

COMMUNICATING, CONNECTING AND DEVELOPING SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR SUSTAINABLE ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT: When organisations take an active role in community engagement they encourage sustainable community practices and develop social capital through networks, collaboration with other organisations, relational exchanges and meaningful community connections. This paper considers regional Canadian and South Australian models of sustainable practice where organisations developed community partnerships and organisations' directors, community leaders, public relations professionals and community media promoted a culture of community responsiveness within and between organisations. In the qualitative, interpretive study organisations embedded social capital initiatives in their strategic plans. This paper focuses on the role of communication in its various forms; media both traditional and social media, that encouraged dialogue and developed trust with organisations and their communities. Considerable effort was required to sustain relationships and manage challenges to community program develop. This paper contends that developing social capital is critical to organisations' participation in their communities and to the realisation of community goals.

KEY WORDS: Sustainability, communication, public relations, media, community

1. INTRODUCTION

Understanding the context of social capital as part of sustainable practice

This article focuses on the importance of communication about sustainability and the way that organisations communicate and engage with their communities through media, including social media and

through newsletters and organisations' websites in order to promote sustainable practice. This is explored in regional South Australia and Canada. These were the two research questions addressed:

- How were the concepts of sustainability and community investment communicated in regional communities?
- What were the specific roles of public relations and media in promoting sustainability and social capital investment, and how were community messages communicated and understood?

This article first defines social capital and its relationship to sustainable practice and, secondly, situates the development of social capital within the communication context and roles important to its effective development. If social capital is important to organisations and to community sustainability it is of the essence to understand what it means and how it can be developed. The notion of social capital is "rooted in the critical sociological perspective of Pierre Bourdieu" (Ihlen, 2005, p. 492, citing Bourdieu 1977, 1990) and it accumulates both through conscious and unconscious investment when exchanges of time, gifts, and services take place. Scholars such as Robert Putnam (1995) put forward the notion that social capital exists and develops in the relations among people as actors, and those relationships can either be within an organisation (bonding capital) or externally (bridging capital). These internal-external capitals develop relationships important to an organisation's viability and develop beneficial partnerships supporting ongoing business and community exchanges, enabling sustainable, long-term programs to become part of business and community engagement.

Social capital includes "connections, membership of a group" (Ihlen, 2009, citing Bourdieu 1991, p.67) and is part of organisations' overall capital stock, which also includes "economic capital (money, property), and cultural capital (knowledge, skills, educational qualifications)" (Ihlen, 2009, p.66). Ihlen (2007) contends that social capital contributes to organisations' bottom line and he suggests that without social capital investment organisations are taking a risk. It could be argued that its absence may impair sustainability. In this article sustainability implies long-term commitment and viability where organisations and their communities develop and grow. According to Hess *et al.* (2008), when organisations think about sustainability the focus moves from their business and market driven practices to an understanding that they have a

key role as members of their communities. The way organisations' business is carried out affects "the perception of not only a firm's customers, but also stakeholders as employees, suppliers, the community, and opinion leaders" (Keller, 2008, p.273).

Being sustainable and developing social capital includes many perspectives. For example, Lin (2000) and more recently Ferragina (2010) demonstrate how the existence of social disadvantage and income inequality adversely affects social capital development. Ferragina notes that Putnam's concept of social capital ignores these considerations despite their important role in determining who might participate in civic engagement and the benefits deriving from it. Such civic engagement will also be more successful when relationships are trusting and valued. Fussel *et al.* (2006) found in their research on social capital and transaction costs that "without the presence of trust social interaction cannot proceed" (p.157) and many organisational outcomes are not accomplished. If this is so, then organisations need to embed strategic management approaches that build trust and develop meaningful relationships as part of their sustainable practice.

Understanding social capital goals and objectives are core considerations (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998) and this article posits that these need to be effectively communicated. As such our primary research questions focused on the communication context of social capital and sustainable development.

Communication, connection and sustainability

There is a risk that role of social capital in promoting sustainable business and community activity will be underestimated since its benefits are often not readily evident and the role of economic capital, which is more easily defined and understood, may take precedence. These risks can sometimes be reduced through discussion and dialogue designed to bring all major partners in social capital development together. That suggests important roles for both communication management and public relations in increasing participants' understanding of the community processes leading to long-term sustainable development, the funds required for that development, and how to handle legitimately different view points about how to plan for and promote social capital.

