The role of Landcare group networks in rural Australia: exploring the contribution of social capital

Jonathan Sobels\textsuperscript{a,}\textsuperscript{a}, Allan Curtis\textsuperscript{b}, Stewart Lockie\textsuperscript{b}

\textsuperscript{a}The Johnstone Centre, Charles Sturt University, P.O. Box 789, Albury, NSW 2640, Australia
\textsuperscript{b}Centre for Social Science Research, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, Qld 4702, Australia

Abstract

In this paper, the authors report their qualitative research examining the origins, modus operandi and outcomes of two networks. The concept of social capital explains, at least in part, the apparent success of these networks. The two networks attracted substantial funding, created opportunities for participation and shared learning, carried out extensive on-ground works, improved communication structures, adopted more professional management practices and increased the knowledge of members. The key elements of social capital that were important in achieving these outcomes were trust, norms, expectations of reciprocity and linkages. Empowerment acted as a bridge that linked social capital with other factors contributing to network outcomes. The success of these Landcare networks suggests that top-down government stimulus can be a catalyst for bottom-up community development. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Social capital; Empowerment; Landcare; Networks; Community participation; Learning organisations; Rural development

1. Introduction

Australia has serious long-term environmental problems. In rural areas these include irrigation and dryland salinity, soil erosion, soil acidity, deteriorating water quality, and introduced pest animals and plants. A major factor is changed land use. Widespread destruction of vegetation communities accompanied the introduction of European style agriculture and pastoralism resulting in extensive land degradation. A recent report by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) estimates that rural environmental degradation in Australia now costs in excess of $2 billion annually and could rise to over $6 billion annually by 2020 (Madden et al., 2000, p. i). There is a strong link between the declining condition of private land and declining biodiversity conservation (Curtis and Lockwood, 1998).

Rural Australia also faces major challenges in social and economic terms. Since the mid-1980s successive governments have promoted economic rationalism for fiscal restraint, small government and minimum regulation (Lockie, 1998). Many rural towns have lost government-funded health and education services and financial services. Farmers have lost the buffer of risk management once provided by fixed exchange rates and statutory marketing boards and operate in volatile global commodity markets, often competing against heavily subsidised producers in Europe and North America. Many producers are not making a profit, particularly those who rely on grazing sheep and beef cattle. Rural de-population is contributing to a lower quality of life and a reduced sense of trust in some communities (Guenther and Falk, 1999).

Government responses to land degradation and the plight of farmers have included taxation rebates, income averaging or other adjustments, a few direct financial incentives for conservation works, legislative prohibitions and investment in new technology (Curtis, 1998). The forerunner to the National Landcare Program (NLP) first emerged in Victoria in 1986. In 1989, the federal government accepted the idea of a National Land Management Program proposed jointly by the National Farmers' Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation. It originally involved a mix of self-help community Landcare groups, monitoring
and evaluation of the natural resource base, and planning and implementation support from government agencies. The Prime Minister declared 1990 the Year of Landcare and the 1990s the Decade of Landcare. Initial funding packages totalled $320 million over 10 years (Hawke, 1989, p. 42). In recent times, the five year, $1.25 billion Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) has provided additional support for Landcare groups and other organisations through a raft of programmes that fund on-ground work with a conservation focus. The NHT has relied heavily on the efforts of volunteers and private landholders who contributed resources in cash and kind, to match government funds.

Landcare rhetoric is strongly inclusive. Groups are usually formed around local catchments, with some awareness of local social communities (Ewing, 1997). A Landcare group is conceived as a "community process based on a learning group" (Martin, 1997, p. 51). Landcare eschews reductionist approaches that often characterised previous extension work by state agencies. Landcare adopted a holistic perspective that more adequately captures the scale, complexity and external effects of agricultural practices within physical and social environments (Lockie, 1998). Government does not proscribe the activities of these groups and groups are not accountable to government outside the context of specific government-funded projects. Activities take place on private and public land and include meetings, field days and farm walks; hosting tours and organising conferences; writing newsletters, field guides and media releases; property and catchment planning; preparing submissions for government funding; and conducting on-ground works such as tree planting, pest animal and weed control and fencing to manage stock access to remnant vegetation and waterways.

By 1998, there were over 4270 community Landcare groups in Australia involving over 30 percent of Australian farm businesses (Mues et al., 1998). With considerable evidence of programme impact on landholder awareness, knowledge and skills and on adoption of best-practice (Curtis and DeLacy, 1996), Landcare has been recognised as an Australian success story (Campbell, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

A relatively recent and somewhat unexpected phenomenon has been the trend for Landcare groups to join together to form "Landcare networks" where the network acts as an umbrella organisation (Curtis et al., 1999). Networks usually operate at a scale substantially larger than a typical group. Landcare networks have formed in a variety of ways: directly by state agency intervention; through the stimulus of a non-government organisation (NGO); by the combined efforts of an NGO (a farmers' federation), a state government agency and a corporate sponsor; and spontaneously through internal initiative. Networks typically exhibit a more professional management approach and operate more independently of government than do most groups.

