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Author(s): Luckin, D. and Sharp, E.

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Exploring the community waste sector: Are Sustainable Development and Social Capital useful concepts for project-level research?

David Luckin and Liz Sharp

Abstract

The concept of sustainable development implies that social, economic and environmental objectives should be delivered together, and that they can be achieved through enhanced community participation. The concept of social capital indicates how these objectives interrelate, implying that community involvement enhances trust and reciprocity, thus promoting better governance and greater prosperity. This paper draws on a survey of Community Waste Projects to explore how these concepts can inform investigations of community projects. It argues that the concepts provide useful guides to research and debate, but highlights the resource requirements of empirically confirming the claims of the social capital perspective.

Key words

Sustainable development; social capital; community waste projects.

1. Introduction

The American term ‘motherhood and apple pie’ is used to denote all that is good, homely and desirable: that is, the things that everybody wants and nobody knows how to deliver. In social and environmental policy terms, ‘sustainable development’ has a similar status. It implies that social, economic and environmental objectives can – and should – be delivered together, and that they can be achieved through enhanced community participation. But are these claims realistic? The aim of this paper is to focus on one set of community-based projects – Community Waste Projects (CWPs) – as a means of exploring whether and how these multiple objectives are compatible. CWPs are defined here as ‘not-for-profit organisations that have the explicit objective of encouraging the minimisation, reuse or recycling of waste’. CWPs appear, at least at the outset, to be a textbook example of sustainable development projects, combining environmental and social objectives, while seeking to achieve these objectives through local community involvement.

Sustainable development is a normative concept that relates to the nature and balance of different goals. However, it says little about the causal interactions between these goals. To further develop the analysis of *how* CWPs contribute to sustainable development, the concept of social capital can be used to explore the nature and implications of community involvement in sustainable development projects. 'Social capital' is a measure of the extent of social networks and norms of trustworthiness and reciprocity that exist in a community (Putnam, 2000). It can be seen as, "a shared resource which is derived from and renewed through inter-personal networks, voluntary associations and trust-generating interaction amongst citizens" (Gilchrist, 2003). In this sense, social capital is an important element of community capacity, and is a resource on which community development work can build. More broadly, the social capital perspective provides a framework for evaluating how community development initiatives – or the activities of community-based projects such as CWPs – interact with and contribute to other processes occurring within a community. This perspective might expect CWPs to contribute to social capital in a number of respects. For example, through participating in local networks, and through enhancing volunteering opportunities.

Social capital has become an important concept in UK policy circles in recent years (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2002). Advocates of the perspective argue that social capital can generate a range of positive results including greater economic prosperity, safer neighbourhoods and more responsive governance (Putnam, 2000). Indeed the concept of local governance - the move away from bureaucratic, paternalist service provision to an enabling model in which local authorities facilitate provision of services by other organisations - can be seen as requiring the development and

maintenance of high levels of social capital (Young 2000; Taylor 2000). Insofar as CWPs can be demonstrated to contribute to social capital, the concept could provide a powerful policy argument for enhancing support for the community waste sector.

This paper draws on a survey of British CWPs, conducted in the first stage of a research project currently being undertaken by the authors. The project title is '*Community Waste Projects: Sustainable Development in practice?*' and funding has been provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (Award no. R000223705) and the Shell Better Britain Campaign. The survey was developed in collaboration with the main UK community waste sector umbrella organisation, the Community Recycling Network (CRN), and involved distribution of a questionnaire to the CRN's 195 full member organisations. The response rate was 44% (see Luckin and Sharp 2003).

This paper draws on the survey, first, to probe the nature and extent to which CWPs contribute towards sustainable development, and second, to explore the mechanisms through which they promote growth in local social capital. The paper concludes by reflecting on the usefulness of the two concepts – sustainable development and social capital – in understanding project scale local action.

