

A VERY SOCIAL CAPITAL;

Measuring the Vital Signs of Community Life in Newham

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ABSTRACT

The concept of social capital is a useful metaphor which suggests that a society with a rich web of relationships and widespread participation in community organisations will flourish, at many levels including the economic. Furthermore individuals who hold large accumulations of social capital will be at an advantage over others with less. Putnam (1995) has argued that social capital and trust has been declining in American society since about 1945 and among Communitarian political thinkers such as Etzioni (1994) there is a proposition that the contemporary Western world suffers from a deficit of vitality in civil society. Knight & Stokes (1995) have taken up the theme in the UK context. These notions, though hard to reduce to a single index which might be measured by any objective standards, are nonetheless susceptible to empirical investigation, in particular using the techniques of social network analysis.

In this paper recent research along these lines in East London will be brought to bear on the issue. Analysis of organisations in the voluntary and community sector in the London Borough of Newham indicates what at first glance appears as a vibrant, diverse and growing network of community organisations. However evidence from surveys of the general public, and participant observation in community activities over many years suggests a more pessimistic interpretation, that levels of citizen participation in community organisations and local politics are extremely low. The existence of a large and active state funded voluntary sector is no guarantee of a thriving civil society or high levels of social capital in the population at large.

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INTRODUCTION: THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The concept of social capital is a useful metaphor which suggests that a society with a rich web of relationships and widespread participation in community organisations will flourish, and that individuals who hold large accumulations of social capital will be at an advantage over others with less. Early definitions of the concept go back as far as Hanifan (1920) who was very involved in the community centre movement of the time.

“In the use of the phrase ‘social capital’... We do not refer to real estate or to personal property or to cash, but rather to that in life which tends to make those tangible substances count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit. If a person comes into contact with his neighbours, there will be an accumulation of social capital, which may immediately satisfy his social needs and which may bear a social potentiality sufficient for the substantial improvement of life in the whole community.

..... First, then, there must be an accumulation of community social capital. (which may be) effected by means of public entertainments, picnics, and a variety of other community gatherings.”

The term social capital was used by Jane Jacobs in “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” in 1961 in reference to networks in urban neighbourhoods: *“These networks are a city’s irreplaceable social capital. Whenever the capital is lost, from whatever cause, the income from it disappears, never to return until and unless new capital is slowly and chancily accumulated”.*

A more theoretical sociological interest in the concept was developed by Bourdieu (1972) As to a definition, Bourdieu (ibid., 1992, p. 119) states that *“social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.”* The theory of social capital is worked out most fully by Coleman in his 1990 textbook, which has become one of the most cited key references in the contemporary literature in the field.

Wellman and colleagues in Canada have used the concept of social capital in the study of personal support networks employing the techniques of social network analysis to good effect in its measurement. (Wellman 1979, Wellman & Wellman 1992, Wellman & Wortley 1990). Friedland & McLeod (forthcoming) have applied the theory to the mass media and highlighted the role of the local press in community integration. The project for the reconstruction of civil society in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has generated much discussion of the theory of social capital (e.g Kolankiewicz and the rejoinder by Pahl 1996, Mai 1997). Some have argued that a similar civil society project is needed in western countries such as the UK. (Knight & Stokes 1996).

Recent debates on the concept of social capital have been triggered and invigorated by the work of Putnam and Fukuyama. Putnam’s study of community organisations in Italy (1993) suggest that regions with a strong and lively range of voluntary activity are likely to develop more rapidly economically than regions where social capital is lower. The role of “trust” in this process is highlighted and developed further in Fukuyama (1995). A whole issue of American Behavioral Scientist has been devoted to the debate on social capital covering the link with religion (Greeley 1997), community organising (Wood 1997), democracy (Newton 1997), Social theory (Foley & Edwards 1997), social movements (Minkoff 1997), civic engagement (Heying 1997, Kenworthy 1997) and minority communities (Portney & Berry 1997).

More recently Putnam (1995a, 1995b) has argued that social capital and trust has been declining in American society since about 1945, resulting in a society where many individuals go “bowling alone”. Much of the decline he believes can be attributed to the influence of television although this is contested by Norris (1996). One might also consider the privatising and delocalising influence of the personal automobile in the same time period. Concern about loss of community is echoed among Communitarian political thinkers such as Etzioni (1994) who advances the proposition that the contemporary Western world

is besotted with the notion of individual rights and in consequence suffers from a deficit, in parenting skills as well as in the vitality of civil society. Such thinking has permeated the outlook and policy of British governments even before the New Labour victory at the 1997 election. This has resulted in a rhetoric (and sometimes an improved practice) majoring on partnership approaches and stakeholder involvement in such fields as urban regeneration and health and social welfare services (Smith 1996b, Burkett & Ashton 1996). Popular participation, and community development do appear to have a more important place in urban policy than at any time in the last two decades. Developing and accumulating social capital is thus clearly on the policy agenda for urban regeneration, and could have great importance in the future development of the East London region. A recent Rowntree funded study of urban regeneration partnerships investigates how networks emerge and operate in this context and suggests sustained regeneration and new forms of community governance depend on how these networks are supported and maintained over future years. (Skelcher et al 1996)

Wilson (1997) has set out a comprehensive agenda for building social capital in economic development, while Mitlin and Thomson (1995) present and discuss case studies of participation including the British "planning for real" projects. Schusterman & Hardoy (1997) review the long term process of reconstructing social capital in a poor barrio in Buenos Aires and argue that long term resources and commitment which can be flexibly applied as conditions change is a pre-requisite for sustainable development. They critique the usual approach of "projects" evaluated by "quantified outcomes" measured over a couple of years.