Landcare networks would appear to provide an important opportunity to reflect on Uphoff's (1991) 'paradox of participation', where 'top-down' stimulus is part of 'bottom-up' development by local organisations. In their study of 150 World Bank rural development projects Esman and Uphoff (1984, p. 24) found that cooperation between local organisations and governments can advance efficiency by minimising risk. Local organisations can promote economies of scale, involve more people in the benefits of managing commonly held resources and empower people with the confidence to participate in political or social processes. However, these authors concluded that the vast majority of state-initiated local organisations failed to deliver these outcomes.

Our previous research found that Landcare networks can deliver cost-effective coordination within and between groups, establish effective communication structures, increase access to resources, increase on-ground works, recruit skilled community leaders, add to the power of groups and establish a regional sense of 'community'. Networks appear to have the organisational structure needed to bridge the gap between local landholders and regional planning bodies such as Catchment Management Committees or Authorities (CMA/C) (Curtis et al., 1999; Sobels and Curtis, 2000). In this paper, we argue that the concept of social capital—with its focus on relationships or ties between people—explains part of the added value attributed to the activities of Landcare networks. In turn, social capital may explain part of the paradox of top-down stimulus being required for bottom-up rural development. After an overview of contemporary thinking on social capital, we provide some background on the case studies. We then review the outcomes of the Landcare networks studied. In a later discussion section we explore the extent that these networks established a robust relationship with government and explore the role of social capital and other factors contributing to network outcomes.

2. Background

Uphoff (2000) likens social capital to assets in relationships that produce benefits that are psychological, cognitive, cultural, social and institutional. We suggest that the way these assets are applied produces a pattern of behaviour in human organisations that determines the productive capacity of the group, other influences being equal (after Solow, 2000; Coleman, 1988). This pattern is the group's 'social capital'. Coleman (1988) suggests that social capital includes expectations of reciprocity that involve obligations and
trust, information channels, and norms and effective sanctions—the rules and roles of reasonable behaviour. Putnam defines social capital in terms of the efficiency and effectiveness of group activity, i.e. “those features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”, or “those features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives” (Onyx and Bullen, 2000, citing Putnam, 1993, 1995).

Uphoff et al. (1993), Krishna and Uphoff (1999) and Uphoff (2000) have analysed social capital as social structure and the capacity to facilitate action. They regard the former as the rules, roles and networks and their processes and precedents, and the latter as cognitive social capital, i.e. norms, values and attitudes that pre-disposes people towards cooperation. This typology parallels that of Falk and Kilpatrick (1999) and Falk and Harrison (1998), who proposed that social capital is a product of ‘learning interactions’ in two fields. One is that people accumulate knowledge of social organisation—who others are, what they do and what they are good at. A second is that participants develop a shared understanding of personal individual and collective identities.

Social capital has so far resisted attempts to codify it, with many descriptive reports failing to resolve the circular argument that social capital can create social capital in a positively reinforcing spiral (or be destroyed in a negative spiral). The concept’s usefulness appears to be limited in that it is difficult to operationalise using proxy measures that are distinct from the predicted effects (Onyx, 1999; Falk and Harrison, 1998; Krishna and Uphoff, 1999; Woolcock, 1998).

If social capital is a product of ‘learning processes’ identified by Falk and Kilpatrick (1999, pp. 5-6), then we have a clear distinction between the process of creating social capital, and social capital as the outcome. Kilpatrick et al. (1998) investigated a rural business development programme in Australia. They described this programme as a ‘learning community’ that created social capital through a shared language, shared experiences, trust, self-development and fostering an identification with the wider rural community. Social capital was identified as a promoter of change through its influence on the learning process. The group learning process is characterised by information flows, experimentation, discussion and decision-making through consensus. So as an organisation learns it adapts and changes.

Warner (1999) reporting on earlier work of Eitzioni (1993) and Fuyukama (1995), suggested that government was either incapable of contributing to the creation of social capital, or more usually destroyed it. International evidence suggests that government or other elites sponsoring rural development will attempt to co-opt community organisations. It seems that it is unusual to find an autonomous organisation emerging from a state-sponsored programme of rural development (Eisman and Uphoff, 1984; Midgley, 1986; Cernes, 1991; Uphoff, 1991). Warner (1999) cited the University Cooperative Extension service in the USA as an example where government has been a key player in empowering local community organisations. Curtis (1998) has suggested that Landcare groups in Australia are another example of successful state-sponsored community participation in natural resource management. Uphoff et al. (1998) found a consistent theme emerging from their evaluation of hundreds of development programmes. They concluded that ‘assisted self-reliance’ is, with learning process, the other leg upon which successful development programmes have stood. If not subsequently co-opted by government, the result is empowerment: “getting workers to do what needs to be done rather than doing what they’re told” (Thorlakson and Murray, 1996).