There are many challenges to communication managers and community leaders attempting to encourage community engagement. Lyon (2008, p.373) suggests that in the "field of communication, we study relationships that are often rife with conflict, ambiguity, and delicate

alliances. Like economic capital, I suggest that social capital can be used for noble and ignoble purposes". Lyon's caution is one that needs careful consideration as organisations' social capital development will be challenged as "people compete for power with their varied amounts and types of capital" (Lyon 2008, p.374). This affects the sustainability of organisations and the communities affected by them, dependent on them, or closely connected to them. Regional and local relationships may develop relational frameworks conducive to open and engaging communication, but they can also, as Johnston (2010) suggests be open to power struggles and differences. When such struggles exist, the role of communication, dialogue, and the reporting of community issues, can become critical to reducing conflict.

As discussed by Luoma-aho (2009), Putnam maintains that there has been a decline of social capital as "people have lost a sense of community" (p.232) and relationships are more difficult to establish. He perceived online communication as giving people their own space and time, which reduces their need for local connectivity and community engagement is. In a recent paper, Sander and Putnam (2010) recognised that the advent of social media is changing this perspective although they are not fully convinced of its value to civic engagement.

The communication emphasis in this paper is one that presents one critical component of connectivity and relationship development where layers of communication include internal and external exchanges – some with the media, some through interactive websites and community newsletters, some through community meetings and others through social media dialogue and engagement. These communication exchanges can be complex but they are part of traditional and "emergent forms of media" (Macnamara, 2010, p.146) that seem to extend the possibilities of civic engagement. Mcnamara suggests that although formal meetings and dialogue are important they might alienate certain societal groups that are more comfortable communicating and connecting online. Thus it is important to exercise all forms of communication to engage with the full range of organisations and community groups able to contribute to sustainable communities. Social media encourage the "creation and synthesis of knowledge, and permits filtering of information" (Kane *et al.* 2009, p.46). Organisations therefore need to be aware of this influence on their community relationships and networks and understand that communication through social media is changing the way communities engage and become part of communication exchanges.

Online media empower many community members to participate actively in community planning as through relationship development and two-way symmetric communication (Seltzer and Mitrook, 2007). Connectedness via online community news, for example, was found by Chung and Nah (2009) to make journalism more meaningful as “users work together with journalists” (p. 867) to circulate news and - stories important to their regions. In short, they actively participated in open communication about community needs.

This article suggests that, as partnerships grow, knowledge about organisations and their communities accumulates through community and online media putting programs on the agenda. Public relations professionals also play a role in maintaining long-term commitment to community engagement.

2. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY METHODS

Social capital has many facets and, according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), both practical sense-making and reflexivity are required in order to know and understand it. Social capital “encourages us to look beyond the habitual frames through which we see the world” (Schirato *et al.* 2010, p. 33). A qualitative study was therefore considered most appropriate as the researchers wanted to look beyond the habitual aspects of social capital and community engagement and focus on the way organisations, businesses, the not for-profit-sector, media and the government were developing, or not developing social capital. Qualitative research allowed researchers to explore patterns, new ideas and give time for explanations. Minichiello *et al.* (2008) observe that, “qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviewing and participant observation, are said to allow the researcher to gain access to the motives and meanings, actions, and reactions of the people in the context of their daily lives” (p.10).

The “researchers’ identity, values and beliefs play a role in the production and analysis of qualitative data” (Denscombe, 2003, p.268) so that in the Canadian-South Australian study the focus on public relations, media and means of communication was viewed through the lens of the researchers’ speciality and expertise. As such there could be biases in the perception and interpretation of information.

The primary methods used – semi-structured interviews and focus groups – were important to this work since participants recounted their experiences in their words, which types of communication were effective

and why, and what social capital meant to them. Focus groups were important to gain an overall understanding of the way community leaders and communication managers as well as the media, understood social capital, what they considered were important components of sustainable communities and how they developed social capital. One-on-one interviews then allowed in-depth exploration of the specifics of the research questions.

These methods proved, in the words of Lindlof and Taylor (2011, p.171), “remarkably adaptable to varied circumstances and settings” permitting the conduct of interviews in the field as well as in organisations and, as the social media findings emerged, exploration of this aspect of the project which we began to understand. As with any other pilot study in an emerging field of research, Edmondson and McManus (2007) warn that there is a need to be “open to emergent themes and issues in the data” (p.1164) and to ensure that the “methodological fit promotes the development of rigorous and compelling field research” (p.1169). We bore this in mind during the study reported here.

