

BUILDING SOCIAL CAPITAL THROUGH DEVOLVED DECISION MAKING: THE STRONGER COMMUNITIES ACTION FUND

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Abstract

This paper examines the impact on community levels of social capital of an initiative by the Department of Child Youth and Family Services, the Stronger Communities Action Fund. The initiative has the goals of testing models of devolved decision making, encouraging communities to identify their social service needs, supporting innovative responses and increasing the stock of social capital. The high-level objective of the project is to improve outcomes for children, young people and families in disadvantaged communities. The research was based on Bullen and Onyx's (1998) work on the empirical measurement of social capital in communities. It was also informed by other social capital theorists and recent research on the measurement of social capital. The initiative appears to have had a positive effect on social capital. Indicators include increased participation, the creation of new networks and associations, and greater proactivity. The high-level objective of child and family wellbeing has provided some glue to hold the project together. The resulting growth in social capital needs to be matched by investment in economic, environmental and human capital to ensure positive future outcomes for the communities involved.

INTRODUCTION

Despite considerable investment by government in the design and delivery of social programmes over the past 20 years, some communities in New Zealand are beset by seemingly intractable social problems such as long-term unemployment, family violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and youth crime. The impact of the wide-ranging economic and state sector reforms of the 1980s and 1990s, and the changing nature of the global economy, left many New Zealanders in socially and economically disadvantaged

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circumstances. The accompanying political and social climate often did little to acknowledge these external forces and their impact on families and communities.

More recently, attention has been focused on taking a community-driven approach to assessing local social service needs and designing locally responsive solutions. This approach is premised on the assumption that it will lead to greater community investment in, and ownership of, both the problems and the responses to them. It is also assumed that such models will contribute positively to levels of social capital within the communities concerned. Social capital theory posits that the accumulated networks of goodwill, trust, shared values and reciprocity that are generated through voluntary interactions and associations in communities lead to an increased level of trust and collaboration, which continues to build on itself. The outcome of this process is social capital. Communities with strong stocks of social capital are expected to engender functional families and support social cohesion (Robinson 1997).

This paper assesses the impact of the Stronger Communities Action Fund (SCAF), a pilot of a community-government partnership to allocate funding for social services. The Department of Child, Youth and Family Services initiated the SCAF project in seven communities in 2001. Its goals are to:

- test models of devolved decision making across a range of communities
- encourage communities to identify their own social service needs
- support the development and funding of innovative, community-based responses to local needs
- develop capacity in the communities involved
- contribute to increasing the stock of social capital in those same communities.

The research used a single case study to evaluate the impact of the needs assessment and decision-making process on a small rural community in the central North Island of New Zealand. The objective of the research was to determine the impact on social capital levels of devolving funding for social services to local decision-making structures in the community. Particular attention was paid to whether the needs assessment and decision-making process, in and of itself, rather than the projects that were funded, has had a positive effect on the development of social capital.

ESTABLISHING THE STRONGER COMMUNITIES ACTION FUND

In early 2001 a funding pool of \$1.6 million was established in Child Youth and Family for what were referred to as “devolved funding pilots”. The development of policy advice on the implementation of such a devolved fund proposed that:

... government identify communities, either geographically based, kin based or ethnically based, that are experiencing social and material disadvantage. These communities are likely to benefit significantly from both the availability of funding, and from the social cohesion arising from participation in the decision making process. (Department of Child, Youth and Family Services 2000b)

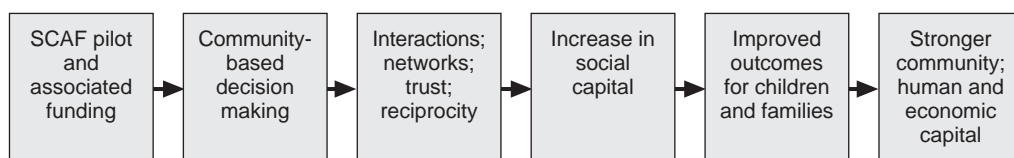
The Child, Youth and Family report referenced the *Report of the Policy Action Team on Community Self-Help* from the United Kingdom (Home Office Active Community Unit 1999). This British report suggested that if a community fund was available, over which local residents had decision-making responsibility:

This would represent a major incentive for local people to get involved, a way of binding people together in joint decision making and ... ensuring that funds have an impact at the most local level.