3. Data collection

This research involved a multi-method approach to data collection in two case studies: the Holbrook Landcare Network and the Woody-yallock Landcare Network. Research methods included: participant observation at network meetings and other events; a content analysis of the minutes from network meetings; and semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of network members and coordinators. The interviews used themes that emerged from a literature review, participant observation and the document study.

3.1. Location

The Holbrook Landcare Network comprises 15 sub-catchment Landcare groups covering an area of approximately 1710 km² of the Upper Billabong catchment in southeastern Australia (latitude 35° south, longitude 147° east). Some 173 (out of a possible 205) property owners are members of the Holbrook Network. The Upper Billabong is located on the continental or southwestern slopes of the Great Dividing Range. The area has a Mediterranean-type climate and is predominantly used to graze beef cattle and sheep for wool and fat lamb production. There is also a small area of forest. Median property size is 353 ha. Major natural resource management issues are sheet and gully erosion, dryland salinity, dieback of mature trees and soil acidity in agricultural land. Enterprise profitability represented as an indicative rate of return (IRR) averages two percent. It is estimated that three percent (RR is needed
for long-term viability in grazing enterprises in Aus-

The Woady-Yaloak Landcare Network comprises
seven Landcare groups located in the Woady-Yaloak
River catchment on the southern and coastal side of the
Great Dividing Range (latitude 37° south, longitude
143° east). The catchment is approximately 450 km
southwest of the Upper Billabong catchment and covers
1200 km² with 156 full-time and 70 part-time farmers.
The northern half of the catchment has steep, infertile
hills, whilst to the south there are more fertile basalt
plains. There are areas of native forests and softwood
plantations. The area has a Mediterranean-type climate
and agricultural production is from grazing—sheep, fat
lambs and cattle—and cereal crops. Extensive gold
mining in the 1800s contributed to the current serious
resource management issues of erosion, dryland salinity
and pest plant and animal invasion. Average property
size is around 780 ha. The soil is of poorer quality and
receives a lower annual rainfall of 500-600 mm,
compared to the Upper Billabong—700 mm. Enterprise
profitability averages two percent IRR for sheep and
around zero percent for beef cattle. Landholders'
property equity is similar to that in Holbrook at an
average of 89 percent (R. Standen, pers. comm.).

4. Outcomes

It is unreasonable to expect network activity to have
already made an improvement in bio-physical condi-
tions given the short time they have been operating,
the large scale and diffuse nature of land degradation
problems they face and the limited resources available
to the networks.

What the evidence suggests is that the two Landcare
Networks have been very successful in attracting funds
and conducting on-ground works. The networks have
increased the learning capacity of individuals and
groups, resulting in an increased capacity to deal with
bureaucracy, an increasing confidence in discussing
more complex concepts and information, and an
increased ability to adapt to change. The networks have
developed new communication structures and re-invii-
gorated existing ones. The networks have increased
the effectiveness of volunteer participants by coordinating
participants’ time and resource allocation for on-ground
works. The networks illustrate a more professional
approach to management than is typical for Landcare
groups.

4.1. Increased access to funding and conversion to on-
ground work

The Holbrook and Woady-Yaloak networks have
each received over $1.25 million in government and
sponsor funds. This level of funding per sub-catchment
group is significantly higher than the mean of $13,990
per Victorian Landcare group (Curtis, 1999). In turn,
both networks have coordinated member and commu-
nity resources, including cash and in-kind contributions,
that exceed the value of the external funding by between
three and seven times.

Woady-Yaloak members have improved over 3500
ha of annual pastures, established 115 ha of revegeta-
tion, exterminated approximately 160,000 rabbits and
their warrens and stabilised over 35 ha of gully, sheet
and rill erosion. The network has conducted around 50
tours for a wide range of visitors since 1993. Holbrook
members have established 11 new native seed orchards,
fenced 163 ha of remnant vegetation and 67 km of
waterways. Network members have repaired 194 ha of
gully erosion, planted an estimated 976,000 trees (some
along roadsides with the Shire council), established eight
farm forestry projects and created seven wetlands and
protected two more, and conducted weed and pest
animal control.

4.2. More efficient coordination

A central theme of volunteer literature is the
importance of coordinators in effective volunteer groups
(Curtis, 1999). Most Landcare groups do not have
access to a paid coordinator (Curtis, 1999). At the same
time, most groups say they need a coordinator to
accomplish important group goals and most groups say
that funding a coordinator would be a high priority for
the use of government funds (Curtis, 1999).