The comparison of Canadian and South Australian communities was also important to data analysis and sense making. Flick (2006) notes the triangulation results in methods that complement each other, adds to the understanding of the research topic, and contributes both to the reliability and validity of the data and the understanding of people’s responses.

The key research questions outlined earlier evolved during the study as there was little in the literature providing insight to the way sustainable practices are understood and communicated to the community. In addressing the communication context and its impact on community social capital the specifics of the public relations role were evident. Such positions as media and communications officers, and credit union managers involved in community partnerships proved important, and helped us explore the ways in which communication was conducted, both internally to organisations, through their publications and websites and externally through community meetings and forums, or through various media forms.

Study participants

Following briefings from representatives of the Roxby Downs Community Board and the University of South Australia’s Mount Gambier Regional Centre, study participants were selected and invited to

contribute. We primarily used purposive sampling, which Stacks (2011) describes as “selecting participants or materials for a particular reason that is based on the researcher’s knowledge of the population and the focus of the research” (p. 202). It became apparent that an initial qualitative, exploratory study in both the remote desert mining township of Roxby Downs and the provincial farming centre of Mount Gambier needed to include key community and business leaders and media specialists who were active in civic engagement and development. Roxby Downs (pop. 4500) was purpose-built in 1987-1988 to service Olympic Dam, the world’s largest uranium deposit, fourth largest copper deposit and fifth largest gold deposit (BHP-Billiton, 2010). Mount Gambier (pop. 24,000) is a centre for farming, timber and tourism and is also the regional centre for the South-East region of South Australia and much of the Western Districts of Victoria (City of Mt Gambier, 2010).

Roxby Downs focus group participants included representatives of the local newspaper (The Monitor) and community radio station (RoxFM) as well as the local council and business representatives, the local community board and the regional development authority. Telephone interviews were also conducted with representatives of the mining company BHP Billiton, Olympic Dam and local media as they support the Roxby Downs community.

Two focus groups were conducted in Mount Gambier. Those who attended included representatives of the two local councils that govern the city and its immediate environs, and included those with responsibilities in the areas of communication, community development and sustainability. Separate interviews were conducted with senior council staff, local journalists and media directors, a local university director, sustainability action group members and business owners.

Canadian interviews included members of the Office of Community Based Research at the University of Victoria, as well as representatives of corporate organisations, credit unions, community council, local media and communication, and a micro-lending society, all of whom had community extension responsibilities. Others interviewed included a social media specialist, university communication manager, community radio staff, and a public relations director-community activist. The model of community practice was found to be benchmarking and leading sustainable community practice from previous research conducted by the author (Chia and Peters, 2008).

The research team also visited a community project centre and interviews took place in organisations where community programs were developed.

Semi-structured interviews and focus groups, coding data

The interviews and focus groups of the eight Roxby Downs participants, 11 Mount Gambier participants and 12 Canadian participants were transcribed and coded according to the dominant themes that emerged. Field notes were prepared in the additional interviews with community project staff and in the meetings with a regional mayor and other support staff. Open coding of the data (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011) identified and clarified relationships between categories as researchers moved “continuously back and forth between inductive thinking developing concepts, categories, and relations from the text” (Flick, 2006, p. 301), testing out responses that were different or seemed to reflect other ways to consider social capital, sustainability and community engagement. Following each focus group and interview the research team discussed and reviewed responses in line with Stack’s (2011) recommendation to “identify significant responses” (p. 178) and review both the content and tone of the interviews. The researchers gained insight into interview peculiarities and characteristics. The manual coding was conducted by each member of the research team, compared and discussed, and responses were clustered according to:

- Responses that supported and encouraged community and social capital development;
- Responses that focused on the role of, and contribution to social capital in its various forms;
- Responses related to community challenges and poor communication that affected sustainability and the realisation of community program goals; and
- Responses that pointed to social media, regional media and other forms of communication important to public relations and communication exchange, connectedness and relationship building that affect social capital development and the sustainability of community programs.

