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Yet another 'magic bullet': the case of social capital

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Abstract
The argument in this paper is that the present fashion for invoking 'social capital' in development thought is dangerous. As an analytical concept, social capital lacks clear definition and is used as a means of ignoring or eliding social and cultural factors. It is argued that the present popularity of the term derives from the growing hegemony of economists in development thought and practice and does little to further analytical rigour. Rather, analysis of social and cultural factors in development should be non-reductionist and recognise the complex nature of social and cultural factors.

Keywords Social capital, Sustainable livelihoods

Introduction

During the last decade, 'social capital' has become one of the most popular terms in the literature on development. There has been an increasing flow of academic or pseudo-academic papers discussing the concept, while development practitioners appear to be viewing it as some sort of 'magic bullet' that will somehow solve the problems of development. In the literature on fisheries development and coastal zone management, there are already signs that social capital is an increasingly popular concept and that, in due course, social capital will become as popular in these contexts as elsewhere. Yet, the rush to adopt 'social capital' as a means of understanding and transforming the lives of poor people has to be treated with some caution. The history of development is a history of failed orthodoxies – of a sudden rise to dominance and a slow decline into oblivion. Community development, integrated rural development, and even 'participation', are examples of this cycle. Social capital (and its close relation, sustainable livelihoods) are, it could be argued, doomed to share the same trajectory. So, rather than simply accept them, we should subject them to criticism in the hope that, through such an examination, we can improve understanding and produce better instruments for alleviating poverty.

This paper does not deal directly with aquatic situations or issues *per se*, but its arguments apply equally to aquatic contexts. In this way, it examines the ways in which the concept of social capital has risen to prominence during the last decade and how this concept has come to play a central role in thinking about poverty and development. On the one hand, this involves looking at the way it has been taken up by the World Bank and the role it plays in World Bank thinking today. On the other, it is a key component in concepts of sustainable livelihoods as used by organisations such as DFID, among others. In both contexts, it is frequently asserted that 'social capital' is a means by which the social can be brought into debates and strategies, which were previously the preserve of economics. However, there is an alternative argument, which sees the concept of social capital as part of a move by economics as a discipline to take over the rest of the social sciences. This paper argues that the concept of social capital is theoretically banal and confused. Furthermore, I shall argue that it falsely empiricises what are, at best, metaphors and leads to a misunderstanding of the nature of social and cultural life. Language – words – are never neutral but value-laden, and to use the term 'capital', even if it is modified by 'social', is to subscribe to a certain outlook on the world. If we are going to take social and cultural issues seriously, the way ahead is not through the sort of reductionism implied by 'social capital'. Rather, it is through accepting the complexity of social and cultural issues and the existence of alternative ways of viewing reality. Only if this sort of approach is adopted can those working in the field of aquatic resources hope to achieve their goals.

The rise and rise of social capital

Social capital has had a meteoric rise to fame throughout the social sciences*. Coming into the literature slightly later than its close relation, 'human capital', social capital is increasingly viewed as a means of understanding almost anything – from the economic success (or failure) of immigrants to the United States or Britain to differences in life expectancy or educational achievement in developing countries. In the world of development, Harriss and de Renzio claim that, since 1993, social capital has become one of the key terms in the development lexicon[2] (p. 920), while Fine[3] (p. 4) refers to its 'astonishing rise' since 1994 within and around the World Bank. By 1998, the World Bank was claiming that social capital was the 'missing link' in understanding economic development[4] and, at present, there is a large set of web pages on the World Bank site dedicated to social capital[†].

As far as the World Bank is concerned, social capital (according to their web site)

> refers to the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions. Increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together.

Given such a wide definition, it is not surprising that social capital is viewed by the World Bank as being relevant to almost all (if not all) aspects of its work. Thus we are told that

> Conventional prescriptions for enhancing the economic prospects of communities and nations include improving education and health facilities, constructing competent and accountable political institutions, and facilitating the emergence of free markets able to compete in the global economy. Social capital speaks to each of these aspects.