It seems that a network is more likely to attract funds
to support a coordinator. Employment of a coordinator
was a critical development in the networks studied.
Landcare coordinators created efficiencies for others by
their effective coordination of people’s resources and
time. Network coordinators amortise their costs across
many groups. The Holbrook coordinator organised
people and events on a daily basis; collected and
critically reviewed data and information, often to
present at committee meetings, and acted as a central
point of contact. This made possible an efficient
communication process within the network and, be-
tween the network and outside actors. The Woady-
Yaloak Network organisation and sub-programmes are
different to those operating at Holbrook. A part-time
project officer was a direct link between individual
landholders and sub-programmes managed by the
Woady-Yaloak Network. Sponsor’s funds went directly
to individual landholders upon satisfactory completion
of ‘individual projects’. It was the role of the project
officer to inspect, monitor and assess works and
determine landholder eligibility for payment.
One of the things that really does bring them together is [the coordinator]. Firstly [he's] a very competent operator ... he’s a skilled agronomist ... he has a lot of respect ... The other thing that gives him power ... [he] had to ok any expenditure ... go and say ok this is a recipe for success here [Victorian Agency staffer].

...research—they’d help bring information to the committee. The committee can decide on policies or whatever. Then they’d go out and help formulate projects or whatever has to be done. They’ll do the leg work as well [as] they’ll sit back and listen to what the committee wants. They’d give you the information you want ... and they’ll act upon a decision for you ... So a successful coordinator’s getting the job done [Holbrook Network committee member].

4.3. New communication structures

Landcare networks foster new ways of communicating across a regional catchment. The Holbrook Network opened a shop in the main street with the assistance of the Holbrook Shire Council. They aimed to facilitate the exchange of information about Landcare issues in the district. The Woady-Yaloak Network conduct bus tours through the catchment for visiting groups such as schools and universities, other Landcare groups, agency staff, sponsors groups and politicians. Another innovation by the Woady-Yaloak Network is ‘neighbourhood groups’ comprising two to seven landholders. The neighbours identify a common problem and get together with a part-time coordinator to submit an application for funding to enable them to carry out the work. This submission is made direct to the network committee.

Communication structures are a conduit for change in patterns of behaviour. Such structures can provide a forum for people to discuss issues and pick up new knowledge that can lead to faster adoption of ‘best’ practices.

Yeah particularly on the farm walk, not quite so much in a meeting in a hall somewhere. It’s hard to get a transfer of knowledge and experience [but] you can build up relationships with people ... I think the best place of knowledge transfer is right at the paddock and if you want to learn about growing trees ... you go to someone’s place who’s doing it, that’s where you get people asking questions [Woady-Yaloak Network member].

To inform each other about Landcare activities, members used network meetings, local Landcare group meetings and any opportunities afforded by other social networks. These include bushfire brigades, church congregations, sporting and services clubs, farm production groups, telephone trees, direct mail newsletters and local media articles.

... the last time we had a meeting we combined our Landcare meeting with our fire brigade meeting and it worked extremely well ... [Woady-Yaloak Network member].

4.4. More knowledgeable land managers

When Holbrook Network landholders saw the maps produced as part of the regional Land and Water Management Plan (LWMP), some of them made an immediate cognitive connection with their property plan. They noted, for example, a ridgeline of native vegetation that might comply with the LWMP goal for remnant vegetation management. The farmers also made a connection with their neighbours who owned other parts of the ridge and together suggested a cooperative project be funded to fence and manage the area. Planning became a ‘learning process’ (after Falk, 1999; Uphoff, 2000) that helped farmers to identify patterns of landscape degradation, stimulated ideas, provided a guide for ‘where they are going’ and with participation in local on-ground works, promoted confidence amongst the landholders.

... I think we’re addressing Landcare as a total sort of picture now ... I think our evolution to where we are today with birds and this sort of thing and the whole picture is just so exciting! [Holbrook Landcare member on the ‘Re-birding’ project].

Both networks have actively promoted field days, covering topics such as salinity, native vegetation management, native and improved perennial pastures, agroforestry, seed collecting, acid soils and rabbit control. Both networks involve students from schools and tertiary institutions in tree planting and nursery activities, ‘Waterbug’ surveys, group tours and other projects. The Holbrook Network actively sought to have four members’ farms involved in the regional ‘Learning From Farmers’ project. Network members have attended pesticide user courses, strategic planning and facilitation courses, Master Tree Growers courses, and 19 landholders monitor 37 ‘Streamwatch’ sites around Holbrook.

The Holbrook and Woady-Yaloak studies suggest that participation in a network helps Landcare members gain a better understanding of natural resource issues.

Yeah, I think forming into a bigger group it gave you that bit more wealth of experience and like once the Woady catchment was formed we then had ...
pool of knowledge was able to help everyone sort out
the quickest and [most] effective way to do things. [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member] Participants in the two networks learned more about
working with government and corporate bureaucracies.
The Holbrook Network believed that their coordinators
learned to write astute funding proposals. The latest
coordinator developed strong links with the federal
agency that was funding the ‘Re-binding Project’, with
almost daily telephone contact during the start-up
phase. The Woady-Yaloak Network planned and
conducted extensive lobbying of politicians and senior
agency bureaucrats.