2. Great expectations – the anticipated benefits of community-based projects.

Community-based projects are often seen as enabling significant environmental gains with a minimum of resources (Young, 1996; Murray, 1999). This perception appears to have become accepted within policy-making circles in Britain. For example,

DEFRA guidance for local authorities on the development of Municipal Waste Management Strategies notes in relation to composting that, “community-based schemes... may represent good value for money from a local authority perspective”(DEFRA, 2001). A number of factors explain such ‘value for money’; Young (2000: 42) notes the energy and greatly reduced overheads that characterise the work of social economy organisations. In relation to waste, Murray (1999: 65) comments that community recycling groups are often willing to operate at or below the financial margin because of their commitment to the job. Despite the resource constraints which CWPs face, members of the Community Recycling Network – the main national umbrella group for the sector in the UK – are now responsible for provision of kerbside recycling services to more than 1.5 million households, or approximately one-eighth of such provision.

In addition, it is arguable that CWPs are able to maximise the environmental gains from activities such as recycling and composting through their flexibility, responsiveness and innovation in collection methods. These features enable CWPs to achieve high participation rates in kerbside recycling schemes. As Murray notes, “the Green values on which the community enterprises have relied support the small, the light footed and the local. These values fit well with household and neighbourhood services” (1999: 65). CWPs tend to operate source-separated recycling schemes which result in collection of high quality materials and avoid the problems of contamination which often occur when materials are collected either as a single stream of recyclables or commingled with other waste. In relation to participation, rather than simply collecting materials for recycling, many CWPs make it an explicit part of their mission to educate people about the economic and environmental benefits of recycling

(Pellow et al, 2000), and, in some cases, to develop understanding of other environmental issues (Entwistle, 1998). Again, there appears to have been some acceptance of the validity of these claims in British policy-making circles;

The community and not for profit sector has shown its ability for innovation and provision of recycling services on a wide scale, and has a valuable part to play in motivating public involvement and increasing participation in recycling schemes (DEFRA, 2001).

However, as with other social economy organisations, the goals of CWWPs tend to be wider than simply waste or even environmental issues.

Young (2000: 191) argues that the three defining features of social economy organisations are that they: first, operate on a not-for-profit basis; second, focus on the level of the local community (usually in the geographical sense, but also referring to communities of need, interest and experience across a wider area); and, finally, emphasise the involvement of local people in defining their needs, shaping programmes, and controlling the development of the organisation. He goes on to contend that, “In sustainable development terms... [these organisations] can combine the social, economic and environmental dimensions in one organisation rooted to locality.”(Young, 2000: 192) Thus, although social economy organisations may engage in income-generating activities, they do so in ways that relate in varying degrees to ethical goals of equity and social justice, and any profits or surpluses are used for reinvestment and community benefit (Young, 1996: 34). Indeed, American research has shown that community recycling groups are often most proud of their social achievements (Pellow et al, 2000). In relation to the involvement of local people, Stocker and Barnett (1998) note that community-based environmental projects provide opportunities for social and cultural interactions. In this sense, such projects

are an important means of strengthening community relationships, leading to greater effectiveness and empowerment within the group itself and stronger relationships between communities and local governments (Stocker and Barnett, 1998: 179-180). To this could be added relationships between community projects and the wider local community. In this manner, community-based environmental projects can act as “embodied participatory democracies”, which provide a tangible expression of the priorities of local communities (Stocker and Barnett, 1998: 179-180).

Although these ‘softer’ benefits are increasingly appreciated by policy-makers, it is still harder criteria – often relating to direct economic impacts and creation of jobs – that are more commonly applied in assessing project outcomes (Young, 1996; Church and Elster, 2002). At the macro-level, in terms of factors such as employment provided, recent research has done much to uncover the aggregate national impacts of the numerous small community sector organisations working on sustainable development issues (Church, 2002). At the micro-level, as will already be clear, much case study research has been conducted into the impacts of community-based projects, both in Britain (Young, 1996; Khan, 1999; Church and Elster, 2002; Church, 2002) and elsewhere (Beall, 1997; Stocker and Barnett, 1998). Addressing the meso-level, the following section of this paper provides an overview and analysis of the wider objectives and achievements of a particular group of community-based sustainable development projects – the UK community waste sector – in order to examine whether the practice of CWPs bears out the assumptions of sustainable development theory, and the expectations of commentators on the social economy.

3. Expectations fulfilled? The diverse objectives and impacts of Community

Waste Projects.