To the World Bank, social capital is a means to an end, the end being economic development[‡]. So, social capital has to be identified and used as a means to development; moreover, where it does not exist, it has to be created. Precisely how the World Bank version of social capital works out in practice is difficult to ascertain. The examples given in its web pages are little more than sketches. Charitably, one might argue that it is too early to expect anything more: after all, the adoption by the World Bank of social capital as the 'missing link' in development is relatively recent. However, as Fine[5] (p. 164 *passim*) points out, what is available on the web site is not impressive. Alternatively, as is argued below, perhaps the concept of social capital is so vague as to be meaningless. However, before leaving the World Bank, it is worth saying a little more about how it views social capital.

In the World Bank literature, there are effectively three types of social capital: 'bonding', 'bridging' and 'linking'. The former refers to 'horizontal associations', which hold groups together, e.g. kinship, language or ethnic identity. Yet, it is quite obvious that this can cause exclusion and, hence, there is a second type, which 'transcends various social divides', namely 'bridging social capital'. Lastly, the World Bank recognises that there are also divisions between the rich and the poor or the powerful and the weak, and this gives rise to the idea of 'linking social capital'. Further complications are at times brought in. For instance, Uphoff and Wijayaratna[6] introduce a distinction between 'structural social capital' and 'cognitive social capital' (see below). Finally, the World Bank recognises that not all social capital is 'good': it may involve the systematic exclusion of other groups (or it may lead to Mafia-like organisations), which is obviously a bad thing.

The World Bank is not alone in its interest in social capital. There are other institutions which use a sustainable livelihoods framework such as DFID – the Department for International Development.* Since the mid-1990s, the sustainable livelihoods approach has become a central component in DFID thinking about development, with social capital playing a key role in the conceptualisation of sustainable livelihoods.

According to DFID,

> A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and shocks and maintains or enhances its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base[7].

* See Baron *et al.*[1] for a collection of articles on the use of social capital in various contexts as well as a general overview of the history of this concept.
† This web page is at http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital, but see Fine's scathing comments[5] before taking it too seriously.
‡ More generally, one might note that health, education and accountable political institutions, which one might consider to be ends in themselves, are here reduced to means.

* Whilst the World Bank has its social capital web site, DFID supports a major set of web pages concerned with sustainable livelihoods hosted by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex. IDS was a major player in the elaboration of the sustainable livelihoods approach.