4.5. Professional management

Setting goals and catchment planning are processes
associated with increased group effectiveness (Curtis,
1999) and reduced burnout amongst Landcare partici-
pants (Byron et al., 1999). The reality is that many
Landcare groups do not undertake these activities
(Curtis, 1999).

Both networks have worked through substantial
reviews of their overall goals and strategies. These
processes involved external facilitators and incorporated
legal/financial/business expertise. For Holbrook the
driver was members’ concern about the level of
accountability and responsibility that was expected of
them as volunteers managing large sums of grant money
and other public resources. With the sponsor’s input,
Woady-Yaloak has developed a business plan. Woady-
Yaloak called in an external consultant to help develop
a five-year plan as part of their response to reduced
funding and a change in the main sponsor’s preferred
method of programme delivery.

The Holbrook Network is increasingly regarded
as a business. Network committees provide adminis-
trative support and feedback on performance of group
projects and the coordinator. A bookkeeping service
for all projects demonstrated accountability and
transparency to members, sponsors and agency part-
ners. The adoption of a professional approach has
meant changes to the constitution to accommodate
employees. This required a change to a ‘company
limited by guarantee’, by definition and implication, a
more accountable, professional organisation. A member
suggested that three factors were responsible for
success at Holbrook. The network was accountable
for resources obtained by ensuring sound financial
management, on-ground works were evaluated and
changes resulting from group activities were monitored.

Because we are using someone else’s money, we must
be accountable... We have a responsibility to our

members and the community... It’s a vital business;
we must measure it to ensure success [Holbrook
Network committee member].

In 1998, the Holbrook committee, through the
coordinator, audited all projects financially and in terms
of outcomes against objectives. Large amounts of
unspent funds were identified, many projects were
finally written up and the true extent of on-ground
works documented. Woady-Yaloak has adopted formal
meeting rules and meeting minutes are typed and filed.
From 1993, Woady-Yaloak has produced annual
reports using a corporate reporting style. Financial
accounts and on-ground results from each programme
are tabled at committee meetings.

4.6. Effective leadership

The networks demonstrated contrasting leadership
roles. The Holbrook Network turned over leaders every
two years whereas Woady-Yaloak had one chairman for
six years. There are pitfalls with both high and low
turnover of leaders (Curtis, 1998).

The large scale of networks makes it easier to find
talented individuals to take on executive positions
(Curtis, 2000). Observations at Holbrook and Woady-
Yaloak suggest that if new leaders find good humour,
support from their peers and a coordinator to provide
organisational support, leadership succession becomes
less problematic. The Holbrook and Woady-Yaloak
Network committees have identified and attracted
‘good people’ to fill vacancies. These people came from
a regional pool of community groups, including
leaders in bushfire brigades, services clubs and local
government.

Leadership styles in the two networks appear to
depend on building relationships and collaborative
problem solving that would fit the model of ‘situated
leadership’ of Falk (1999). Observation at committee
meetings suggests that leadership is ‘shared’ around the
committee, as Landcare group representatives and
previous network chairmen and the coordinator balance
the power dynamics of the forum in leading discussions
and contributing to decisions. Committee meetings
cultivate humour, irony and pragmatism rather than a
culture of personal authority or blame. The chairman’s
role is to retain some formal structure to the meeting.
The original Woady-Yaloak chairman suggested that
leadership was

I suppose an ability to negotiate, confidence that you
can do it. Put forward ideas that aren’t necessarily
your own and discussion and arguments to represent
the organisation [Woady-Yaloak Network committee
member].
5. Discussion

5.1. State-sponsored community participation: developing robust relationships

Even though the NLP explicitly set out to create local community groups, the agencies did not envisage the emergence of regional ‘groups of groups’ that would challenge the agency perceptions of their roles in delivering the NLP. Governments appear to have experienced difficulty in dealing with these local organisations as they generated their own political power. Landcare networks began to take on more responsibility for decision-making, collecting information and attracting resources that empowered them and increased their autonomy.

Agency presence on the Holbrook Network committee stopped in 1992. Agency staff mostly work through the Holbrook coordinator when approaching the catchment groups. Similarly, in Woady-Yaloak, the lead agency is no longer an exclusive supplier of knowledge or services to the network. Both networks now employ private sector or university consultants on short-term contracts.

State government agencies responded to the emergence of the two networks with what is best described as rule obsessiveness, territority and resistance to change (Haugh and Laschinger, 1996). Members of the Holbrook committee recalled the reluctance of the state agency to allow a different format or to cede power to the network, that is, to allow the network to be autonomous.