If urban policy is increasingly to be based on the case that the accumulation of social capital brings economic prosperity, the mechanisms linking social capital to economic growth are worthy of detailed investigation. A strong version of the Putnam/Fukuyama hypothesis would posit that a high level of social capital is a necessary or sufficient prior cause of strong economic life. A weaker version would be content to say that the two are merely correlated. One could perhaps argue the reverse, that a strong economy is a necessary basis for the growth of social capital in a community although this position appears counter intuitive. A more well established (if rather romanticised) view is that community solidarity and mutual help arises as a response to shared poverty and oppression. In this account Social Capital is developed as compensation for lack of economic capital. However it must be pointed out that at the same time as slum dwellers were forming strong communities capitalist elites were also building up networks of power and solidarity on the basis of the proverbial "old school tie".

Recent green economic theory following Schumacher's "Small is Beautiful" (1973) suggests a curvilinear relationship with the economy as the controlling variable. A briefing paper from the Friends of the Earth and the (Whitechapel based) New Economics Foundation for the 1997 Election (FOE/NEF 1997) suggests "*the presence of stable social capital is a prerequisite for market growth, but after the threshold point (where growth ceases to be beneficial because of long term environmental and human costs), the destruction of social capital by markets contributes to the insecurity and decline of society*"

Before applying the notion of social capital in the local context it is worth pausing to review and question the implicit values and ideological basis of the theory. From a certain perspective the debate about social capital can appear progressive, it does after all appear to represent an more humane and holistic understanding of society than the economic determinism of Marxism or the brutal free market individualism of the New Right. However, it is to say the least a pity that the language of the market and of money has been co-opted, or perhaps more accurately has colonised, discourse about the relationships between human beings, which traditionally have been seen as outside the cash economy. There is a danger that the notion of social capital will come to be taken as something more than a useful metaphor, and that qualities which on any humanistic or spiritual values should be rated as "more precious than rubies, yea than much fine gold" could be reduced to balances on accountants' spreadsheets. This creeping commodification of qualities such as gift exchange, voluntary labour, solidarity, mutuality, neighbourliness and friendship is to be regretted and resisted. Certainly the Christian tradition of social involvement as expressed in Catholic Social teaching, documents such as the recent Catholic Bishops' document on "The common good" (CBC 1996), and the 1985 Faith in the City Report (ACUPA,1985) all make an assumption that community, in the form of localised *gemeinschaft* is a moral imperative and a good in its own right. While Putnam may (or may not) be empirically correct in suggesting that high levels of social capital lead to economic prosperity, one cannot help being reminded of the words of Jesus that we "should seek first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you".

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND "THE EAST END COMMUNITY SPIRIT".

The folk history of the East End coloured as it usually is by the rose tinted spectacles of socialism suggests that in the past East London made up for its lack of economic capital by large accumulations of social capital. (The same suggestion is made for Hamburg in the 1990s by Dangshat 1994). East London was a community of working class people who were exploited by capital and therefore never had any control of the means of production or the capital accumulated from it. In so far as social capital developed it was the survival solidarity of an oppressed people. East London has been portrayed as the birthplace of organised Labour with the strikes of the Dockers and match girls in the late 19th century as high water marks of working class solidarity. Certainly West Ham elected Keir Hardie as the first Independent Labour Party MP while the Poplarism of George Lansbury in the 1920's represents some evidence of popular involvement in municipal socialism. Marriott's (1991) study highlights the importance of the Co-operative retailing movement. But despite the political hegemony of the Labour Party and the strength of the Trade Unions, local working people never got their hands on the economic levers. Even the post-war nationalisation of Transport and the Docks failed to protect the East End against the effects of the global transformations of capitalism of the final quarter of the century.

Thus social capital in East London had little by way of economic infrastructure. It was reduced rather to two ideas, community spirit and provision of municipal services, most notably housing. The settlements, missions and churches also played an important part in social welfare and community building, even through such low key activities as charabanc trips to Southend (Marchant 1986) The Blitz engendered a spirit often remembered as community singing in the bomb shelters. In early post war years the Bethnal Green community studies of Young and Wilmott (1957) perpetuated the stereotype, of cheerful Cockney neighbourhoods, knit together by local kinship obligations and a general sociability of the streets. Interestingly Coleman (1990) mentions the Bethnal Green study as an example of a community where mutual obligations, helpfulness and trust are evidence of high social capital. Slum clearance, tower block estates, the exodus from the inner city to Dagenham and beyond, and the influx of immigrants are often blamed for the breakdown of community spirit. "It's no longer safe to go out at nights, let alone leave your door open or your key under the mat" is a refrain that is often heard from older white East Enders and which is frequently reinforced by the media. However, it could be argued that a key causal factor in the alleged decline of social capital has been the economic collapse of the area. People with little or no economic stake in society, with no jobs to go to, and therefore with reduced social contact with others, living in under-resourced and rapidly changing neighbourhoods, with tensions which breed conflict and crime, are perhaps even more likely than the successful entrepreneur to retreat into a privatised existence, where "me first" appears as the best survival strategy.