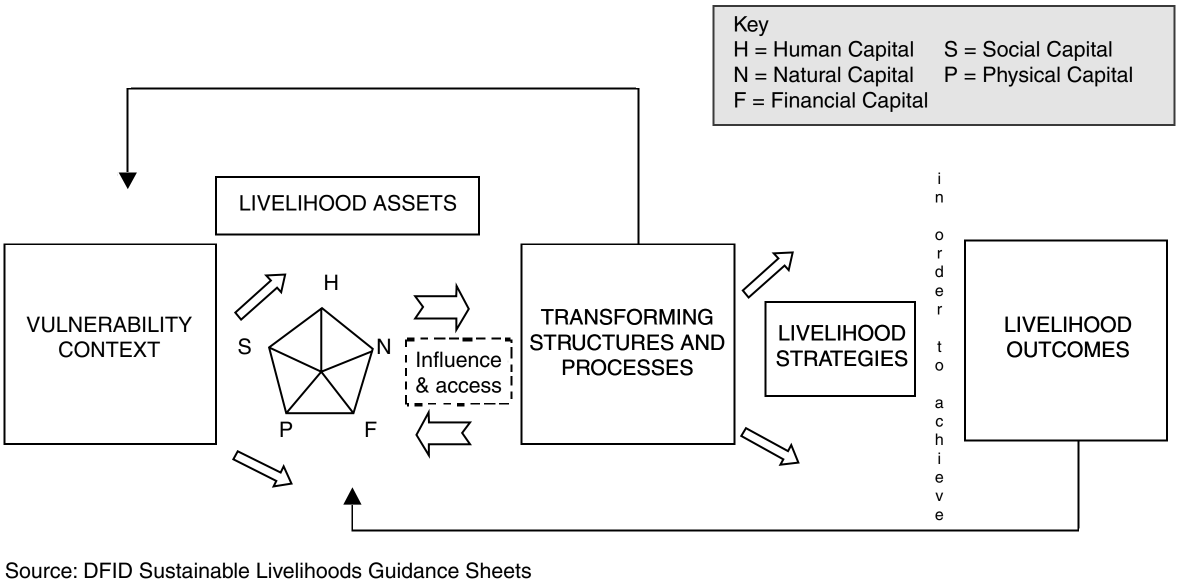

Fig. 1. The sustainable livelihoods framework

The sustainable livelihoods approach promises both a mode of analysis (how do households or communities or whatever earn a living; what are the sources of vulnerability; what is the context in which their actions take place) and a platform for intervention (how can vulnerability be reduced; how can livelihoods be improved and so on). The sustainable livelihoods approach is summed up in the oft-cited diagram given below (see Fig. 1). In the present context, what is significant is the 'asset pentagon' or the five capitals. These are seen as the assets which a household has at its disposal and which it uses within the wider context in which it exists. Three of them (financial capital, physical capital and, perhaps, natural capital) are relatively unproblematic, but the other two, human capital and social capital, are much more debatable. In the sustainable livelihoods framework, these five assets are seen as a key to an understanding of how a household makes a living.

Here, little will be said about the concept of human capital – 'the skills, knowledge, ability to labour and good health that together enable people to pursue different livelihood strategies'[8] (p. 2.3.1) – except to note the manner in which the putative subject of development is reduced to a means by which development is achieved. Turning to social capital, this is defined by DFID as 'the social resources upon which people draw in pursuit of their livelihood objectives'[8] (p. 2.3.2). Perhaps more subtly than the World Bank, DFID admits that what social capital actually means is debated but it sees three ways in which the social resources that make up social capital are developed: through networks and connectedness, through membership of groups and through relationships of trust, reciprocity and exchange.

Within the literature generated by DFID and its satellites, there are relatively few sources that deal in any significant detail with social capital *per se*. Instead, what exists in some profusion is a mass of literature and web-based resources concerned with sustainable livelihoods in general and the role social capital plays in this characterisation of society. Yet, clearly, social capital is a key component in sustainable livelihoods analysis and practices. Thus any criticism of social capital is likely to undermine sustainable livelihoods approaches.

Social capital in practice

Those who have written about the history of social capital mention three main authors: Bourdieu, Putnam and Coleman, with a fourth, Becker, sitting off stage but having a major intellectual influence. The problem is that these various writers used the term social capital in various different ways, and these differences partly underlie the conceptual confusions in the way the concept is used today.*

It is not clear who first used the term 'social capital': a number of authors are mentioned in the literature. The first to have a major influence on later thought is Bourdieu[10–12]. For Bourdieu, social capital is a matter of social linkages – the ways in which people can use social relations and social networks. However, Bourdieu thinks of what he calls social capital less as capital in the sense that economists use it and more as a matter of power. Furthermore, social capital is only one of a series of capitals (economic, cultural

* This section is based on Fine[5], Harriss and de Renzio[2] and Schuller *et al.*[9]. I have found Fine's work particularly useful.

and symbolic) and, as Fine[5] (p. 62) points out, these various forms of capital are not reducible to one another. In other words, Bourdieu's use of the term 'capital' is in many ways metaphorical.

Even though Bourdieu was probably the first major writer who used the term, two later authors have been much more influential. The first of these was Coleman[13,14]. For Coleman, social capital is a matter of social relations. Social capital is something which accrues to individuals and derives from (or adheres to) individuals' relations with other individuals. In Coleman's model of the world, society thus consists of individuals exercising 'rational choice'. And here he links up with Becker and his approach to social life, which again views society as consisting of nothing more than the outcomes of individual choice. In Coleman's approach to social capital, there is no idea of metaphor or of the cultural complexities of situations which one finds in Bourdieu's work. Rather, social capital becomes a 'thing' and is as real as physical or financial capital.

The final ancestor of social capital is, of course, Robert Putnam in his work on, first, Italy and then the USA. Putnam's approach to social capital is quite different in that, rather than having a focus on individuals, Putnam sees social capital to be concerned with associations, societies and voluntary organisations[15,16]. The more there are, the more social capital there is, because they encourage co-operation, trust, reciprocity and civil well being. Thus Putnam argues that northern Italy developed and southern Italy stagnated because the latter had less social capital. Similarly, the problem faced by the contemporary USA is a decline in associational life.*

These then are, in summary, the bases of what has become the social capital industry. What is important is that, from the beginning, the concept of social capital has been characterised by two features: first, disagreement as to what it might be on a conceptual level and, secondly, what it might be on an empirical level.