We had to fight tooth and nail to get the structure... We said we want to have a core body acting as an umbrella and then have catchment groups—sub groups as we called them then, that could control their own destiny [Holbrook Landcare member].

They definitely tried to direct us... They wanted to get control of it...[They didn’t want]...other groups to get too much kudos...[It was]...government groups trying to build an empire...[Holbrook Landcare member].

At the beginning of the Holbrook Network, the lead agency threatened to withdraw the Landcare imprimatur for the Holbrook Network, equating it with ‘greennie groups’:

...if you lobby against pine plantations, we’ll drop you like a hot potato! [NSW State Agency staffer].

The Woady-Yaloak Network also has a somewhat bumpy relationship with the lead agency, in particular over perceptions of the role of the agency vis-a-vis the needs of the network.

I think that there is still a bit of tension from our [State Agency] point of view that they [Woady-Yaloak Network] are going to take over our traditional roles and, tension from their point of view that we’re not supporting them as well as we could...we’re seen as a bit of a fly in the ointment...I reckon that’s something that [is] perhaps in the back of people’s minds [Victorian State Agency staffer].

I think the [Woady-Yaloak] Network was, they felt, a threat originally because Landcare traditionally being a very much [an agency] sponsored organisation...all of a sudden they saw something that [they] developed going away, leaving them, and I think...that there’s a bit of power game...but whether the community decided they couldn’t afford it and...

That perhaps we can deliver services more economically. And as well as more economically, in a different manner, that’s more suitable to what the community wants [Woady-Yaloak Network member].

At Woady-Yaloak Network committee meetings, the part-time coordinator and sponsor representatives provided important technical and group facilitation advice that was previously an agency role. This change caused some friction within the agency and between the agency and network, especially where agency staff felt that they had a responsibility to represent the wider public interest. Ironically, much of the power of a network flows from the efficiencies the network provides to agency staff.

Well we [State Agency] had our own ship to run. One example of where a conflict—a bit [of] confusion I guess that we had with the Land Protection Incentive Scheme...we go out to get a grant to a farmer and they’d say well we’ll have to compare with [Woady-Yaloak coordinator] before [we] can go ahead and so some of our officers thought, well, you know I’m playing second fiddle to [Woady-Yaloak coordinator] and it didn’t go down all that well with some staff. [Victorian State Agency staffer].

Managing relationships with two NGOs, a large corporate sponsor and several state agencies was a difficult task for the Woady-Yaloak committee. With time, a record of achievement and a changing mix of personalities, the organisational relationships have matured as respect and trust are built through working cooperatively.

we thought we got off our butt and earned this other money [Sponsor] and we still needed their [the Department’s] support...I think there may still be some resentment but I think it’s being accepted that it’s a whole partnership. [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member].
5.2. The role of social capital

Uphoff (2000) and Falk and Kilpatrick (1999) have suggested that the main factors in creating social capital are our knowledge of social organisation such as rules, roles, precedents and procedures in networks or linkages, and the cognitive identity we create in norms, values, attitudes and beliefs, such as trust and cooperation. Linking both forms is “the subjective behavioural phenomenon known as expectations” (Uphoff, 2000, p. 219). From our research we found that the elements of social capital that were critical to network achievements were trust, linkages, norms and an expectation of reciprocity.

Communication and learning is more effective where there is mutual trust (Falk and Kilpatrick, 1999). A willingness to participate in public good or ‘commons’ activities generates trusting behaviour (Brehm and Rahn, 1997). Willingness to participate depends on history. For example, communities generate substantial trust when they organise to combat the common threat of a bushfire. Bushfire brigades form the basis for many Landcare groups and trust is therefore implicit in subsequent cooperative behaviour. Landcare networks arise within existing social capital. What they do is to construct new patterns of behaviour that combine existing and new elements of relationships.

I guess that system that goes on within your own mind ... that trust of other people and integrity and honesty and all those other sorts of things, your own experience helps you through what you believe and what you don’t or what you toss over in your own mind [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member]

Organisations that foster trust internally are likely to be confident, inclusive and tolerant of diverse perspectives. Observation at network committee meetings would suggest that individuals contributed their voice to debate without feeling that they risked personal opprobrium. An organisation that is perceived to be trustworthy facilitates increased participation. The more the participation the more information, resources and experiences that can be shared and learned from. As a forum for discussion, networks promote social capital through creating a ‘place”—in both physical and cognitive terms—that enables sharing and learning to occur. Trust among partners can share risks and encourage innovative solutions. A farmer might be more likely to accept the economic, social or physical risks of changing their farming practice if they felt that they had support.

I asked “Why aren’t people doing it?” and they said it’s a lack of confidence and the high level of risk that’s now associated with doing some of these things ... We need to overcome that ... [Woady-Yaloak coordinator]

Mutual trust between people reduces transaction costs and enables efficient cooperative behaviour in solving collective action problems.