Sustainable development discourses suggest, at the least, that environmental protection, economic development and social equity are not mutually exclusive and that, in many circumstances, these multiple objectives are mutually dependent, or can be made more complementary through appropriate policies or strategies. In this paper, ‘integration’ between these priorities is seen as being achieved when the strategic decisions of CWP’s take account of more than one sustainable development goal, but when the goals are perceived as competing such that trade-offs are made between them. In contrast, ‘synergy’ is seen here as being achieved when different types of goals are perceived as mutually dependent. This section of the paper draws on the survey findings to explore the extent to which projects stress diverse objectives, assess the relative weight given to these objectives and give an initial indication as to whether they act as complementary or competing imperatives. The discussion is based on two related aspects of the survey. First, projects’ self-reported emphasis on different objectives and, second, indicators which are used by projects themselves in order to assess progress in relation to each of these goals.

The survey respondents were asked to rate various categories of objective – environmental, social, community involvement, educational and campaigning – according to their importance to their organisation on a sliding scale comprising; (1) key objective, (2) major objective, (3) secondary objective, (4) few relevant activities, (5) no relevant activities. Economic objectives for CWP’s essentially consist of

ensuring project continuity and maximising impact within financial constraints (Murray, 1999), and were taken as given.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, environmental objectives were generally accorded the highest priority, with 89% of responding projects indicating that environmental goals were either a key or major concern of their organisation. Relatively high proportions also indicated that social (62%), educational (70%) and community involvement (66%) objectives were key or major concerns. In relation to campaigning, however, considerably more groups stated that they had few or no relevant activities (48%) than perceived campaigning as a key or major objective (28%). The reticence of respondents to the survey in terms of describing themselves as campaigning organisations goes somewhat against the received wisdom. Entwistle (1998), for instance, refers to the evangelism of community recycling organisations. This reticence may reflect the potentially sensitive position of some organisations – e.g. charities, social enterprises involved in delivery of services to local authorities – in terms of describing themselves in overtly political terms.

In terms of the relative weight ascribed to different objectives, the survey findings indicated positive – if generally fairly weak – associations between all objectives with the exception of the ‘social’ category. It appeared that projects with a strong emphasis on social objectives tended to put slightly less emphasis on environmental, educational and campaigning goals. This may reflect the diverse origins of organisations in the community waste sector. Many furniture projects are initiated for primarily social goals, e.g. to support low-income households through collection and redistribution of low-cost furniture or electrical appliances (30% of the survey

respondents were involved in such activity, and 88% of these stated that social objectives were a key or major concern of their organisation). Therefore, although considerable environmental benefits accrue from these organisations' activities – diversion from the waste stream of furniture, domestic appliances and IT equipment – they may perceive these as spin-off benefits of their primary social goals.

The survey also included a section asking whether projects employed any indicators to measure or assess progress in relation to their objectives, and, if so, projects were asked to briefly describe these indicators. The responses to this question shed further light on the way in which projects conceive of their activities, and add some detail to the broad categories of objective discussed above. Such indicators provide an initial outline of the concrete *achievements* of community projects. The use of indicators can also act as a guide to any external assessment of community-based projects' impacts; such assessment should always consider the definition of 'success' that is employed by projects themselves rather than applying generic criteria. In this respect, however, the use (or non-use) and nature of formal performance measures should not be taken as defining groups' activities (Cleaver, 1999). Table 1 shows, (1) the proportions of CWPs that use indicators to assess their progress in relation to each category of objective, (2) the *aggregate* number of indicators that were cited for each objective by all CWPs responding to the survey, and (3) the number of *different* indicators that were cited for each objective. For example, within the environmental category 60% of projects used environmental indicators and a total of 62 environmental indicators were collected by responding projects. There were many overlaps between the indicators cited in different projects, however, as only 15 *different* environmental indicators were

identified. To give an indication of the more commonly used indicators, Table 2 lists those that were cited by two or more responding projects in each category.