3. FINDINGS

Core themes

Similar patterns emerged in each of the three communities; each valued community group meetings, multi-sector involvement and the development of strong relationships between the business, not-for-profit and government sectors. Study participants' responses focused on:

- Collaboration and a strategic approach to internal and external communication, and to community engagement made possible by leadership from organisations' directors, communication managers and community leaders;
- Long-term commitment to sustainable practice with an emphasis on trust and on local, meaningful programs that were communicated to the community; and
- The increasing role of social media (adding to current role of regional media) in opening up dialogue and focusing on a 'bottom up approach' where ideas and decisions were generated from the community.

In both the focus groups and interviews participants reported that community engagement is complex and multi-layered as organisations viewed their role from a community perspective with many statements about society changing, needs changing and the implied need for organisations to change and respond to these needs. Through a qualitative analysis, the reports here give an understanding of themes, important statements as well as those that pointed to varied perspectives about organisations' and their communities' social capital. Our emphasis is on gaining a grasp of, and giving context to, what it actually means to develop organisations' and community social capital, and our analytical style is one of sense-making rather than definitive analysis. Weick, a social psychologist (cited in Czarniawska, 2005), sees sense-making as about framing meaning around organisations and their connections, which "can be driven by beliefs or by actions" (p.272) and by expectations and disruptions to exchanges and developments.

Social capital and organisations' responsiveness, along with the meanings that evolve, are best understood by uncovering the layers, examining viewpoints and gaining understanding of what works and why, and what hampers social capital. The study reported in this paper

concentrates on the *communication* dimension of social capital and sustainable practice in regional communities focusing on public relations sense making where they, as connectors and relationship facilitators, respond to the equivocality of the situation (Kreps, 2008) “or the level of understanding of messages to which organisation members respond to” (p. 23) and the community responds to.

Collaboration, strategic approach, and leadership from organisations’ directors and community leaders

A theme that was evident in the focus groups and throughout the interviews was that at a regional level, where communities were challenged by high unemployment, youth issues, homelessness and environmental concerns, social capital development was possible when organisations, government and community leaders collaborated on long-term sustainable programs. This required a strategic approach where each aspect of civic engagement and community program planning was considered, communicated and discussed with the community. From the initial focus groups it became apparent that this is not readily achieved. Connecting and engaging were described by a Roxby Downs business manager as a slow process; she indicated that without good planning it was easy to lose people along the way and not achieve what was intended. Other focus group members reported that constant changes in a mobile mining community made it difficult to consolidate and include all community members in program planning. Mt Gambier focus group members stressed that the *‘heart beat of communities is around relationships’* but too often focus is on setting up structures and activities believing that relationships will form around them. Focus group members said they were disappointed with the lack of business support as community engagement was part of the *‘soft stuff’* that many businesses chose not to be part of.

The Canadian business sector (Victoria, Vancouver Island, Canada) was much more committed to social capital development from within their organisations and in collaboration with others outside their organisations. A good understanding of the leadership role that facilitates social capital development came from one of the Canadian community council directors who described her role as:

If everybody brings their knowledge to the table, what are the realities of what can be accomplished, and what can we each do and what can we each do for each other to make that happen? So when you have, I think, a table where there's trust, respect and real shared vision, you can start to see how you can leverage off each other.

The role of 'key players' in ensuring that social capital investment in the community is realised was emphasised in Roxby Downs and Mt Gambier focus groups. These key players were Directors and Chief Executives of councils, regional business managers, media directors and not-for-profit managers and communication specialists. The Canadian study recipients supported this view, but also focused on the need for organisational employees to be encouraged to engage and take an active role in their communities; key players might lead the way but communities need people on the ground to make programs feasible and workable.

In the quest to support sustainable communities, participants in the three communities reported that they needed considerable cooperation from many different community members and organisations but they also needed champions. The Canadian community research group that led community program development were described as being real champions who made a significant community investment. In the two South Australian communities there were also champions, or very strong leaders who were skilled and committed to community engagement. One-on-one interviews with some of the community champions were important as they gave a good understanding of their contribution to sustainable regional communities. In one South Australian region, for example, a strong leader and Chief Executive Office (CEO) of a local council successfully gained \$8.5 million in grants for his community that allowed him to develop community infrastructure, assist the aged and set up youth support programs, develop environmental projects and encourage the use of solar energy, as well as celebrate with his community. His energy and drive was exceptional and his community programs gained constant media coverage providing excellent community knowledge about their progress. Highlighting the need for open and transparent communication, this CEO's bi-weekly meetings with business, government, not-for-profit and interested community members encouraged dialogue and participation in community decision making and planning. This CEO said that many in the community told him that 'you've built the trust' and 'people sit back and think – look what they

have achieved'. It is not a question of what he achieved. This Chief Executive Office was beginning to use social media but said that his success in developing social capital was due to face-to-face meetings, encouraging participation across all sectors and acknowledging each and every contribution that made the community stronger and assisted in its development. This was one of the best examples of strong leadership and excellent communication facilitating a sustainable community.