I just knew that they were genuine people who were involved in the community and I knew that if they were involved in it [the Woady project] that it was going to be a reputable organisation... [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member]

Networks build on and create linkages among the network members and between members and others such as universities, corporations, Landcare organisations and NGOs. Visiting neighbours’ farms and seeing their examples of land degradation for the first time was an enlightening experience that forged stronger links between people. An informant in Holbrook suggested that some farmers felt a great weight had been lifted from them as for the first time they were able to talk to their neighbours about their own examples of degraded landscape.

There’s a lot more social interaction and that’s been a critical issue. Landcare gives them that opportunity and that’s a big issue in itself because they talk amongst issues and what’s going on. I think you’ve got to actually talk to your neighbour about what you might do over two or three farms. It’s a fairly big step too, for people to take. Interesting times. [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member]

Within the Holbrook Network these linkages resulted in learning, collaboration and the development of sufficient competence and confidence for participants to question the scientific validity of work by a consultant recommended by the lead agency.

This methodology is suspect ... basically we feel that we have been conned ...[consultant] must be held accountable ... [Holbrook Network minutes, April 16, 1997]

We all need to be well informed at next meeting ... so we can get as much information from him as possible. Maybe invite [scientist] to next meeting to have a scientist to scientist debate [Holbrook Network minutes, May 21, 1997].

The two Landcare networks formalised the roles of gathering and disseminating information and established norms of measuring and reporting on their achievements, mainly for the benefit of members. The Woady-Yaloak Network set up four sub-committees to structure and implement the funding programmes proposed by members. The Holbrook Network established norms of reporting and accountability for each recipient of public funds or resources, and the network
I suppose they’ve developed their own ‘ethics’—what the Landcare groups should be doing and should not be doing. It comes from their pride in what they’ve achieved [Holbrook Landcare coordinator].

Social capital takes a willingness to invest time, ‘capital’ resources and energy for which people generally hold an expectation of reciprocity. Farmers who joined Landcare did so with an expectation that the public money they received for on-ground work on their private properties was justified in terms of a wider public good. The farmers had to match the government funds with their own cash and kind contributions. The reciprocal private benefits were of improved understanding of sustainable land management practices, and in the medium to long term, improved property ‘health’.

Well I believe a lot of our problems are community problems. When I say community I mean the larger community not just the Holbrook community. Everyone’s got to take some responsibility for the environmental problems, or they’re just going to keep impacting further downstream. This is where the government’s got to hook in and help and unless they keep funding coming for important community projects … We can’t tackle issues on our own particularly when the benefits financially are not there to do it… [Holbrook Landcare member].

In the relationships between Landcare groups and the network committee, members felt an expectation for the network to provide access to information and resources to the groups, without compromising the groups’ autonomy. The network committee expected that the groups would carry out the work for which they were being funded, and would respond to network requests. The coordinator was a central figure that strengthened the capacity of members, groups and the network committee to deliver the expected reciprocal benefit to each partner.

The Werneth Landcare group have been able to look in on the experience and the funding that they’ve got from the Woady [Landcare Network] and then the other way Woady’s been able to use the Landcare groups to get things done that they want done [Woady-Yaloak Landcare member].

And the other thing coming from [the Holbrook] committee is the Landcare coordinator. To each member who is using them, [she] is absolutely vital [Holbrook Landcare member].

5.3. The influence of scale

When people work at a scale that is appropriate for maintaining effective, trusting, personal relationships they create social capital. An appropriate scale allows a degree of closure (Coleman, 1990) or proximity (Bourdieu, 1986) to minimise ‘free riding’ and make learning effective. Bourdieu (1986) “argued that establishment and maintenance of social capital requires proximity in physical, economic, or social space” (Warner, 1999, p. 377). Uphoff et al. (1998) suggest that a range of 30-300 people can maintain trust and maximise linkages. Other work on historical commons management (Devine, 1986) suggests that an organisation or community of between 200 and 1000 participants can be linked effectively. Warner (1999, p. 379) suggested that “building and maintaining networks is not a given”. Simply increasing scale by adding Landcare groups together is no guarantee of increased social capital. But scale is a crucial element in linking people to a learning community or organisation (Kilpatrick et al., 1998).

The two Landcare networks operated in ways that emulated the trusting relationships of Landcare groups. At the same time, the increased scale of the networks contributed to substantially increased political power of the networks. More people involved means more people influenced, hence more power for the network. The participation rate of Woady-Yaloak farmers in Landcare has increased from 20 percent of landholders at inception to over 70 percent in 2000. Holbrook’s participation rate is above 80 percent of landholders. The network committees, their leadership roles and their members became more powerful because they legitimately represent an important local organisation. The members gain access to more opportunities to access funds and on-ground works than they would in a single Landcare group.