Taking the conceptual level first, what is striking in the literature on social capital is the vast number of different definitions of the term. Hulme[18] (p. 5) lists six alternative definitions, but the list could be lengthened almost indefinitely. For some, it is to do with social networks. For others such as Fukuyama[19], it is simply a matter of trust. Whilst some see social capital as an asset for individuals, others view it as something that accrues to society. For still others, it appears to be almost anything social or cultural. The result is that, to quote Fine[5] (p. 190) again, social capital 'becomes a sack of analytical potatoes'. The concept is simply chaotic.

* This latter argument is presented in the infamous 'Bowling alone' paper, which sees the decline of bowling clubs as symptomatic of a decline in social capital[17].

Indeed, what happens with social capital in practice is that, far from being a means of analysing the social, it becomes a means of avoiding analysis. Since it can be (and often is) used as a portmanteau term, it is a means of avoiding any rigorous analysis of what is actually going on. Part of this, as many critics have pointed out, is a tendency to ignore political factors or questions relating to power. Thus, relations between poor farmers and political patrons can be presented as 'social capital' rather than as relations of exploitation and dependency. At the same time, the relations between poor farmers, e.g. in resisting their patrons, can also be put in the same box marked 'social capital'*.

To illustrate these points, let us look at two examples of the use of social capital, both from Sri Lanka. Both are, in many senses, interesting and valuable contributions, but in both cases, one wonders why the authors felt constrained to use the concept of social capital.

The first of these is the paper by Goodhand *et al.*[22] on social capital and the political capital of violence. This paper starts off with a discussion of social capital and offers a useful critique of the concept (pp. 391–2). However, having done that, it then attempts to use the concept to understand the Sri Lankan conflict: 'Is social capital a concept that can contribute to the fine-grained, empirical analyses that are needed to understand specific conflicts?' (pp. 392–3). There follows an interesting discussion about a series of case studies of villages affected by violence before the authors turn to 'analyse the links between violent conflict, political economy and social capital' (p. 401).

The authors argue that there are a number of ways in which social capital has been affected by the ongoing conflict. The first is that there 'appears to have been deepening and strengthening of bonding social capital' (p. 401) – in other words, caste and religious networks. What exactly this involves is not made clear; for instance, in what sense is a 'reassertion of religious ties' a form of 'social capital'? However, at the same time, the authors also argue that new forms of social capital are created. Thus what they call 'conflict entrepreneurs' have attempted to create new forms of social capital which stress, for instance, the difference and separation between Sinhala and Tamil people. This involves the destruction of 'bridging' social capital and the creation of 'bonding social capital' (which 'may represent a powerful social glue') (p. 402). Furthermore, 'social capital depletion appeared to be greatest where communities were subjected to competing regimes of control and terror' (p. 402).

* This has led to a number of suggestions that 'political capital' be added to the list of livelihood assets. See e.g. Baumann and Sinha[20]. But this could easily lead to a plethora of assets. So, Bebbington[21] verges on suggesting 'cultural capital' and others might well suggest the possibility of 'spiritual capital'.

Now, the story told by Goodhand *et al*. is interesting and significant, but I fail to see what 'social capital' adds to the analysis and I would suggest that, rather than assist analysis, it impedes it. What it does is to put under the same label a host of different phenomena: caste, religion and ethnicity, to mention but three. Social capital is not an analytical tool but a descriptive term. Rather than look at the various forms of identity and power that are manifest and the processes that are taking place, we are left with a series of catch-all labels. Thus, the distinction they use between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital is simplistic in the extreme since what is bonding for some is bridging for others. LTTE activists would presumably see what they are doing as increasing the 'bridging' social capital between various sorts of Tamils, while Sinhala observers would interpret the same activities as dangerously exclusive and 'bonding'. Similarly, the complexities of identity and the multiple identities of various actors (people are not just Tamils or Sinhala: they are also male or female, old or young and rich and poor) are all ignored in an analytical framework which consists of 'bridging' and 'bonding' as its key terms.

In the end, social capital tells us little if anything about the phenomena Goodhand *et al*. are discussing that could not be perfectly well told using other more subtle and analytically useful tools. Indeed, it would seem to me that it effectively hides the major issues that have to be addressed and makes things seem so simple: all that is needed is more 'bridging social capital'. Would that that were true.