One of the Canadian credit union directors also focused on the need to lead and listen as part of sustainable planning and being attentive to community needs in order to have the greatest impact on communities. More generally, the interviews with Canadian credit union directors and communication managers revealed that their work in providing micro loans for small enterprises generated social capital as they worked with other business leaders who acted as mentors for loan recipients. The loans proved to be sustainable long-term initiatives because recipients received good advice about their business ventures. There were many similar examples where local businesses supported youth programs financially. Moreover, the credit union's strategic plan for employee professional development provided a stream of volunteers to support community programs. Every program was reported on its website; stories appeared in credit union newsletters, on community radio, and in local print media. Thus, funding cannot of itself make communities sustainable. Communication played a critical role in promoting micro loans and youth programs, and was critical to their ongoing success.

Long-term commitment to sustainable practice with an emphasis on trust and on local, meaningful programs

Study participants across the three communities indicated that effective collaboration between the many local organisations was essential, indeed fundamental, for promoting growing communities, and this, in turn, required strong mutual trust in each other's ability to deliver their contribution ethically. Public relations practitioners and community liaison managers reported that communication in all its forms, face-to-face, meetings, newsletters, YouTube, twitter, blogs and group consultations fostered relational trust where all parties could present their views, begin to understand each other and have input to decision making. Within a mining town such as Roxby Downs in South Australia's desert region this was especially important as the public relations director of the mining company reported that there was an 80% turnover of personnel

each six years. Thus, communication needed to be open and transparent so that the constantly changing community was kept informed and included. The public relations director also set up support programs for young mothers who had no family to assist them because her community liaison work highlighted the need for this program. Her organisation would not have known about this social need if they had not actively engaged in community dialogue online and in face-to-face meetings. Challenges also arose because employment in the mining sector is erratic and workers who lost their jobs were often wary of company support. The community public relations officer said that:

She spent a lot of time of time out in the community with our key stakeholder groups helping them to identify community projects that we could support whether it's direct funding or income support that really meets a need in the community where we can help to do that then that does build trust in the company especially people start to understand our reasoning that we were looking for sustainable projects.

Being a trusted member of the community was critical. When Canadian and South Australian study participants were asked about what was important to their relationships trust was mentioned in two thirds of the interviews. A Mt Gambier participant offered a typical response:

It's really crucial it's extremely important to have a high profile in the community and a trusted position and you've got to be out there and also your views have to be sensible.

The understanding that social capital is developed through respect, strong relationships and connections between leaders, organisations' directors and community members was clearly evident. These outcomes also require ongoing two-way communication which involves both making suggestions and promoting ideas, while listening to the views of others within, and external to, organisations using all forms of communication.

Challenges: Media and Social media extending social capital possibilities

The study indicated that traditional communication through community meetings, newspapers, television and newsletters were playing a role but

social media were also having an impact in the way organisations and their communities understood each other and framed their agendas. Study participants reported that grass roots involvement through social media such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook opened up opportunities to communicate with those who were marginalised and often excluded from face-to-face dialogue.

Canadian credit unions reported that they developed strong relationships with other organisations and, as one director put it, we “*have an ethical screen when we do business*” but the community did not always agree with organisations’ initiatives. For example, some credit unions supported programs for prostitutes and gays that were not always accepted. In these cases regional media, print, radio and television played a key role in reporting and telling the stories, alongside community newsletters and online blogs, Twitter and Facebook making the aims of the programs known and understood.

When environmental sustainability activists within some communities sought to promote their views there were several accounts of overzealous media reporting about intended community projects and the protests of activists. In Mt Gambier, for example, proposals to cut down trees upset many local residents and made the headlines, but reports about successful solar energy programs also needed media attention and rarely reached the headlines. In the three regional communities, however, there were strong relationships between traditional media and the community, and also between communication professionals and organisations’ managements, which led to less sensationalism in regional media reporting than is apparent in many national newspapers and television broadcasts. One community radio director explained;

You hope you tell both sides of the story so that people know that you’re not one sided or have an agenda. We pride ourselves on having a non agendered news cast. We want to tell people the stories.