THE PROGRAMME MODEL

The intervention logic that underpins the Stronger Communities Action Fund draws on social capital theory and on research that links improved outcomes for children and families to an increase in social capital in communities. The SCAF programme design is summarised below:

Figure 1 SCAF Intervention Logic



The model was conceived as a three-way partnership between the fund-holding organisation, the “community” and Child, Youth and Family. The role of the fundholder was to act as a banker, to release funding on the direction of the community decision-making body; and to ensure that appropriate accountability was maintained. The role of the community was to develop a representative decision-making process, to assess local needs and priorities, and to make decisions on the allocation of the fund. The role of Child, Youth and Family was to provide funding, be available for support, advice and information sharing (if needed), and to evaluate the impact of the fund across the three-year implementation period.

SOCIAL CAPITAL THEORY

Alongside political, financial and human capital, social capital has been proposed as equally important in terms of society and its general wellbeing. According to Wilson (1997:745) the social capital literature (for example, research by Putnam (1993a, 1993b) and Fukuyama (1995)) puts forward that “the lack of, or decline in, social capital lies behind the psychological, spiritual and economic malaise in communities throughout the world”. Social capital has been described as “not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together” (World Bank Group 1999).

The term “social capital” is used to refer to the outcomes from the network of relationships between people in a community that help that community to operate effectively (Robinson 1997). These relationships are often centred on voluntary associations such as community groups, sports clubs and work-based associations, and are based on trust and reciprocity between the individuals concerned. A point noted in the social capital literature is that:

Social capital develops from the core building blocks of the personal capacity for trust, tolerance, value of life, and proactivity. Connections are formed, first within the family and neighbourhood, and later within wider communities. (Bullen and Onyx 1998)

Social capital theorists describe a spiral upwards and downwards for the generation and degeneration respectively of social capital. For the upward spiral to operate, Coleman (1994) asserts that a threshold needs to be reached for the generation of social capital to be self-sustaining. Beyond this threshold, voluntary and spontaneous social organisation occurs. When stocks of social capital are below the threshold, the substitution of formal organisation is required to provide a kick-start to this process.

SCAF is a policy instrument that is intended to act as such a kick start in communities that have diminished levels of social capital, but which have the potential to reverse into an upward spiral should the appropriate environment be created.

THE LINK BETWEEN SOCIAL CAPITAL AND CHILD AND FAMILY WELLBEING

The ability of social capital to contribute to positive outcomes for children and families has been researched in a number of settings, and is supported by sufficient evidence to include it as an outcome in the SCAF intervention logic. The creation of social capital is not necessarily an end in itself, but rather a means to an end – in this case improved child and family wellbeing.

Australian research undertaken in the mid-1990s found high levels of variability in the rates of child maltreatment in areas of similar socio-economic deprivation (Vinson and Baldry 1999). Links between child abuse rates and socio-economic disadvantage are widely accepted, to the extent that a variation in the child abuse rate would be expected to be accompanied by a variation in deprivation levels. However, the key difference between the localities studied appeared to be the extent of social networks and trust between residents. The areas with high rates of child abuse were characterised as low trust, poorly connected neighbourhoods. Indicators such as the value residents placed on friendships within the neighbourhood, the sense of belonging, and the perception of trust and safety were significantly lower in the area where abuse rates were at their highest. These indicators are key signifiers of levels of social capital (Bullen and Onyx 1998).

Earlier research by Garbarino and Sherman (1980) also showed that child development outcomes were affected by factors outside the immediate family, and that socio-economic indicators were not necessarily directly related to levels of child abuse. Again, residents of neighbourhoods with high levels of child abuse reported poor trust between neighbours, lack of community networks and lack of attachment to the community. Residents in such neighbourhoods often sought to exit if they had the capacity to do so, further reducing the level of community resources and pro-social skills. This created the cycle of diminishing social capital stocks and increasingly poor child development outcomes.

It is apparent then that initiatives such as SCAF are responding to concerns about child and family wellbeing, using an indirect but evidence-based approach. The impact of the project on child and family wellbeing is an important outcome for the Government and Child, Youth and Family to assess in determining the effectiveness of such programmes in the long term.

