East Harlem develop various strategies for this: mobilizing networks of parents and developing their leadership capacities; incorporating parents into multidisciplinary teams; bringing adult education and services into school buildings; developing student internships and service learning in community organizations; organizing oral history and other projects around the stories of community leaders; involving community and local business leaders in mentoring. These schools build on the notion of creating a "conspiracy of the entire community" to educate the child, but also on young people's opportunities to do work of real value within community networks and institutions.

County Extension Agents The county extension system was an important effort to develop social capital in the past, and in some states new efforts are underway to revitalize this mission. Extension agents are coming to realize the limits of service and expert approaches, and coming to rethink their role as catalysts of new community partnerships. Thus, they bring institutional actors together in health services, link church groups and seniors groups, convene self help networks, and provide training so that community volunteers can continue projects without

depending on the county agents. They bring together local businesses and banks to provide resources and meeting space for citizen problem solving groups and low-income women's empowerment networks. They help develop the educational materials that civic partners can use in local groundwater protection projects, and engage in the kinds of "public issues education" that develops community deliberative capacities. These efforts draw upon concepts of "citizen politics" and other traditions within community organizing, as well as older traditions within Extension. (See, for instance, [County Extension Agents in Alabama Catalyze Community Health Efforts of Citizens](#).)

Some Relevant Issues

There are many issues that need to be addressed in refining the social capital framework and developing appropriate organizing and policy tools that build upon it. Several important ones are the following:

Decline of Social Capital

Robert Putnam has presented compelling evidence for the decline in social capital in the United States over the past generation, measured by a variety of indices of participation in church-related groups, labor unions, PTAs, traditional women's clubs, fraternal organizations, and mainline civic organizations. Verba, Schlozman and Brady's recent study of civic voluntarism presents some data that is consonant with this, but also much that supports Americans' deserved reputation for high levels of involvement in voluntary associations. Of particular note is the evidence that participation has modestly increased at the level of community and local problem solving activities, and that the decrease in voter turnout has not been accompanied by a general decrease in citizen activism, even on campaign related activities.

As these and other scholars continue to refine their measures and debate quantitative trend lines, it is important to keep in mind several things. First, we do not know how and whether specific indices of decline in participation have impacted on citizen capacities to innovate to solve problems. Membership in the League of Women Voters may have declined 42 percent since 1969, but local Leagues have developed a whole variety of civic innovations to address environmental and child care issues that were not on the agenda a generation ago. Membership in the national Federation of Women's Clubs is down by more than half, but newer women's groups have addressed issues—including ones such as domestic violence that were previously masked within old forms of social capital—by developing grassroots networks, community supports, and educative relationships with criminal justice and social welfare agencies that represent new investments in social capital.

Secondly, and related to this, is that we need to be careful not to interpret the argument for the overall, quantitative decline of social capital to entail a nostalgia for earlier times. This is most obvious when it comes to forms of social capital that were illiberal and socially exclusivist. Their decline (if we could measure this adequately) should be seen as a net gain. But the decline of other forms of social

capital, such as bowling leagues, may not be all that significant, if they do not lend themselves to being mobilized for new forms of community problem solving and trust building. The decline of church attendance may be far more significant.

Civic Innovation & Social Capital

Wherever one might stand on the issue of overall decline of social capital, it is important to recognize that civic innovation has been occurring over the past several decades in many arenas, and that these innovations represent substantial social learning upon which we might continue to build. The clearest case of this is in civic environmentalism, where there have been overall quantitative increases and much qualitative innovation. In the arena of community organizing and community development there have been substantial qualitative innovation and some measures of quantitative growth (numbers of community organizing projects and networks, linkages with urban officials, capacities for complex partnerships, multiracial organizing), but also broader indices of decline, such as that represented by the exodus of the black middle class from inner-city urban networks. In women's organizations, as noted, there have been innovation and selective participation increases in grassroots networks amidst other indicators of decline, with the overall balance still unclear. In community health and AIDS work, we also see civic innovation that builds social capital. Some forms of civic journalism, such as the [Taking Back Our Neighborhoods](#) project of the *Charlotte Observer*, also have the potential to help build problem solving networks around crime in neighborhoods.

Rather than focus on overall quantitative increases or decreases in social capital, where the link to democratic vitality is often speculative, a civic innovation approach asks how social capital and community assets can be mobilized, and in which specific forms to enhance capacities to solve public problems and empower communities. A congregation-based community organizing project that mobilizes the social capital of church networks and the public leadership capacities of grassroots women to empower disenfranchised communities in the urban power structure warrants more attention than simple church-based social capital as such. One that builds new linkages across denominational, class or racial lines, warrants still more, as does one that can do this *and* engage in complex partnerships with business and political actors. Service unions that build new relational models of organizing based on women's workplace culture and networks, such as the [Harvard clerical union](#), or that develop models of working time flexibility that permit greater integration of paid work with unpaid family and civic commitments, warrant more attention than bowling leagues

How can public policy support social capital building? While there are some clear examples of how public policy can destroy social capital (e.g. urban renewal projects of the 1950s and 1960s), there is less clarity on how policy can be used to help build it. Putnam's recommendation that government policies be vetted for their indirect effects on social capital is a good starting point. However, his argument that policy should focus on community development, with attention to "religious organizations and choral societies and Little Leagues that may seem to have little to do with politics or economics," seems misplaced, unless we can show the specific

ways in which these can be converted to enhanced public problem solving capacities. Competing claims on public resources alone warrant a more targeted approach, not to mention the need to avoid supporting social capital that is illiberal and exclusivist, and that may further compound our problems of governance.

It is important to ask how policies designed to support the building of social capital also foster responsible democratic deliberation. A policy that supports the development of environmental justice networks, for instance, may be crucial in building social capital needed to confront environmental racism. But if these networks are acting on the terrain of a Superfund policy design that is highly flawed in the way that it discourages responsible citizen deliberation about costs and risks, then the result may be highly problematic in terms of effective toxics policy, as well as justice among competing worthy claims. On these kinds of issues, social capital ought be complemented by deliberative democracy in a broader framework of "public policy for democracy." (See, for instance, Carmen Sirianni and Lewis Friedland's essay, "[Civic Environmentalism](#)," especially the section Community Empowerment and Public Policy for Democracy.)