Table 1. Use of indicators by objective

| OBJECTIVE | % of CWPs reporting use of indicators | Aggregate no. of indicators reported | No. of different indicators |
|------------------------------|--|---|------------------------------------|
| <i>Environmental</i> | 60 | 62 | 15 |
| <i>Social</i> | 47 | 70 | 11 |
| <i>Educational</i> | 42 | 42 | 13 |
| <i>Community involvement</i> | 51 | 43 | 10 |
| <i>Campaigning</i> | 19 | 17 | 5 |

Not all projects reported using indicators – 25% of respondents did not cite any indicators, and only 13% of respondents reported using indicators for all five categories of objective. As Table 1 suggests, the use of indicators was most frequent in relation to environmental goals, which were cited by 60% of responding projects. Approximately half the projects cited indicators in each of the categories of social achievements, community involvement and educational contribution, while only around a fifth cited indicators of campaigning activity. This ranking of different types of indicators roughly parallels projects’ reported emphasis on different objectives. However, it may also relate to the priorities of funding bodies, and the ease of identifying quantifiable indicators.

The widest range of *different* indicators was found in the environmental category, with 15 different indicators cited (see Table 1). These indicators included, unsurprisingly, various measures relating to waste, but also listed wider environmental factors – such as ‘amenities upgraded’ – and measures of projects’ own environmental management

such as water and/ or energy use (see Table 2). The highest aggregate number of indicators – seventy – was found in the social category (see Table 1). This demonstrates that many CWPs were recording their social impacts in two or more ways, indicating the diversity of social benefits which their activities can bring about (see Table 2). Frequently occurring indicators within the community category included ‘number of participants’ and ‘number of volunteers’ while within the educational category, the most commonly cited indicator was ‘number of schools visited’.

As Table 2 illustrates, some indicators were cited in more than one category. For example, the ‘number of participants’, was cited as an indicator of social impact, community involvement, and education, while several groups cited ‘tonnage of waste recycled’ as both an indicator of environmental and educational impact. These choices indicate that there is degree of overlap between the different objectives and the way in which they relate to CWPs’ activities. Many of these activities can be seen as benefiting the community in a range of different respects, e.g. running a recycling scheme in a local school may have both educational and environmental impacts. Of course, it must be acknowledged that such differences may relate to genuine variations in the way a particular indicator is used by different projects, or may relate merely to semantic differences in the respondents’ perceived scope for the different objectives.

Table 2. Indicators cited in each category

| Indicator | *No of projects citing |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <i>Campaigning</i> | |
| Non-specific | 8 |
| Impact on local and central government policy/ public inquiry decisions | 3 |
| Increases in membership | 2 |
| Press coverage | 2 |
| <i>Community involvement</i> | |
| No. of people participating/ using service | 13 |
| No. of volunteers | 8 |
| No. of groups assisted/ member groups | 8 |
| Community recycling awareness and changes in behaviour | 3 |
| Public satisfaction | 2 |
| Sponsorship/ donations | 2 |
| No. of activities organised | 2 |
| Non-specific | 2 |
| <i>Educational</i> | |
| Schools visited/ involved in recycling | 10 |
| Workshops/ presentations/ events provided | 6 |
| Non-specific | 5 |
| No. of participants | 4 |
| Tonnages waste diverted | 3 |
| Calls to information line | 3 |
| Training provided/ qualifications gained | 3 |
| No. of visits to centre | 2 |
| <i>Environmental</i> | |
| Tonnages of waste diverted/ recycled | 26 |
| Non-specific | 9 |
| No. of items recycled/ reused | 6 |
| Fuel consumption | 3 |
| Energy use/ conservation | 2 |
| Water use | 2 |
| Land improved | 2 |
| Amenities created/ upgraded | 2 |
| No. of suppliers donating waste | 2 |
| Improvements in recycling facilities | 2 |
| <i>Social</i> | |
| Individuals/ households assisted | 16 |
| Jobs created/ secured | 13 |
| Training provided | 11 |
| People into jobs/ training outcomes | 9 |
| Participation/ people involved | 7 |
| Member groups assisted | 5 |
| Non-specific | 4 |

* Only indicators cited by two or more responding projects have been included in this table.