ISSUES FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

The measurement of social capital has been the subject of significant research in recent years and a number of frameworks have been developed internationally (Bullen and Onyx 1998, Krishna and Schrader 1999, Spellerberg 2001). According to Stone (2001) the conceptualisation of social capital has not been matched by the development of tools to measure it in an empirical way. She claims that there has been little connection made between how commonly used measures of social capital link to its theoretical definition, leading to the use of questionable indicators and inconsistent results. Specific issues she raises are:

- the use of secondary analysis, which uses data collected for other purposes to attempt to measure social capital
- the use of single indicators of social capital, which is essentially a multi-dimensional concept

- confusion between the outcomes of social capital and its actual components, which leads to reliance on outcome indicators to imply the presence (or absence) of social capital
- the resulting tautological problem, which assumes social capital to be present whenever an outcome of social capital is manifested.

Secondary analysis has frequently been used to indicate levels of social capital, and often consists of ad hoc collections of data made up of varying measures and indicators. Stone believes that this can contribute to confusion between social capital theory and its measurement, and that to measure social capital effectively it is important to first have a clear understanding of the concept of social capital, and then to develop measures that link directly to its core elements.

Given that social capital is a multi-dimensional concept that includes notions of social networks, and norms of trust and reciprocity, it is important when measuring social capital to examine each of these components, as well as the interaction between them. Some studies have, however, used single-item measures to assess levels of social capital, such as a single measure of trust drawn from a survey of personal values. Stone concludes that it is possible to measure social capital empirically with validity and reliability. She claims that a framework for measuring social capital needs to be cognisant of the multi-dimensional nature of the concept, measure each dimension independently and in relation to each other dimension, and make a clear distinction between social capital and its outcomes.

Models of Measurement

The World Bank has been at the forefront of investigating the use of social capital measurement tools. As part of the World Bank's Social Capital Initiative, Krishna and Schrader (1999) developed the Social Capital Assessment Tool, which examined a number of assumptions made by theorists in the field. In particular, they explore notions of the nature of networks and norms that contribute to social capital; for example, whether it matters if associations are horizontal or vertical, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous networks contribute more to social capital, and whether the mere existence of a network association necessarily raises the level of social capital.

Assessing the quality of associations is also important when examining the networks in a given community. Some networks are more likely to diminish social capital than enhance it, such as anti-social or hate-based organisations like criminal gangs or militia-style groups. Krishna and Schrader point out that unless the activities, purpose and values of a group are known, it is not possible to know whether a group adds to or diminishes the stock of social capital. They conclude that when measuring social

capital in any given setting, the social and cultural context must be considered in order to ensure the findings are relevant and valid.

A Local Framework

More recently, Statistics New Zealand has proposed the development of a framework specifically for use in New Zealand. The research paper outlining the proposed framework argues that the incorporation of Māori concepts such as tika (fairness), pono (truth), manaaki (kindness) and tautoko (support) is essential for the nature of social capital to be fully understood in New Zealand (Spellerberg 2001). It also claims that a Western world view informs most social capital theorists (Bourdieu, Putnam, Coleman, Fukuyama). That perspective sees social capital as being primarily created in relationships outside the family, and is less relevant to Māori, for whom the delineation between whānau (extended family), hapū (sub-tribe) and iwi (tribe) is seamless.

Measuring Social Capital Empirically

Bullen and Onyx undertook research in New South Wales beginning in 1995 that attempted to determine whether social capital could be measured empirically, and to develop practical and valid ways of doing so. This research is one of the few studies that has used primary data collection to measure social capital. Key findings were that:

- social capital is an empirical construct
- it is possible to measure social capital in local communities
- there is a generic social capital factor that can be measured
- there are eight distinct elements that appear to define social capital.

The eight elements they identified are participation in the local community, proactivity in a social context, feelings of trust and safety, neighbourhood connections, connections to family and friends, tolerance of diversity, value of life, and work connections. These findings underpinned the development of the interview schedule that was used in this research. Evidence was also gathered through document review, direct observation and semi-structured interviews with community members involved in the pilot, and with Child, Youth and Family staff overseeing its implementation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The initial research question posed was whether the SCAF project had the ability to increase levels of social capital within a given community. The hypothesis postulated was that enabling a small, disadvantaged but functional community to undertake assessment of its own social needs, and to develop and implement a decision-making process for the funding of local initiatives to meet their social needs, will contribute positively to the level of social cohesion and social capital evidenced within that community.