This director explained that they are partnering with the local university because of its community engagement focus and they are partnering with other media, working with local research centres at the same time that citizen journalism (i.e. the public sending in reports through YouTube and other social media) is increasing. In this director’s assessment, the views expressed through social media were valued as they extended the parameters of individual and community understanding. This assessment

is also congruent with both the focus group discussions and two-thirds of the interviews. Social media are changing the context of organisations' response to their communities, but much more research will be required to uncover social medias' influence and value to community and social capital development.

The study participants across the three communities reported that:

- Social media are giving more community members the opportunity to engage and it is including those who often do not turn up for meetings or for face-to-face discussion;
- Social media for the marginalised need to be managed strategically – they need to be given skills to present their point of view and assisted in communicating in a way that their views are articulated and understood – this is not always apparent;
- Social media continue community links even when community members move away from a locality;
- Social media open up media opportunities as community members report and send in photos on YouTube and participate in media blogs and send in local reports – citizen journalism;
- Twitter was short, sharp communication and had an important place in communicating core needs, concerns and ideas; and
- Social media bring many young people into community discussion and participation- it is their way of communicating.

Such social media are therefore interlinking with traditional media and and interactive websites run by local organisations, to circulate community stories, celebrate milestones, put forward ideas and engage community members with a strong local focus. The rise of interacting social media is contributing to more grass roots community engagement and an increasing social capital development.

4. DISCUSSION

We have discussed how the development of local networks and relationships, both organisational and personal, can contribute to sustainable communities and the creation of social capital and in particular trust. However, local communities often encounter challenges and difficulties arising from rapid economic and social change so that organisations and individuals have to be constantly open and receptive to the exchange of information and ideas with their peers to facilitate

community understanding and action. All contemporary media play an important role in this task..

Our study indicated that many organisations have indeed developed responsive cultures, whereby leaders and employees have become actively engaged in both short and long-term community programs or where organisations' vision and goals have helped promote social capital development. The Canadian credit unions reflected Ferragina's (2010) call to take income inequality into account as there was a deliberate and strategic approach to support engagement with disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups. The credit unions undertook research and worked with other organisations to ensure that they were actively engaged with their community so that their programs had an impact and made a difference to peoples' lives and livelihood and contributed to sustainability. The micro loans programs that were also observed in other Canadian programs (Chia and Peters, 2009) had a strong emphasis on sustainability but their details and benefits needed better communication and promotion. Loans were given to individuals and families to begin their businesses at a time when banks would not support them. Business leaders and mentors ensured that loan recipients were supported and their stories were reported in community radio, in regional newspapers and organisations' newsletters.

One of our key findings is the need for all community sectors to work together to promote local development, including the business sector, not-for-profit organisations, local universities and public relations and media professionals. If organisations focus on a culture of responsiveness then connectivity and strong relationships should be beneficial to all partners as long as they communicate, develop understanding and knowledge about outcomes and developments.

The study had a regional focus but the principles and the models reported here may well be viable for communities and organisations in urban environments. A critical point is the communities should consider investment in social capital in the same way as businesses regard economic capital as central to their survival, and embed social capital's development in their strategic plans emphasising participatory communication. Cunningham (2002) also suggests that organisations' focus on social capital gives them a competitive advantage in tough market environments. The position of the author is that social capital development is fundamental to organisations' philosophy and ethical response to their communities. The commitment of leaders and community champions that add value to society framed the discussion

and set the agenda for Canadian and South Australian communities. They made the headlines and they attracted funding because their programs championed sustainable communities.

The needs of organisations and communities of course vary. Coleman (1988) alerts us to varying social capital contexts where cultural differences and expectations often make networking, mutual understanding, and community engagement half-hearted. However, there are ways to deal with community apathy and diversity and we should emphasise the role of public relations and community liaison professionals in setting up relationships. They can, work with the media and actively engage communities face-to-face or through online forums to develop relationships and realise social capital. The Roxby Downs support group for young mothers was made possible because the public relations director and her team from the mining corporation liaised with the public and understood their needs.