Non-specific use of indicators, where projects stated that they used indicators but did not specify what these were, was most commonly found in the campaigning area. This may reflect the low priority that is put on this area by both projects and their funders, and the politically sensitive nature of overt campaigning activity, but probably also relates to the difficulty of defining impacts in relation to campaigning. Finally, other parts of the survey illustrate how the results of this question should be interpreted with caution. For example, while only 12% of all respondents stated that they kept track of numbers of schools visited or involved in recycling schemes as a measure of their educational impact, the survey showed that 84% of respondents were involved in educational activities of some sort, with more than three quarters of these working directly with schools in various ways.

Overall, the survey findings demonstrate that the majority of CWPs embrace objectives much wider than those that would be expected in relation to their materials reclamation activities. In addition to environmental goals, CWPs also focus to varying extents on social, educational and community involvement objectives, though most appear to place little emphasis on overt campaigning. Moreover, the multiple impacts which are brought to light by projects' use of indicators give an initial sign that community projects are able to achieve the diverse impacts to which they aspire. It is clear that the UK community waste sector is addressing the waste challenge in a manner that is deliberately distinct from the practices of commercial waste firms. On this first reckoning, CWPs support the idea that sustainable development is possible, fulfilling the great expectations suggested by commentators on the social economy (Young, 1996; Church and Elster, 2002).

As the above analysis indicates, the concept of sustainable development can be used as a reference point in evaluating the aims and achievements of organisations.

Theories about sustainable development, however, do little to inform analysis of how the multi-dimensional achievements of CWPs might be reproduced on a wider scale.

Therefore, the following section assesses the potential of the social capital perspective in terms of informing further research into the sector.

4. Do Community Waste Projects enhance social capital?

The concept of 'social capital' has become a prominent reference point in debates surrounding the potential impacts of community projects. In brief, it is argued by advocates of the social capital perspective that social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trust that arise from them, can generate a range of positive results including greater economic prosperity, safer neighbourhoods and more responsive government (Putnam, 2000). Insofar as CWPs contribute to local social capital, they might be expected to enhance these benefits. In this respect, a number of aspects of the survey shed light on the ways in which CWPs interact with their local communities. These are: (1) the nature and extent of volunteer activity in project work; (2) criteria for selection of management bodies; and (3) the extent of networking with other social economy organisations.

Volunteer involvement in community-based projects can be seen as tapping in to the "citizenship potential", which conventional politics is currently failing to engage" (CAG Consultants, 2000: 5.4). It may also offer opportunities for local people to gain confidence, experience and skills and is thus a means of tackling social exclusion (Church and Elster, 2002; Taylor 2000). In the context of social capital, volunteer

involvement provides a focus for social interaction and the development of norms of reciprocity and trust.

Survey respondents were asked to indicate how many volunteers had worked with their organisation in the last year, how often they worked (full-time, part-time or occasional) and what type of activity they were involved in (practical activity, project promotion, project management or other). The great majority of projects (82%) reported some form of volunteer involvement in their activities, with 1335 volunteers involved in the responding projects over the course of the preceding year. Of these volunteers, 67 were full-time, 638 part-time and 630 occasional. This equates to sixteen people voluntarily participating in each project responding to the survey. (A further 3836 volunteers who participated in the annual beach clean-up organised by the Shetland Amenity Trust are excluded from the figures above.) Two-thirds of these volunteers were involved in practical activity, around a fifth in project management, 9% in project promotion and 5% in other activities.

The selection criteria employed by projects in choosing members of management committees and/ or boards of directors provides a further indication of the extent and nature of interaction between CWPs and their local communities. As noted above, around a fifth of volunteers reported in the survey were involved in project management. In total, seventy seven per cent of projects reported having either a Management Committee or a Board of Directors. The reported criteria for membership of these bodies provided strong evidence of community involvement in management of projects. 'Local people' was the most frequently cited criterion (30% of projects reporting management committee/ board of directors). Other categories

indicating an emphasis on locality – such as ‘community groups’ (22%), ‘volunteers’ (11%), and ‘service users (current and former)’ (9%) – also featured strongly. In contrast, criteria indicating official capacity or expertise – including ‘local council officials’ (12%), ‘professionals’ (8%) and ‘universities’ (3%) – were cited by considerably fewer projects. (It should of course be noted that these two sets of criteria are not mutually exclusive.)