The collection of data to inform the research involved a variety of methods, and different perspectives were sought across the range of participants. Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis, involving analysis of the frequency and intensity of specific themes.

A range of data collection methods was used in the research: document review, direct observation and semi-structured interviews. Documents reviewed were drawn from two key sources: Child, Youth and Family policy advice documents and publications, and records of SCAF steering group and management committee meetings. Direct observation² involved:

- attendance at SCAF steering committee and community meetings by the researcher
- attendance at the launch of SCAF at the local marae, and involvement in subsequent discussions in the wharehenui
- participation in design and planning meetings within Child, Youth and Family during the SCAF development and implementation process.

Fifteen community interviews were undertaken during October and November of 2001, eight with Pākehā subjects and seven with Māori. Interviewees were selected to represent a range of perspectives and stakeholders, including the SCAF steering group and management committees, local community agencies, Child, Youth and Family, the local district council and individual community members.

IMPACT OF SCAF ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

Overall, the evidence gathered in this research project indicates that the SCAF project is having some positive impact on levels of social capital. The impact varied across the eight elements of social capital defined by Bullen and Onyx. The pre-existing level of social capital was rated differently by different people – both community members and outside observers. Assessments of community safety and tolerance of diversity were especially wide ranging. The findings about participants' views on the extent to which the elements were present before the SCAF project, and whether they have been affected by its implementation, are summarised in the sections that follow.

Tolerance of Diversity

Views on the level of tolerance for diversity were mixed. Some people saw the town as a fairly closed community, with little tolerance or welcome for outsiders and a lack of

² These observations took place between October 2000 and November 2001 and involved the researcher spending approximately six days in the community, observing and participating in community processes.

experience of the wider world, while others saw it as friendly and welcoming, and perceived the different sub-groups in the community as working and relating well to each other. As in many small rural towns, diversity is somewhat limited, with no great extremes of wealth and poverty, fairly proscribed cultural and recreational pursuits, and generally mainstream religious affiliations.

Tolerance of diversity was affected during the implementation of SCAF in that there were considerable challenges to the community's ability to accommodate different points of view. This led to fairly high levels of conflict at some meetings, as people struggled both to convey their own views and to understand those of others. Most interviewees believed, however, that SCAF had the effect of increasing the level of participation in the community and broadening community networks, especially among people who previously had not been involved in local initiatives or organisations.

Participation

The element of social capital that appears to have experienced the most positive impact is participation by a wide cross-section of the community in the decision-making process. Community networks broadened and people became involved in the project who had not previously taken such roles. Community meetings to discuss the project and elect the committee were very well attended, and interest was generated in the project across the wider district. One community member said:

"A year ago you wouldn't have gotten these people in the same room together. If this fund achieves nothing else, that is still a good thing to have happened."

Most of the Māori respondents placed a very high priority on participation by Māori:

"The only way to solve the problem is for us to participate in the problems, see what they are and, if you can change them in some little way, they've got something they can do to help the community."

The same person said that participation by young people was vital to the project's success, and allowing young people to make decisions on it would build their mana and encourage them to become positive role models for other young people. He felt this would have had a very positive impact on him as a young person.

Trust

The social capital literature generally identifies three types of trust.

- Trust of familiars exists within established relationships and social networks.

- Generalised trust is extended to strangers in the expectation that shared norms of behaviour exist.
- Civic trust refers to formal institutions, including fairness of rules, procedures and resource allocation (Stone and Hughes 2000).

Low levels of civic trust appeared to be related (within the admittedly small sample) to individuals' low socio-economic status and difficult life experience. The individuals who expressed strong and generalised distrust of institutions also recounted experiences of disadvantage at the hands of such authorities, such as being a ward of the state, or becoming unemployed as a result of state restructuring. Comments included:

"What they're doing is trying to manipulate everything."

"They want control."

"They have a hidden agenda."

"The only reason they set it up (SCAF) was to try and win votes."

Levels of trust between familiars and in the general community were not identified as having been affected either positively or negatively by the SCAF project. These types of attitudes would not be expected to change quickly, or as the result of a single intervention. However, respondents thought that government agencies and business had developed greater trust in the community as a whole. Respondents believed that the community's ability to implement SCAF would reflect well on its potential to succeed, and probably attract further support. This aspect reflects the self-perpetuating nature of social capital: the greater the stock of social capital in a given community, the greater the potential for it to be further generated.