In a sense, the increased scale of a network created vacancies or roles for leaders that are then ‘filled in’. This contributes to new relationships such as leadership development and therefore a new pattern of behaviour, or new social capital.

5.4. The influence of Government funding

The community–agency partnership is a fundamental element of Landcare. Agency staff worked with community leaders to establish Landcare and continue to play important roles in the development and work of many groups. Government funds play a vital role in the
continuing presence of Landcare groups (Curtis and DeLacy, 1996; Curtis, 1998).

Both networks received support and funding from government in their formative years and continue to attract considerably more funds than is the average for Landcare groups. Without this ‘financial capital’, the ‘social capital’ of the networks is unlikely to have been expressed in positive outcomes.

5.5. Empowerment

Empowered people are “allowed to have control over conditions that make their actions possible... [so that] more is accomplished” (Kanter, 1977, p. 161).

I’m always happy, in a sense of power seeing the group empowered to stand up for itself, articulate its own objectives, explain its own successes, lobby for its own needs, and if by inclusion of us in that, it improves the group’s capacity for empowerment, then good. That’s an appropriate use of power [Sponsor representative].

If people see success two or three times over, they start to develop confidence... So people could still choose whatever method they wanted and the group said as long as it’s within the realms of being successful, you can try whatever you like... [Woady-Yaloak coordinator]

Such confidence is empowering; people who are empowered are effective in doing what needs to be done (Haugh and Laschinger, 1996).

Social capital builds a ‘home for community’ from trust, norms, expectations of reciprocity and linkages. Within this place, social capital and the other building blocks of successful organisations can be combined to solve collective action problems such as land degradation. These other building blocks include increased scale, government stimulus, financial capital, physical resources and information. Empowered people ‘produce community’ through public participation in forums for discussion and governance (Warner, 1999). Empowerment can be viewed as the bridge that linked social capital and these other building blocks, to network outcomes.

6. Conclusion

Landcare networks are an outcome not foreseen in the original NLP. The case studies suggest that networks attract more government resources than the groups would have obtained on their own. The Holbrook and Woady-Yaloak Network case studies offer strong supporting evidence that extra resources ‘pulled down’ by networks translate into increased on-ground works, especially as networks offer groups increased access to a coordinator. The networks have increased learning amongst—individuals and groups, resulting in an increased capacity to deal with the bureaucracy, an increasing confidence in discussing more complex concepts and information, and an increased ability to adapt to change. The networks have developed new communication structures and re-invigorated existing ones. The networks have increased the effectiveness of volunteers by coordinating participants’ time and resource allocation for on-ground works. The networks also illustrate a more professional approach to management than is typical for Landcare groups.

Our research supports the broad thrust of social capital literature in confirming the importance of relationships alongside economic, human and natural capital in solving collective action problems. Specifically, we found that certain aspects of social capital explained important outcomes of network activity.

The networks were successful in building on the extent level of trust in rural relationships to facilitate learning and communication across many Landcare groups. Trust in relationships allowed network committees to function as public forums for discussion. Mutual trust enabled leaders to work more effectively by reducing transaction costs.

New linkages emerged amongst neighbours, and new regional linkages emerged through, for example, representation on a committee. The new linkages intensified a sense of a shared local/regional identity, increased knowledge exchange, increased opportunities to learn and provided more leadership roles.

The two networks created new norms of behaviour for their volunteer membership by adopting professional attitudes to management functions that minimised ‘free riders’. This included reporting and measurement to ensure financial accountability. A network is more attractive as a partner for a corporate sponsor.

The two networks were highly regarded by their peers, government agencies and tertiary institutions as successful organisations at the ‘cutting edge’ of Landcare. Members in each network expected and received access to information and resources in return for their participation and cash and kind contributions.

The two networks were more powerful due to the synergy of social capital with increased scale creating politically important organisations. Landcare networks demonstrated this power in robust relationships with government agencies. The networks provided an organisational structure and power base that could bridge the institutional vacuum between local landholders and regional planning in, for example, Catchment Management Authorities/Committees.

The two networks clearly empowered their membership. Social capital created a ‘home for community’ in a set of relationships to which was added increased scale,
more resources, more information and opportunities through government programmes. The process of empowerment is therefore about generating confidence in people and comes about through learning from experience of organised activities. Empowerment as a process, is a bridge that links social capital with the other factors that influence organisational outcomes.

Finally, we stress the importance of separating social capital as a cause, from social capital as an outcome when exploring the role of groups in rural development. The two Landcare networks studied are partly characterised by social capital that exists in three areas. There is the existing social capital of relationships that is called on to form the organisation. Then there is the new social capital that this research describes in terms of its influence on outcomes. Thirdly, social capital is an outcome of the activity of the organisation, because the networks are learning organisations that respond to and build on new knowledge.

References


Further reading