The final aspect of CWP activity considered here is that of project involvement in community sector networks. Interaction with other community-based projects can be seen as conducive to project survival (Khan, 1999). A projects’ involvement in a network could be argued to increase the social capital available to it (Young, 1996), while the existence of networks adds to the mutualism – or social capital – of the community sector as a whole. The survey found strong evidence of networking activity on the part of CWPs. On the national level, all respondents were by definition members of the Community Recycling Network, but 60% were also members of other national waste networks (such as the Furniture Recycling Network and the Community Composting Network). In addition, 77% of projects were involved in local waste networks. Most importantly in the current context, two-thirds of projects were involved in local social economy networks that were not related directly to waste. Such networking, and the development of local alliances across boundaries, are important to the development of social capital and are seen by many commentators as a key solution to problems of social exclusion in contemporary society (Taylor, 2000).

On the basis of the evidence cited above, it is clear that CWPs are engaging with local communities in ways that could be expected to reinforce the norms of reciprocity and

civic engagement that are stressed by the social capital perspective. CWPs could therefore arguably be seen as both embodying and enhancing social capital. This finding, however, needs to be understood in the light of three important reservations. First, it is clear that involvement of local communities in community groups may not always be unreservedly positive. Khan (1999), for example, notes that the degree of community participation in community sector projects is necessarily limited and selective, while Church and Elster (2002) bring to light local sustainable development projects' experience of problems in relation to working with volunteers. The broad assumption that CWPs' activities will contribute to social capital clearly needs to be examined in detail in a range of cases. Such analysis may highlight complexities that limit impacts on social capital. Second, it is crucial to understand that while the work outlined above has identified characteristics of CWPs that are likely to contribute to social capital, it has not sought to measure the impact of CWPs upon local norms of trust and reciprocity themselves. To empirically verify whether the specified activities of CWPs do actually increase social capital as claimed would require intensive neighbourhood-based longitudinal studies of how these norms have changed during the development of particular local CWPs. Such studies might yield fascinating insights, but they would be very resource intensive. Finally, the work described above does not assess whether the positive impacts of social capital predicted by this perspective actually occur. For example, it has not looked at how the existence of CWPs impacts on local governance. Beall (1997) questions the predictive elements of social capital and, in particular, points out that the perspective ignores issues of structure and power in society. If studies were carried out to verify the impact of CWPs on social capital, parallel exploration of developments in the local governance of waste would enable the predictive elements of the perspective to be investigated.

5. Conclusions

The concept of sustainable development has provided a useful framework for the authors' survey research, and also poses interesting questions for ongoing case study investigation. The survey research demonstrates that the multiple goals of sustainable development are frequently combined within CWPs. Investigations of case study projects are needed to address the arguably more crucial question of whether the combined achievement of these goals actually demonstrates the complementarity or 'synergy' suggested by writers on sustainable development. A further important question concerns the circumstances in which – and the strategies through which – CWPs can most effectively combine these multiple objectives.

The concept of social capital has been used in this paper to discuss further potential impacts of CWPs. There is evidence that such projects carry out activities, and engage with local communities, in ways that could be expected to reinforce the norms of reciprocity and civic engagement that are stressed by the social capital perspective. In this sense, CWPs can be seen as both embodying and enhancing social capital. Case study investigations of CWP may indicate *how* some of the cited activities actually contribute to local social capital. In this respect social capital is useful in understanding the potential impacts of CWP on a locality.

However, there is a limit to the usefulness of the concept within project-focused studies. Empirically verifying the impact of CWPs upon *total* social capital in different localities would require resource intensive and longitudinal neighbourhood-based analyses. Indicating whether increases in social capital achieved the wider

benefits predicted under the perspective – for example, in terms of more responsive governance or greater local prosperity – would require still further investigation.

Overall, empirical verification of both, (1) the occurrence of increases in social capital and, (2) their impact upon the locality, pose resource challenges that may limit the usefulness of the social capital perspective in understanding the impacts of community-based projects.

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