Other Social Capital Effects

Respondents discussed the other elements of social capital identified by Bullen and Onyx (neighbourhood connections, connections to family and friends, the value of life, and work connections) in a more generalised way. They spoke about how SCAF might affect the community as it was further implemented. They were generally positive and optimistic about both the project and the future of the community as a whole, noting a sense of growing self-esteem in the community. We saw a connection between this sense of hopefulness and Bullen and Onyx's concept of "value of life". Being part of a community that feels positive and confident of its value might well be expected to lead to a greater appreciation of the value of life and its possibilities. This sense of belonging and hopefulness is an important factor in child wellbeing as well.

Several respondents commented that they had learned a lot from hearing the viewpoints of sectors of the community they would not normally be aware of. Māori respondents were positive about the representative nature of the project's management

committee and the involvement of a wider-than-usual cross-section of the community in the process so far. They felt strongly that the involvement of the community was a key component to the success of SCAF. They said it gave them the opportunity to be involved in decision making from which they had previously been excluded. This also seemed to improve the quality of neighbourhood connections.

Two Māori interviewees said that the fund would continue to have an important impact, particularly as skills learned from implementing it were passed on to future generations. One person saw the ultimate goal as “giving the community their mana back, giving their tino rangatiratanga back to them ” and hoped that in years to come people would look back and say “yeah, the community did that”.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research has raised a number of issues both for policy makers and for the future design and implementation of such initiatives. The (admittedly) early findings indicate that SCAF is having some positive social capital effects. Social capital theory claims that an increase in stocks of social capital can increase stocks of economic and human capital (Putnam 1993a). The time frame for these improvements is unknown, and neither do we know whether they depend on stocks of financial and environmental capital being present in the community. Natural resources and access to markets are required to support the community and provide employment, and thus play a key role in the ability of many communities to thrive, especially in remote rural areas.

A note of caution identified in the research was the need to be realistic about what can be achieved with a single small initiative in the face of deep-seated social and economic deprivation. The current strength of the community would appear to suggest a resilience and potential for growth that can be tapped. There is also strong evidence of the commitment of many residents to their community over a long period of time. Yet without significant local economic growth, job creation and a concerted effort to address the infrastructural, educational and housing needs of the community, the seeds of social capital that have been sown by SCAF may ultimately be falling on barren ground.

The Community Imperative

Devolution to community-based structures also raises issues of accountability for public funds and responsiveness to community aspirations. Community organisations see themselves as more capable than government of delivering integrated or “joined-up” services and successful outcomes to complex problems. At a time when state sector reform has made the decisions and processes of government more transparent, government agencies have been perceived as inflexible, unresponsive and not taking

sufficient account of citizens' views. Community organisations are seeking the opportunity for greater input into policy development, and the design and implementation of services (Ministry of Social Policy 2001).

There is also a belief that locating decision making and financial management closer to the regions and localities will strengthen local communities. The principle of subsidiarity states that matters should be dealt with at the closest point to those affected. This means that central government only undertakes those functions that cannot be performed effectively and efficiently at the local level. Placing responsibility for decisions with local community leads to growth in local leadership and human, social, economic and cultural capacity (Ministry of Social Policy 2001). These outcomes need to be clearly articulated and acknowledged by government when assessing options for implementing new programmes, with relevant criteria being developed to inform decision making about the level of devolution appropriate for a specific programme or initiative.

Devolution and Accountability

The reforms of the 1980s led to government agencies concentrating on their core businesses as defined in legislation, chief executive performance agreements and purchase agreements. This reduced opportunities for cross-agency collaboration and exacerbated the problem of services being funded and delivered through a silo approach. In recent years there has been a shift to a case management approach, particularly in some health, education and welfare initiatives. Addressing some of the structural and legislative issues that led to the silo mentality in policy and service delivery should lead to a more collaborative approach to cross-cutting problems.

Accountability problems emerge, however, when any significant devolution of government funding is proposed. A small devolved funding programme such as SCAF can be accommodated within current structural and legislative arrangements. The devolution of administration and accountability for large amounts of taxpayer funds to local structures that is implied through adoption of cross-sectoral devolution would require significant legislative and structural change.