Turning to the second example, again an important and significant paper, once again we can see how sophistication is systematically avoided through the use of social capital. This is Uphoff and Wijayaratna's discussion of social capital in the Gal Oya irrigation scheme[6].

Uphoff and Wijayaratna are interested in the role of farmer organisations in irrigation management. They follow through the experience of an irrigation scheme and the way in which effective farmer organisations have successfully managed this irrigation scheme, an achievement that can be measured in terms of productivity. It is an impressive tale that, when taken at face value, is an impressive example of how effective water user organisations can be.

The problem is that, in this paper, the success story of Gal Oya is dressed up in terms of social capital and the issue is whether this adds anything to their argument. They begin their paper with a discussion that seeks to understand 'social capital as an asset'; however, they strangely fail to give definition of what they mean by social capital. Instead, they make a distinction between 'structural social capital' and 'cognitive social capital' (p. 1876). The former includes '*roles*, *rules*, *procedures* and *precedents* as well as *social networks* that establish on-going patterns of social interaction', while the latter includes '*norms*, *values*, *attitudes* and *beliefs* that predispose people to cooperate' (p. 1876). The paper then moves on to discuss and analyse the experience of the project, with hardly a mention of social capital (of either sort) until the last section. Here, they argue that much of the success of the scheme can be put down to both forms of social capital, which, although 'produced by the farmers themselves and maintained by them', had been encouraged by project staff (p. 1885). They also stress the importance of what they call 'cognitive social capital', which they imply is often ignored. Finally, they argue that, 'All cultures have the basic elements of social capital within them.' What is needed to make these elements manifest is 'appropriate structural forms of social capital'. 'To be able to capitalize on cognitive social capital, it is essential to construct or install appropriate structural form.'

Taking their analysis of the Gal Oya scheme first, it is not clear what the introduction of social capital has to offer. In effect, their argument is that water user associations are good for productivity – but why this should be called social capital is not clear. Furthermore, it shifts the focus of analysis in a rather worrying way. Since social capital is such an all-embracing term, we tend to forget that what all the authors are really talking about is water user organisations. Hence, nothing is mentioned about, for instance, how gender relations have been affected by the project, not about how disparities between the population and resources are dealt with. These (and there are many others) are issues that would remain on the agenda if we were truly dealing with the social and not with social capital defined in the narrow way employed by Uphoff and Wijayaratna.

However, more generally, to claim that values and beliefs are 'capital' is surely to carry the metaphor too far. Where the authors discuss this matter (labelled 'cognitive social capital'), the discussion is distressingly naive. They appear to consist of 'norms of equity, productivity and participation' (p. 1885). It is difficult to argue against such a vague claim, but it wilfully ignores the vast literature on rural Sri Lanka in general and those communities dependent on irrigation agriculture in particular, which paints a very different picture of rural society. If one of the characteristics of capital as far as economists are concerned is that one can measure it, beliefs or values are surely beyond the pale except at the most banal level. Such analyses wilfully ignore the vast literature on the nature of culture and the ways in which culture (which could equally well be defined as 'norms, values, attitudes and beliefs') is created.

What we end up with is that social capital is anything one wants it to be: social relations, social groups, beliefs, values or traditions. As Harriss and de Renzio[2] (quoting Narayan and Pritchett[23]) note, 'Social capital, whilst not all things to all people, is many things to many people' (p. 921). Attempts to split it up into, for instance, 'cognitive' and 'structural' social capital, are little more than exercises in butterfly collecting.

Why social capital?

If social capital is really as confused a concept as I have made it out to be and if it is indeed 'a sack of analytical potatoes', then why has it become so popular? Why do so many articles and reports begin with what amount to devastating critiques of the concept, yet end up by employing it? There are, I think, a number of reasons, but perhaps the best place to start is by returning for a moment to Uphoff and Wijayaratna's discussion of Gal Oya.

Towards the end of their paper, Uphoff and Wijayaratna quote some figures on the overall rate of return in the Gal Oya project. These data show, they claim, that about 50% of the returns were attributable to farmer organisations but expenditure on these organisations was only between 5 and 10% of project expenditure. In other words, they imply that investment in 'social capital' leads to identifiable and quantifiable results.