East London is widely recognised as one of the largest and most persistent concentrations of economic decline, urban deprivation and associated social problems, and despite massive regeneration in Docklands is struggling to develop a more positive image which will attract investment. The borough of Newham in which the research reported here took place is ranked by the Department of Environment's index of local conditions based on the 1991 Census (DoE 1994) as the most deprived local authority district in England. It is also the most ethnically diverse (in 1991 42% were from ethnic minorities). In consequence community activity takes place in a context of lack of and declining resources, widespread poverty, and statutory services which are hard pressed to meet extremely high levels of need. Yet personal involvement in local life over many years leads me to the impression that "there is a lot going on". Need combined with diversity of the population has led to a wide range of community and voluntary sector activity, from charities for children and the aged which go back centuries, to refugee support groups and immigration rights campaigns that are being formed today.

However, a more sceptical working hypothesis has been adopted in most of our recent studies carried out at Aston Community Involvement Unit (CIU). The proposition is that public participation in organised social, political and community life in Newham does not amount to much, and is in all probability declining. The

seeming vitality of the voluntary sector may in fact mask the reality. Voluntary organisations proliferate, especially in a context where funding, contracting out of services, and political influence are mediated through increasingly bureaucratic procedures. The experience of the CIU is that new groups by the score draw up constitutions and apply for charitable status. However the democratic accountability of such groups exists largely only on paper, few of them have large membership bases, and usually have difficulty finding a full complement of trustees. Indeed contested elections at AGMs appear rare and many meetings struggle to become quorate. One suspects that a small elite of professional voluntary sector employees, many of whom do not even live in the borough have accumulated the lion's share of social capital, (and project income in the form of salaries). As the public resources available to the local community are inadequate and declining, the funding that does get allocated, may even represent a diversion from community activism towards the voluntary or rather "not for profit" management of state resources for welfare service delivery. The rhetoric of community capacity building, probably has little impact in terms of the accumulation of social capital by local residents. Nor incidentally does it seem to encourage shared ownership of public resources, such as public buildings or a co-operative approach to economic development .

In order to test this hypothesis it would be necessary to carry out a range of more detailed studies of a large representative sample of Newham residents alongside work on the voluntary sector organisations, and the regeneration partnerships and programmes in the area. Although it has been beyond our resources to do this in a systematic way a number of small studies, and secondary data from larger pieces of research produce some evidence which bears on this issue.

MEASURING SOCIAL CAPITAL

It is not easy to evaluate claims for historical change in the levels of social capital in East London. Memory is notoriously unreliable as a guide and there are few if any time series data sets which allow for relevant and consistent longitudinal measurement of this variable. The pluralism of the area, its ethnic diversity and the impact of globalisation on economy, culture and communications make the task more difficult still. However for a baseline study it should be possible to address the issue by collating data on the following variables. Many of them, and variants on them have been used elsewhere by other researchers on this theme (e.g. Putnam 1995, Knight & Stokes 1994, Marshall 1995, Reynolds, Elsdon & Stewart 1995, Knight 1993)

- a) Number of voluntary and community sector organisations. their characteristics and role
- b) their network connectivity to other organisations both inside and outside the sector
- c) levels of membership in these organisations.
- d) public awareness these organisations and use of the service they provide
- e) active citizen participation in religious, voluntary and community organisations
- f) formal citizen participation in local politics, and local elections.
- g) informal personal localised networks including kin, neighbour and friendship relationships.
- h) participation in families and multi-person households

There is no intention here to suggest that these variables can all or indeed should be measured on reliable quantifiable scales. Still less is there any attempt to combine them into a single index, or unit of currency in which social capital can be counted, banked or exchanged. To use a European analogy, there is little prospect of an easy transition to monetary union, there may not even be a single market in terms of social capital. For example Xavier de Souza Briggs when talking of the social capital resources available to individuals distinguishes

(a) support capital " which helps people cope with problems posed by their circumstances ("get by"). This type is very often provided by socially similar others;

and

(b) leverage capital - a la Granovetter's (1974) "getting a job" which helps people change their life chances or create and take advantage of opportunities ("get ahead"). this type calls for having diverse ties, whether weak or strong.

Our list of factors to examine betrays the fact that in this paper the focus will be on what Coleman (1990) has called the "public good facet" of social capital rather than "the private good facet... how my connections can help me...". However it is obvious that there are likely to be large variations in levels of social capital between individuals and in all probability interesting correlations with key demographic variables, such as age, gender, social class and ethnicity.

The data presented below can only give partial coverage of the variables outlined above and bear on the general hypothesis that social capital in Newham is only thinly distributed, or monopolised by elites. We have for example little reliable data to hand on the membership levels or participation rates in community organisations (other than the churches), and nothing systematic on the role of professional workers in the local voluntary sector. However we can present some findings which use social network analysis, based on relational data. The methods of social network analysis (Scott 1992, Freeman et al 1989, Wellman & Wortley 1992) seem particularly apposite to the measurement of social capital, and are being looked at with renewed interest by researchers in community and voluntary sector studies, although published results of empirical studies in the UK are as yet hard to come by.

MAPPING THE VOLUNTARY AND COMMUNITY SECTOR

How Many Organisations?

Newham has a large, lively but diverse and uncoordinated range of community and voluntary sector activity. It is also increasingly well documented and information about it is becoming more widely and easily accessible thanks to new electronic technologies. Recent research work by the Aston Community Involvement unit includes the development and updating of a directory/database of religious groups and a survey of provision for young people (funded through the Newham Safer Cities Project). Information from this research has been incorporated into the LBN Social services "Community Care Database". Version 2.6 (see note 6) shows that in 1997 there are 790 groups or organisations classified as Newham voluntary groups. Another 257 "London Voluntary" and 265 "national voluntary" organisations are listed as offering services to the people of the borough. In addition the list gives 9 after school clubs, 51 assorted youth projects or organisations, 51 Housing association projects, and 97 places of worship.