Recent Analysis

Much of the current analysis being undertaken in key government agencies in New Zealand is focused on the development of a coherent approach to strategic policy that balances economic, social and environmental goals. Papers such as *The Inclusive Economy* (Treasury 2001) and *The Social Development Approach* (Ministry of Social Development 2001), and the Sustainable Development Programme of Action emphasise the Government's desire to "establish principles and a framework for

highlighting the interrelationships between the social, economic and environmental pillars of society”.

It is clear that government has a will to perceive and address policy issues in a holistic way and to measure outcomes across a range of domains. Even Treasury is now openly acknowledging the importance of economists being mindful of social goals (Treasury 2000), a position that would have been difficult to envisage 10 years ago. It may, however, be equally important for social policy makers to be mindful of economic goals when designing and implementing programmes such as SCAF. Programmes that seek to build social capital and to improve child and family wellbeing, without being complemented by initiatives that seek to address the economic deprivation that has contributed to such poor outcomes, may be compromising their effectiveness.

It would seem appropriate, then, to recommend that further expansion of the SCAF initiative might benefit from an intersectoral approach. Such an approach would target communities where efforts are also under way to develop a sound economic base, to address environmental issues and to ensure that the communities’ human capital is maximised through the provision of high-quality health and educational services. An important finding of the longer-term evaluation of SCAF will be a comparison between its impact in communities where it is embedded in a range of programmes to address “whole of community” issues, with its impact in communities where it has been delivered as a single intervention.

Review of the Centre

The report of the Ministerial advisory group convened by the State Services Commissioner, *Review of the Centre*, examined how well the public management system responds to the needs and expectations of Ministers, citizens and communities (State Services Commission 2002). Three key areas were identified in the review as needing input in order to ensure that government is more responsive and effective in both its policy development and service delivery:

- integrated service delivery – dealing with cross-cutting issues at the service delivery level
- the loss of strategic vision resulting from fragmentation of the state sector
- concerns relating to the human resource capacity and the culture of the state sector.

The issue of integrated service delivery is of particular significance for the future implementation of programmes such as SCAF. As noted previously, the ability of a single small initiative to address longstanding issues of social and economic deprivation is likely to be limited. In order to effect significant change in communities suffering high levels of deprivation it will be important for government to deliver and fund services in a comprehensive and broad-based manner. *Review of the Centre*

developed the following model to indicate where it saw the most to be gained from this type of approach.

Figure 2 Matrix of the Extent of Inter-Agency Collaboration and Devolution for Types of Services

	Little inter-agency action required	Significant inter-agency action required
Nature of service determined centrally	E.g. passports, tax collection, property transfers	E.g. border control, student loans
Nature of service determined locally	E.g. hospital services, conservation management	E.g. employment assistance, public health, social exclusion

The table addresses two of the key issues facing the SCAF project: the need for an inter-sectoral approach to complex social issues, and the desire for communities to be more active in decision making and needs assessment, thereby increasing social and human capital stocks. The *Review* notes that the issues in the bottom right-hand corner of the matrix pose the greatest challenge, in that services need to be both cross-cutting and highly devolved. It also acknowledges that the boundaries between central government and local government, Māori groups and community organisations can become blurred, and that people working in this environment need to be able to manage a range of relationships and understand local and strategic issues.

Three strategies were recommended as an initial response designed to improve the state sector’s management of such issues. They are:

- establishing cross-agency “circuit breaker” teams to solve previously intractable problems in service delivery
- enhancing regional co-ordination of state sector agencies, including their interaction with local government and community agencies
- reviewing relationships between policy and operational units within the state sector.

The recognition inherent in the recommendations is that government needs to address complex local problems in a way that recognises and draws on community expertise and ownership. It also needs to be aware that problems are “joined up” in real life, and that for interventions to make a real difference in the lives of families and communities they need to respond to the entire, complex messiness of that reality. This needs to be echoed in the future design of programmes such as SCAF. SCAF has begun to demonstrate its potential as a catalyst for social capital growth. It also needs to be embedded in a suite of initiatives responding to the entire range of issues affecting the communities where it is located. It would then be more likely to enable the resulting growth in social capital to be harnessed in ways that would enhance the economic, cultural, environmental and human capital of those same communities.

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