Attempts to quantify social capital run through the literature, perhaps the most famous being Narayan and Pritchett's study of Tanzania[23]. More recently, the World Bank has published a volume dedicated to the empirical assessment of social capital[24]. The result is a series of papers that purport to examine the significance of social capital in development. Yet, the result is somewhat disappointing. One case study covered 850 traders in Madagascar and, after a series of tables and analyses, ends up with the unremarkable conclusion that,

> traders with better relationships with other traders, suppliers and customers earn higher margins ... [T]hree dimensions of social capital should be distinguished: relationships with other traders ... which help firms economise on transaction costs; relationships with individuals who can help in time of financial difficulties, which insure traders against liquidity risk; and family relationships which are found to reduce efficiency, possibly because of measurement error [*sic*][25] (p. 151–2).

Another case study, this time on the relationship between ethnicity and violence, is equally unimpressive ignoring as it does the vast literature on ethnicity and how violence breeds ethnicity as much as the other way around[26].

More generally, such exercises have been widely criticised (see e.g. Fine and Green[5], pp. 160–3). As Durlauf writes,

> the empirical social capital literature seems to be particularly plagued by vague definitions of concepts, poorly measured data, absence of appropriate exchangeability conditions, and lack of information necessary to make identification claims plausible. These problems are especially important for social capital contexts as social capital arguments depend on underlying psychological and sociological relations which are difficult to quantify, let alone measure[27] (p. 21).

Yet, the urge to quantification is, I think, a clue to the reasons why social capital has become so popular among development agencies, particularly the World Bank. First, it is related to what Harriss[28], following Ferguson[29], has referred to as a 'depoliticisation' of development and, secondly, it is related to the hegemonic position of economics as a discipline within organisations such as the World Bank.

Harriss, faced with the problem of why social capital has become so popular over the last few years, argues that the idea of social capital has 'mystified rather than clarified'[28] (p. 95). However, he claims, it does this to good effect because what the concept of social capital does is to hide and disguise problems of class and power and their role in the reproduction of poverty and marginalisation. By turning social relationships into 'capital', social capital is a means by which development can be presented as a technical issue amenable to the technical apparatus of economics. Given that economics as a technique is based on a set of empiricist assumptions and methods that more or less demand quantification, the sort of exercises presented in Grootaert and van Basteler's volume are inevitable. However, as Harriss persuasively argues, social capital is only the latest in a series of 'depoliticising' concepts that hide the central issues in development.

Perhaps the most eloquent (and most polemical) statement of the relationship between economics and social capital is Ben Fine's. He argues that the growth in popularity of social capital has to be seen in terms of the colonisation of the social sciences by economics[3,5,30*]. Fine traces this process back to the work of Becker and his famous (or infamous) attempts to understand social phenomena (e.g. the family, religious affiliation and divorce) in terms of methodological individualism and rational choice theory[32]. Coleman, in effect, takes up a similar position and, through his use of social capital, opens the way for an increasingly ambitious attempt to view the social and the cultural through the tools developed by formal economic analysis.

* For a fascinating discussion of the rise of economists in the latter half of the twentieth century, see Markoff and Montecinos[30].

Thus what the concept of social capital offers is a means by which economists can extend their operations beyond the sphere traditionally seen as their own. They can, in effect, colonise areas of understanding that have previously been seen as the preserve of other social scientists: political scientists, sociologists or whatever. What were previously treated as externalities and exogenous to economic understanding have now become part and parcel of economists' understanding. Of course, such a mode of understanding is extremely dangerous. As Carrier and Miller[33] have argued, it involves 'economic virtualism': the treatment of models of the world (such as the neo-classical model of economics) as if they were identical with the worlds inhabited by people*.

It is within this context that efforts to quantify social capital have to be seen. One of the criticisms of the activities of other social scientists by economists is that the former are unable to show causation in the same way as the rigorous statistical models of the economists. Through social capital and through quantification, economists are, in effect, able to make claims to objectivity and logical rigour that an anthropologist, for instance, could not make.

However, of course, at the same time, it could be argued that the rise of social capital is symptomatic of an increasing awareness of the importance of the social in development. Social capital thus becomes not a form of economic imperialism but a means by which the work of economists (and by extension, the work of organisations such as the World Bank and DFID) become more amenable to inputs from other social scientists.