The “three dimensions of social capital: structural, relational and communication” (Hazelton *et al.* p.94, cited in Duhé, 2007) are integral to the community credit that is established by organisations. As public relations takes a role in building and developing social capital the communication focus is one that Luoma-aho (2009, p.247) proposes, “is a necessary force not only for organizational legitimacy, but for the prosperity of a democratic society”. In the three regional communities most participants underlined the need to be inclusive so that a sense of community was part of a sense of democracy.

The evidence from the study reported here is that the internet and social media are playing a role as they are bringing many more people into the discussion and decision making about sustainability programs and what is important to organisations and communities. As Fleming and Thorson (2008, p.401) put it, “the internet makes it possible for access to information to be a bottom-up-globalization process in which communities and groups are formed online, without the dominance of any particular class of actors”. In Luoma-aho’s (2009) view, online media-social media are contributing to social capital and relationship development contesting much of Putnam’s argument about the decline of a sense of community. Sander and Putnam (2010) lament that “only the young” (p.13) are engaged and that the need for civic engagement continues for many others in the community. These scholars acknowledge that connecting with the community is possible but through face-to-face encounters where the real connection takes place. Contrasting this, in the three regional communities there was a deliberate attempt to encourage the use of social media to include youth as social

media is their forum and it is the way to engage them. At the same time Kane *et al.*'s (2009) suggestion that employees are part of online communities so that community engagement through social media is readily embraced by them, was evident in all three communities and especially so in Mt Gambier and Victoria, Canada. This study suggests that all forms of communication need to be utilised so that community newsletters and newspapers reach diverse constituents simultaneously with social media. This increases dialogue and understanding especially with those who have not participated in the past. Bringing new members to the community table is important as they may also contribute to more innovative and creative community programs important to sustainability supporting Tsai and Ghoshal's (1998) notion that innovativeness is critical to social capital development.

A local or regional emphasis was important to organisations and the media as all study participants indicated that most sustainable programs were a direct outcome of support at the local level. Fleming and Thorson (2008) found that local media news was important in building trust and relationships, in the same way that the Roxby Downs, Mt Gambier and Vancouver Island communities were informed, looked forward to their community newspapers and actively engaged with local radio and television. Public relations and community liaison managers actively worked with the media that at times focused on the sensational, but mostly reported what mattered and was important to communities. The three communities were aware of funding, grants and micro loan programs and organisations' in-kind support through media stories, organisations' websites and sharing of information on Facebook, YouTube and organisations' blogs.

5. LIMITATIONS

This Canadian - South Australian qualitative study uncovered some of the driving forces for social capital development but it is recognised that these reports were primarily by those who were active community members. Further, the role of social media in community engagement was not a focus of the study yet it became an important finding – a quantitative study would be useful to understand what social media are inclusive, who are using them and whether members of the online community consider that they are engaged community members.

6. CONCLUSION

The regional community study indicates that organisations need to be strategic and flexible for successful community engagement so that social capital can be realised. Communities also need grants and funding that underpin social capital initiatives. According to Easterling (2009) this also provides opportunity for innovation, creativity and support especially to the not-for-profit sector making it sustainable and giving it long term prospects. The study findings indicate that connectedness and strong partnerships are possible when funding and in-kind support facilitate social capital as organisations, together with community groups, assist the homeless and fund youth programs as they champion innovative community programs. Emphasis on sustainable practice, where organisations pay a key role in long-term community growth and development, is supported by communication that builds knowledge and understanding of programs, relationships and meaningful partnerships that grow community programs.

The regional study with its focus on communication and its role in connecting and cultivating social capital highlighted collaborative responses by organisations and communication professionals alongside leaders and community champions. Knowing and being informed, having an opportunity to dialogue and participate in community programs is important to employees and organisations, to the community and to the media. Social capital investment can be successful if (i) notions of trust and transparency are integral to all community communication, (ii) the expectations of partner organisations are clarified, (iii) program priorities are negotiated and understood, and where (iv) the marginalised are included as part of a focus on sustainable communities. One of the study participants comments that it is vital that *'each person has to connect to something in their community beyond themselves'*, and this article argues that organisations need to do likewise-connect to others beyond themselves. If organisations want to create a culture of responsiveness where their employees engage in community programs, build relationships, communicate with diverse community members, then organisations and the community will benefit. The real challenge is to understand that community engagement is societal engagement and that all aspects of social capital development relational, structural and communication enrich communities and reflect engaged organisations of value to directors, key players, employees and to community partners. That is social capital taking organisations beyond themselves and their brand.

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