The structure of the LBN database does not make it easy to crosstabulate or breakdown the numbers of groups into mutually exclusive sub categories. However it appears that some 223 listed organisations are religious of which 150 are in the Christian tradition, and just under a hundred are places of worship which broadly tallies with the evidence of Aston CIU's Directory of Religious Groups in Newham (2nd edition 1995). Around 230 groups have a prime focus or dominant membership drawn from the ethnic minority communities. 70 focus their work on people with illness or disability and 77 on the elderly (over 50s population). Over 350 examples of provisions for young people aged 9-25 were documented by the Safer Cities Survey and a further 160 possibly existing groups failed to respond to the survey (Crisp & Smith 1997). Over two thirds of the provisions for young people were located in the voluntary or community sector, albeit in several cases drawing on funding provided by the state.

However we interpret these figures it is clear that there is a lot of voluntary and community sector activity to be found in Newham. Roughly 1000 local organisations are available to serve and mobilise a population of some 215,000, roughly one organisation for every 215 people. Barry Knight (1993) found rather lower ratios of organisations to population in the two London boroughs he studied (1:361 in Inner London and 1:420 in Outer London). The Newham figure which is not precisely comparable because of possible differences in method, compares roughly with his figures for small towns in Wales and the West Country and is somewhat lower than the ratio in his Northern borough.

The Structure Of The Voluntary Sector:

It is impossible to understand and navigate through this mass of information on Newham's voluntary and community sector if it remains no more than a list of 800 or so organisations, ordered within a crude taxonomy of simple categories or multiple keywords. To appreciate more fully the nature and structure of the community/voluntary sector, and what it represents in terms of social capital, it is helpful to have a mental map of the relationships within it, the patterns of collaboration and information sharing, referral practices between agencies, and the way they build alliances through affiliations to umbrella bodies. Another part of the picture is linkages between the voluntary sector and the Borough Council. It is significant (some might say suspicious) that at least four prominent Newham Councillors are staff members in major local voluntary organisations, and many others are active in or serve on the management committees of community groups.

A small pilot study of 41 local organisations carried out in 1995-96 by Aston CIU attempted to delineate some of the structural linkages between organisations.. The network questions focused on three areas, awareness of other groups in particular fields of work, referrals to other agencies and membership and participation in umbrella groups. The 41 respondents mentioned and named between 4 and 39 agencies of which they were aware (mean 16.95) See Table 1 for a categorisation . In response to the question “. Which organisations do you regularly refer people on to and for what? (list up to six)” all except 7 of the 41 respondents mentioned at least one agency to who they referred, 4 mentioned 6, and 2 mentioned 8! making 125 links in all (average 3.0) In terms of umbrella organisations, coalitions and forums the 41 local agencies reported memberships in 78 wider bodies 48 of which were local to the borough. (Fuller details of this research are to be found in Smith (forthcoming) or can be had direct from the author)

insert table 1

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION.. VARIOUS MEASURES

The analysis of the organisations in Newham's voluntary and community sector presented above does suggest that the quantity and structure of community activity should amount to a considerable total of social capital, in whatever units such a commodity might be measured. However, it is still reasonable to ask how big an impact all these organisations make upon the people of Newham. Is the general public aware of their existence, of the nature of the services they offer? How many people are formal members of such groups, and how many are active participants?

Awareness Of Voluntary Sector Survey.

The first piece of evidence comes from a small survey carried out in the autumn of 1995 by a group of medical students on placement at CIU. They interviewed a quota sample of some 116 Newham residents contacted in the street mainly in Stratford. They asked respondents whether they had heard of or used the services of 24 actual and one fictional local voluntary sector organisations. Table 6 gives their findings. Levels of awareness of the organisations appeared very low; only 5 organisations, all with a significant national profile, plus the generic "church /religious group" were recognised by a majority of respondents. And only the Citizens Advice Bureau and Church / religious scored higher than 10% in terms of actual usage. Even allowing for the fact that this survey was carried out by "amateurs" and cannot claim to be fully representative it presents strong evidence that the profile of many of the voluntary sector groups we have mentioned early is not very high. There is no evidence in this survey that the general public accumulates much social capital through participation in such groups.

Insert table 2

Parish Survey; Questions On Local Participation

Some corroboration of these findings comes from a church community survey carried out in 1992 by CIU with a local Anglican parish in Stratford / West Ham (Smith 1992). 185 residents were interviewed on doorsteps selected by a random cluster sampling method. In response to the question. 'Which clubs, community groups and organisations are you a member of?'

146 (79%) either said they belonged to none or gave no answer to this question. The remaining 39 mentioned 45 memberships. slightly different question "Do you or family go to a local community centre?" found 26 people (14%) who said yes.

Respondents were also asked whether they participated in or attended a variety of different leisure activities. Apart from shopping and visiting relatives all these appeared to be minority pursuits. Furthermore the more participatory activities in which social capital might accumulate such as social clubs, pubs, adult education, religious groups and sports clubs attracted 30% or less of the respondents. Even accounting for the possibility that the most clubbable people were underrepresented in that they were more likely to be out when the interviewers knocked on their door these participation rates seem very low.

The data for children's participation is a little more encouraging. Of the 65 respondents with children only 2 reported that their offspring had not participated in any play scheme, children's or youth club, sports or uniformed organisation, although no single category attracted more than 30% of the respondents' families.