In this context, one of the more fascinating documents is a paper by Edwards, which is unfortunately not published but available on the World Bank web site[34]. As the title of the paper indicates, he distinguishes between 'enthusiasts', 'tacticians' and 'sceptics'. To the first group, social capital is the 'missing ingredient' that integrates 'non-market rationality into economic models'. In general, claims Edwards, the enthusiasts are economists. Not surprising. Tacticians, on the other hand, are those who see social capital as a means to an end: 'The really interesting stuff lies in the interactions between social, economic and political processes, not in notions of social capital divorced from its wider context'. For them, the growing interest in social capital is a means of getting the non-economic on the development agenda. Finally, there are the sceptics who reject the whole idea of social capital as a dangerous blind alley.

* It is also worth noting that it can be argued that economic imperialism is in part an intellectual process building upon increased interest in transaction costs which makes what were previously seen as exogenous sources of market imperfections into endogenous economic forms[3,5].

I suspect that many analysts and observers who use the term 'social capital' would see themselves as fitting into Edwards' second category. They would argue that their use of the term is a means to an end; they would argue that, if this is the language that institutions such as the World Bank or DFID wish to use, then accommodations have to be made. This would in part explain the tendency for critiques of the concept of social development to be followed by its use. The paper by Goodhand *et al.* discussed earlier is an example of this – even to the extent that they end up seeing themselves as 'sceptical tacticians' and seeing social capital as a means by which the 'overemphasis . . . on the economic functions of violence at the expense of social analysis' can be counterbalanced'[22] (p. 405).

However, such a view could well be overoptimistic. Simply by adopting a particular sort of language, one buys into a way of conceptualising the world. Words are not neutral but carry symbolic loads and 'capital' is a word with a very heavy set of baggage. Furthermore, words like social capital come as part of a particular way of seeing social phenomena. Rather than see behaviour as having a complex sets of meanings, an approach based on social capital reduces all meaning to self-interest and all forms of rationality to economic rationality. Without such a reductionist framework, the use of the term social capital becomes meaningless. And finally, there is no evidence as yet that analyses which employ social capital recognise the complexities of social life. All the evidence points the other way: that complexity is reduced to banal simplicity. To accept social capital is to accept the Trojan horse of impoverished analysis and a one-dimensional view of humanity.

Conclusion: what is to be done?

So far, the penetration of social capital into work on artisanal fishing, aquaculture and coastal zone management has been limited[35–38]. Much of it is not impressive analytically and produces conclusions such as, 'social capital is high'. On the other hand, some of the work is rather impressive[35]. Much more common has been studies that use a sustainable livelihoods approach, an approach which has become institutionalised in such forms as the West African Sustainable Livelihoods Fisheries Programme.

Yet, if the arguments put forward in this paper (and by other writers such as Fine and Harriss) are correct, then it is clear that extreme care must be taken over the wholesale importing of concepts such as social capital and sustainable livelihoods into the fields of aquaculture, coastal zone management and artisanal fishing. Social capital is very seductive, an 'easy' concept which can be fitted into an economistic discourse and which can be used to present a semblance of objective analysis.* What social capital (and by extension, sustainable livelihoods) does is to avoid any close analysis of the complexities of the social and cultural. Social capital in effect denies all value. It denies cultural difference. It denies the importance of gender relations, of power relations, of kinship relations, religion and culture because it reduces them all to one level: social capital. It reduces the irreducible and, in effect, denies humanity.

Over recent years, there has been a move away from narrow definitions of development that see it only in economic terms – or more narrowly, in narrow terms of output. Instead, we are exhorted to look at development as a holistic process – as a process that 'values' cultural diversity, indigenous societies and so on. However, if such factors are to be taken into account, they must not and cannot be lumped together as 'social capital'. Rather, they must be disentangled, deconstructed, teased apart and subject to much more analytical interest than 'social capital' allows. Only then will social and cultural (not to mention political) factors be taken into account fully.

* Here, it is worth noting the work of Gudeman[39–41], who points out the culturally constructed nature of economics and how part of its claim – that it is 'universally true' – leads to misrepresentations of the culturally and socially diverse.

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