Safer Cities Project: Survey of Youth Provision

A major piece of research carried out in late 1996 by CIU for the Newham Safer Cities Project (Crisp & Smith 1997) documented about 350 examples of provision for young people, the large majority of them (over two thirds) provided within and by the voluntary and community sector. The research defined “young people” as those in the age range 9 to 25. The borough’s population in this age range is estimated to be a little over 50,000 (one of the highest proportions in any district in the UK). A calculation based on questions to providing agencies about monthly usage of their services suggests Newham’s provisions are used by an estimated 39,000 young people. At least 13,000 (and as many as 26,000 if multiple usage of services by individuals is taken into account) of the borough’s 9-25 year olds are not accessing provision at all. From the point of view of the Safer Cities Project and society in general the argument that improved services for youth would reduce crime and the fear of crime has much to recommend it. It is at least plausible that young people who accumulate social capital, as well as the human and cultural capital that come through education, and some economic capital or at least income through employment, (in other words those who have a significant stake in the community), are less likely to have motives, opportunities and needs to commit crimes.

Religious Participation.. The 1994 Directory of Religious Groups

- One sector of community life in which public participation is surprisingly high in Newham is religion. The 1994 Directory of Religious Groups documented 198 “Christian” congregations and a further 77 “para-church” organisations operating within the borough (Aston CIU 1994, Smith 1996). Many of these churches and organisations were newly established and growing, others in a phase of renewal. There is also evidence of strong and active collaborative networking across the whole religious sector in Newham (Smith 1997.). At the very least there appears in east London to be a “blip” in the long term process of secularisation and numerical church decline. It was estimated that some 18,000 people attended these churches each week (8% of the population or 11% of the non-Asian population). The same research estimates that Newham has a Muslim community of up to 30,000 people, a Hindu community of some 21,000 and a Sikh community of over 4,000. A survey by the Newham Association of Faiths (reported in Smith 1996 and in more detail in Smith forthcoming) found weekly attendance at mosque by Muslim men to be as high as 75%.

It must be admitted that participation in religious worship is a notoriously slippery variable to measure, as a result of its varying significance in different religious cultures, combined with the general problem of mismatch between survey findings based on reported attendance and harder data based on census counts in churches and mosques. It is nonetheless clear that the religious sector in Newham is full of vitality. While participation rates vary according to ethnicity, gender and social class, and religion is obviously an important factor in the construction of ethnic identity and belonging, meeting together on a regular basis in a religious community setting offers many individuals a rich opportunity for accumulating social capital. This is valuable to them first of all in terms of personal support networks, which help meet emotional, social and sometimes economic needs. Furthermore religious organisations can also provide a base for interventions in community development as evidenced by the large number of social welfare projects which have a religious foundation, and in mobilising in community politics. A significant example of this in recent years has been the formation of TELCO a broad based community organisation on the style of Saul Alinsky (Alinsky 1972, Farnell et al. 1994) which has brought some 30 organisations into a coalition for political action, and seen mass meetings of up to 1500 people. Most of the member organisations are religious congregations with all of the major faith communities of East London represented.

Political Participation

When we turn to local politics it seems that levels of active involvement in the parties is extremely low. Newham has the not undeserved reputation of being a one party state, a place where Labour votes are weighed rather than counted. The only perceived threat to Labour at the present time comes, especially in the Docklands area from the neo-Nazi British National Party and potentially in the North of the borough from Islamic mobilisation either inside or outside the party.

There is much evidence that the general public in Newham is not interested in politics. (In the West Ham parish survey only 8% of respondents said they found politics to be very important, 25% important and 66% not important. In comparison the items rated very important were religion by 36% of respondents, good health (89%) family/home (89%), work/education (59%), a good standard of living (66%) and taking part in the local community (23%). Election turnout rates are an obvious variable that can be measured. At general elections Newham constituencies consistently report rates which are well below the national average figures, and below those for nearby constituencies for example the marginal Ilford North and the safe conservative Wanstead and Woodford. See Table 7. However, they are considerably higher than the record low 49% national turnout reported for the US presidential election of 1996 (3). Furthermore these percentages are based on an electoral roll which is liable to be more inaccurate and incomplete than those in other districts which do not have the same levels of population mobility, ethnic minorities and social exclusion. This means that any turnout figure would probably represent a smaller proportion of the adult population in Newham than in more settled, affluent and monochrome districts.

INSERT TABLE 3

In council elections turnout is regularly much lower still. For example in the 1994 borough Council elections turnout averaged 37% only exceeded 40% in five of the wards, all of which had a full range of candidates and were in some sense “marginal”. Several wards in the old West Ham borough had turnout rates of 35% or below and in one ward where only the Conservative party put up alternative candidates to Labour the turnout was less than 22%. (4)

Labour Party membership may be a better measure of active political participation. Although it has almost doubled since the rebranded image of New Labour hit the supermarket shelves, membership of West Ham constituency stands in September 1997 at 850 (600 of whom are fully paid up) rather than thousands. Active participation in branch meetings is even lower, Plashet ward for example has a reputation as a thriving and lively branch and has the largest membership of around 150. Two thirds of the members are male. However, monthly meetings are still usually less than a dozen people, coming from an increasingly wide range of ethnic and social class backgrounds. Obviously such low levels of participation make local branches very vulnerable to infiltration and takeover by any determined and well organised faction. Political structures in Newham make it easy for individuals and small groups to accumulate power and influence but they are hardly a rich bank of social capital for the community as a whole.

Personal Support Networks..

Another area in which social capital can be accumulated and is susceptible of measurement is in the informal sector, the everyday relationships of social support. At the local level these are usually found in the links of kinship, friendship and neighbouring and numerous pieces of research in the tradition of community studies have investigated this area e.g. (Wilmott 1986,1987, Abrams/Bulmer 1986 Wellman 1979) In Newham the research evidence is limited and comes from the West Ham parish study (Smith 1992) and a follow up piece of work on neighbourhood networks carried out by a group of medical students on placement in 1993. (Smith 1994)

In the parish survey 185 respondents were asked “How well do you know next door neighbours?” Just over a third said they knew their neighbours very well (26.5%) or were close friends (8.6%), under a third (28.6%) said “fairly well” and another third that they knew their neighbours “only to say hello” (29.7%), or “not at all” (6.5%).

The follow up survey interviewed 67 parish residents recruited by a networking process starting from contacts suggested by voluntary sector and church workers in the area. The sample cannot be taken as representative and it is particularly obvious that the Asian communities of the borough were not included in this research. The difficulties encountered during this snowball sampling procedure showed that for many people the number and strength of their local network ties was extremely limited. The fieldwork problems seemed to centre around the low level of trust of strangers, in the form of interviewers.

- Nearly 70% liked living in the neighbourhood, but only 11% saw it as a strong friendly community and only a third belonged to more than one community group.
- When asked to list up to 6 significant others in each category, respondents reported they were in touch with an average of 3.6 kin (outside their own household), 3.3 friends, and 2.9 neighbours. Older respondents had considerably more kin and neighbours, but less friends than younger respondents.
- Only a third of the relatives mentioned were living in Newham, compared with 70% of the friends. Only 37% of the relatives were seen at least weekly.
- Friends were likely to be of the same gender, and age group as the respondent. Inter ethnic friendship was rare and almost unheard of among the older respondents.
- Neighbours seemed relatively insignificant to most people and only 10% of the ones mentioned ever came inside the respondent's home.
- Over half the respondents felt they could turn to relatives and/or friends for routine help or support of more than one type, compared with only 20% who could turn to neighbours. Even for the proverbial "borrowing a cup of sugar" less than one in five had recently been helped by a neighbour and only another one in five thought they could approach a neighbour.

While it is hard to generalise about levels of social capital from this limited piece of research it does suggest some hypotheses which could be usefully investigated in future larger scale research. In this sample of respondents levels of social capital appeared to be rather low. Most of their investment was in a small number of close, private relationships, with help and support coming potentially and actually from relatives and friends. These relationships in many cases are hard to maintain because of geographical mobility and separation by distance. Lower levels of involvement with neighbours suggest a level of distrust of others in the public world. There appears to be little evidence of people investing in a wide range of "weak ties" which according to Granovetter (1973) are especially usefully in achieving economic and social goals. There are obvious contrasts too with the picture of the local community of Bethnal Green portrayed in Young & Wilmott (1957). For older respondents in the survey memories of a richer community life, and the experience of rapid neighbourhood change has left a sense of loss and grief, which may be explained to some extent by the findings of this research.

Families And Households

A final set of data which may throw some light on the measurement of social capital relates to family and household structure. Broadly the argument is that people who live alone will have less dense networks of close supportive relationships than those who live in larger households and within families. The same may hold for families headed by lone parents in comparison with those where two parents are present. Single people and lone parent households are thus likely to possess less social capital than people in larger conventional families.

Clearly this argument can be contested both empirically and as ideology. It does seem likely for example that many people living alone may compensate for the lack of dense supportive networks by a more diffuse network comprising higher numbers of friends and acquaintances to whom they can turn. Likewise lone parents may have supportive networks in the form of extended family (including the "absent" partner) and friends. It could be argued also that for some people at least being forced to live in the confines of a large family, possibly with overcrowding, stress and abusive relationships, should not be counted as a form of social capital. However, this should not blind us to the fact that stresses of other kinds affect many

people living alone, and in lone parent families, and many individuals who are not in such situations entirely by choice, long for an end to loneliness, or for a stable “conventional” family situation.

So with these provisos in mind we will present some selected data from the 1991 census to help compare the family and household patterns found in Newham with those elsewhere.

In terms of Adults living alone Newham has a considerable number. The proportion of such households ranges from 25% in St.Stephens Ward (in Forest Gate) to 39% in Ordnance Ward (Canning Town). However Newham stands out (especially the multi-ethnic Eastern part of the borough) as having low proportions of single person households compared with the rest of London. In many wards in West London boroughs single person households are a majority, in some as high as 80% of all households and borough averages reach over 40% in Westminster, Kensington and Chelsea, Brent and Hammersmith. However the other London East boroughs going outward have similar or slightly lower rates of lone person households to Newham, while the average for the UK is around 30% .

For single parent households the picture for Newham is more ambivalent. The proportion of families comprising a lone parent and one or more dependent children reaches well over 20% in 3 wards in Canning Town and Stratford, well towards the top of the league table for wards both in London and nationally. But again in the multiethnic East of Newham rates are generally about 10-15%, around the average for London. The Newham average of 15.25% is considerably lower than the 20% found in boroughs such as Hackney, Islington, Southwark and Lambeth. The national average is about 14%.

In terms of average numbers per household at the ward level Newham (together with Tower Hamlets, parts of North London and bordering areas of Redbridge) stands out as way above the London and national average. The mean number of persons per household is above 2.2 in every Newham ward and above 3.0 in four central wards of the borough. This borough average of 2.63 is substantially higher than that for all the other East London boroughs while elsewhere in the capital only Harrow and Brent reach a similar figure.

Clearly these patterns of household structure are linked with the multiethnic nature of Newham’s populations, with many large and overcrowded households in the Asian and African communities. One would hazard a guess that insofar as family and community networks remain well established and functional for these communities, they could represent a potentially rich accumulation of social capital. Coming full circle back to the argument that social capital promotes economic prosperity, it might well be that the relative success of some of the ethnic minorities in business and education documented in a recent PSI report (Modood et al.1997) is explained at least in part by the strength of their social networks. In contrast the failure of the white, (and to some extent the black) non-working class in East London to achieve economic success can be linked to low levels, and possibly the historic erosion of social capital in their communities. There are obvious dangers in adopting this theory, without taking into account the overwhelming influence of global capitalism and the massive economic restructuring of East London. However, it is an interesting hypothesis around which a programme of further research could profitably be centred.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have argued that the notion of social capital is a useful one in evaluating the resources to be found in a place like Newham. It is however totally impossible and probably misguided to reduce the concept of social capital in its many varied forms to a single measurable index. It is also beyond the scope of any existing research project in East London to make statistically valid, comparative or longitudinal conclusions. Nonetheless, it has been possible to investigate the nature and extent of social capital as a by product of existing community and voluntary sector studies. However imperfect this evidence and the measures suggested, they could provide a baseline against which to measure the growth or decline of social capital in the borough in coming years.

The overall weight of the evidence presented here, drawn from a variety of community based research projects, coupled with years of experience as a community worker and active citizen in Newham is ambivalent. Do we say as optimists that the glass is half full or as pessimists that it is half empty? Studies of the general public suggest that for many if not most local people, economic deprivation compounded by

lack of human capital (educational and skills resources) is matched by low levels of accumulation of social capital. It is worth asking again if there is in a causal link. More rigorous research to check this out would be well worthwhile. Certainly for the poorest people in Newham participation in public life, and the number and depth of personal supportive relationships is at a low level and may well be declining. Indeed this is the very essence of social exclusion or marginalisation.

However, there is within Newham another side of the story. The voluntary sector has a huge range of organisations and community groups serving every conceivable sector and interest group. The religious communities are alive and growing, and involve as many as a third of the population in their activities. Religious organisations are a key factor in the networking of ethnic minority communities. The network structures of the voluntary sector provide many useful channels for information sharing and support. All this presents a massive resource of social capital for the community as a whole. The voluntary/community/religious sector offers major opportunities for community and economic development, in partnership with the local authority and other agencies in the private and public sector. It can also serve as a counterweight and “opposition” to the concentration of power in the hands of a political elite.

In order to maximise the accumulation, and ensure a more equitable distribution of social capital for the public good two major problems need to be addressed. The first is wider participation, a key issue in any attempt to make democracy work. We have suggested, although the evidence is anecdotal rather than conclusive, that many of the voluntary sector community groups are self appointed and self perpetuating organisations. In many cases they are doing a competent professional job, yet are based on a tiny active membership, and often linked together in the relatively closed networks that constitute the sector and the Newham establishment. Public sector consultation exercises turn out to be conversations with these unrepresentative activist elites. It seems unlikely that these few social capitalists can properly represent the interests of, or even ensure the welfare of the social proletariat of Newham. Even with the political will and the effective implementation of the best community development techniques, in which informal rather than bureaucratic relationship building would need to take centre stage, it will be a hard long term struggle to raise participation levels.

The second problem is the potential for fragmentation and conflict. Newham is already a uniquely diverse community, with a majority of minorities in its populations. In a region facing major economic and social stress, high levels of social exclusion, and urban regeneration and restructuring of the economy on a massive scale, the potential for conflict and even social disintegration is high. A well resourced programme of investment in the SOCIAL infrastructure would seem essential. The concept of social infrastructure would need to be a broad one which recognised the reality of pluralism and multiple special interests but would aim to bridge the multifarious divisions in the borough and to distribute its energies and resources fairly across the many distinctive groups. Only then can the high hopes for economic regeneration and the positive contribution of multiculturalism in the region have much chance of success.

The final word must be about the need to integrate the development of a stakeholder society with a stakeholder economy. Almost regardless of the truth or otherwise of Putnam’s theory of the link between social capital and economic prosperity, it seems breathtakingly obvious on the basis of any values that seek the welfare of the people of East London, that the majority would benefit from a bigger stake in the national economy. The mechanisms of this problem of distribution are not our concern here but it is at least plausible that greater economic inclusion could have positive social consequences. Equally it seems that increased reserves of social capital well distributed through the local population would make the region a better place, more precisely a more human and humane community in which to live. However for the maximum benefit the social economic and indeed the cultural resources ought to come together in synergy, which leads one suggests if somewhat tentatively, that some measure of social ownership, or at least communitarian or co-operative stakeholding in the economy is an appropriate way forward. Whether these ideas are anything other than unrealistically utopian in the face of global capitalism and the march of the individualistic consumer culture of our age, time alone will tell.

In the meantime all this suggests a range of further directions for research.

1) Studies of social capital in the local economy... How do individuals in the local job market, and firms in the local economy make use of social capital resources e.g. personal networks for their own and mutual economic benefit?

2) Studies of the social economy... investigating how trade takes place outside the cash economy on the basis of exchange and mutual obligation within social networks.. Can these transactions be costed and be shown to bring worthwhile community benefits either in terms of Cost Benefit analysis or alternative forms of social and environmental auditing ? How can they be maximised and what is the role and limitations of organised barter e.g. Lets schemes in regeneration?

3) How do people perceive social capital in their lives? Is it merely instrumental a resource to be used for the benefit of individuals, or are mutual obligations in social networks the stuff of which identity and belonging, true humanness are made? Are values around community, often legitimised by the religious tradition, strong enough to override cash values when personal economic survival is at stake.? How are these values constructed, developed and maintained in various cultures and social networks in East London?

4) Capacity Building, social capital and public interventions in urban regeneration. How do interagency partnerships actually work and how might they work better. How much depends on the social capital of policy making elites and how far does this present a barrier to community development and the wider participation of the people of East London, especially the socially excluded.?

5) Continued monitoring of the extent and networking of the voluntary, community and religious sector, with emphasis on membership and participation of the public and on networking across agencies and sectors? Longitudinal studies would enable us to follow trends from the baselines that have been partially set in this paper and to judge how far policies are effective in achieving their intended results, or as is frequently the case, producing unintended side effects.

NOTES

1) I would like to acknowledge that the definitions and quotations used in the introductory section are derived from an open discussion on the SOCNET listserv which took place in June 1997 and was collated and reposted by Michael Lichter. Among the key participants were Robert Putnam, Barry Wellman, Lewis Friedland and Xavier da Sousa Briggs. SOCNET (SOCNET@NERVM.NERDC.UFL.EDU) is a discussion list associated with INSNA, the International Network for social Network Analysis, and details of how to subscribe can be found on their web site.

<http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/project/INSNA/>.

2) I wish to thank my colleagues at Aston Community Involvement Unit who have contributed to the research programme on which this paper is based, in particular Anne Crisp, Hazel Aimey and two groups of students from the London Hospital Medical College at QMW, who undertook most of the fieldwork for the surveys. Thanks also to Mike Locke and Steven Howlett of the Centre for Institutional Studies at UEL, John Williamson and an anonymous referee who read and made comments on an early draft of the paper.

3) Statistics on UK parliamentary elections are taken from the Elections archive web site based at Queen Mary & Westfield College (<http://www.qmw.ac.uk/%7Elaws/election/index.html>). US election turnout data can be found on <http://www.fec.gov/pages/htm1to5.htm>.

4) Local council election results were published in the Newham Recorder for the first week of May 1994.

5) The Data analysis for this research was carried out using two software packages

UCINET IV by Borgatti Everett & Freeman Copyright Analytic technologies 1994

Krackplot 3.0 An improved network drawing program” by Krackhardt D., Blythe J & McGrath C.
Connections Vol 17.2 December 1994 Information from Krackplot web site

<http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/~krack/index.html>

6) The LBN Social services “Community Care Database”. Version 2.6 July 1997 on which the statistics on the local voluntary sector are based is available on disk from David Williamson LBN Social Services Broadway House, Stratford E15, (tel 0181 534 4545) or on line in Newham Libraries, public information (ATTACH) kiosks, and the LBN web site (**[http://www/newham.gov.uk](http://www.newham.gov.uk)**).

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TABLE 1
Awareness of Other Agencies working in various fields

type of agency	number mentioned
a) welfare rights advice	29
b) support for people with a particular illness or disability	47
c) drug and alcohol misuse	18
d) crime prevention initiatives	20
e) safety of people on the streets	16
f) the needs of young people	39
g) the needs of the elderly	44
h) the needs of refugees	37
i) domestic violence	20

Table 2
Public awareness of selected Voluntary Organisations

	not heard of	heard of	can contact	used
Neighbourhood Watch	11.2	69.8	13.8	5.2
Barnardos	23.3	60.3	14.7	1.7
Age Concern	29.3	55.2	15.5	0.0
Citizens Advice Bureau	10.3	49.1	28.4	12.1
Victim Support	41.4	49.1	7.8	1.7
Newham Council for Racial equality	56.0	38.8	4.3	0.9
Newham Mind	56.9	37.9	3.4	1.7
Local Churches, mosques, temples	40.5	37.1	11.2	11.2
Tenants Associations	60.3	33.6	6.0	0.0
Newham Rights	64.7	29.3	4.3	1.7
Advice Arcade	69.0	27.6	2.6	0.9
Refugee Centre	71.6	25.9	1.7	0.9
Newham Monitoring Project	75.0	21.6	3.4	0.0
Newham Parents Centre	73.3	19.8	3.4	3.4
Safezone Stratford	81.0	17.2	0.9	0.9
Community Links	80.2	17.2	1.7	0.9
Durning Hall	75.9	16.4	6.0	1.7
Councillors surgery	81.0	16.4	1.7	0.9
Crossroads Care	85.3	14.7	0.0	0.0
Carers Association	82.8	13.8	1.7	1.7
Onelove Community Association	87.1	12.1	0.0	0.9
Upton Centre	90.5	6.9	1.7	0.9
Newham Community Renewal Programme	94.0	6.0	0.0	0.0
The Maister Smith Foundation **	96.6	3.4	0.0	0.0

** A fictitious organisation

Table 3

General Election Turnout % of electorate

	1983	1987	1992	1994 *	1997
Newham N.E. East Ham	62.1	64.1	60.3	(34.80)	60.3
Newham N.W West Ham	56.1	59.4	56.0		58.4
Newham South Poplar & Canning Town	53.6	59.1	60.2		58.5
Ilford North	71.3	72.6	77.9		71.6
Wanstead & Woodford Chingford & Woodford Green	68.4	72.4	78.2		70.7
UK National Average	72.7	74.3	77.7		71.3

source elections archive web site QMW College

* Parliamentary Bye-election

