Introduction

Jenny Onyx

In this book we have brought together researchers from Canada and Australia and from diverse disciplines to explore some of the sustainable development challenges facing local (small) communities. Some authors are "experts" in sustainable development, others in social capital research. Together, we look at the links between these two fields, both of which hold tremendous promise for our future, if we can understand their potential synergy for mobilizing social change for humanity's future sustainable development.

The link between social capital and sustainable development, however, is elusive, as both concepts are in themselves highly contested. They cannot be defined precisely, but we argue that both are critical to humanity. Many of the things that are important to our civilization, such as integrity, truth, love, and beauty, cannot be precisely defined, and yet, each of us has clear meanings for these constructs. Those of us who are "expert" in issues of sustainability and sustainable development are inclined to focus on the implications of the different positions taken. Those of us who are "expert" in matters of social capital are inclined to accept a simplified view of sustainable development but contest the finer details of the different positions taken on social capital. Both concepts are fuzzy but nonetheless important starting points for meaningful dialogue about the future of our planet. Many of the perspectives arise from the different disciplinary approaches taken, as well as from the different political/value positions adopted, and the scale at which a particular researcher is interested. Nonetheless, it is this kind of cross-disciplinary and cross-national discussion that may prove useful in advancing our knowledge, particularly as we are all united by a conviction that the two concepts are somehow related.

In this book, we begin with a definition of sustainable development – rather than sustainability – that we all accept as a starting point for discussion. We have chosen to use the former over the latter because it brings a constructive ambiguity to the debate, with its tension between sustainable

and development, which of course, is the heart of the problem that many single-resource communities are facing. In addition, many Canadian experts in this field have converged on the following definition (Canadian Consortium for Sustainable Development Research 1998).

Sustainable development is defined as a process of reconciliation of three imperatives: (1) the ecological imperative to live within global biophysical carrying capacity and maintain biodiversity; (2) the social imperative to ensure the development of democratic systems of governance to effectively propagate and sustain the values that people wish to live by; and (3) the economic imperative to ensure that basic needs are met worldwide. And equitable access to these three resources – ecological, social, and economic – is fundamental to its realization (Dale 2001; Robinson and Tinker 1998).

We take sustainable development to refer to a fundamental reconciliation of the three imperatives, of which the ecological imperative is the most primordial, as it is the foundation for all life. Much has been written about the economic imperative, and in most analyses, it is regarded as dominant. While we acknowledge its importance, and we cannot escape its pervasiveness in all case analyses, this book does not focus directly on that imperative, as we believe the failure to implement sustainable development is fundamentally a social problem (Dale forthcoming). Thus, our focus is on the second imperative, the social, referring primarily to "democratic systems of governance." Perhaps this is one answer to the question, what is the link? It lies in the definition; the social must be reconciled with the other imperatives or there is no sustainable development.

Yet that is a very limited response. The "social," as Dale uses it, incorporates both social and human capital. Human capital refers to the sum of human capacity, including the knowledge and skills that can be used in the production of wealth and that form the basis of any collective and purposive human endeavour. Social capital encompasses much more than "democratic systems of governance." The latter is one fortunate outcome of the appropriate use of social capital, and reflects a public policy focus. There are other equally important outcomes of the appropriate use of social capital, for example, good health (Putnam 2000), good education (Coleman 1988), and economic well-being (Woolcock and Narayan 2001).

So what is social capital? There are many definitions, and some scholars are critical of the concept for this reason (see, for example, Portes 1998; Woolcock 1998). However, we take the position that this diversity of definitions simply reflects the relatively new state of social capital research and its discourses. While there is much agreement about some of the constituent elements of social capital, we are not sure about which of these is essential, or core to the concept, and which are associated or peripheral phenomena. Indeed, several of the chapters in this book will help clarify some of these relationships further. Two of the most frequently used definitions of social

capital reflect a fundamental theoretical difference. Bourdieu (1985, 248; 1980) defines the concept as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more of less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition." Further, he argues that social networks are not a natural given and must be constructed through investment strategies oriented to the institutionalization of group relations, usable as a reliable source of benefits (Portes 1998). This approach locates the social capital possessed in any given network for the use and strategic advantage of the individual. Other definitions are more explicitly social in orientation. Social capital is located within the social structures, the space between people, and not within the individual. Coleman (1988) defines social capital by its function with two elements in common: with some aspect of social structures that facilitate certain action by actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Putnam provides the most commonly used definition, one that clearly locates social capital within social structures. Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1993, 167) define social capital as "those features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks[,] that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions." Nevertheless, consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of actors (both group and individual) to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes 1998).

One point of discussion concerns the centrality of trust. For some it is critical (Fukuyama 1995; Misztal 1996; Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993), for others simply a fortunate side effect (Portes 1998; Woolcock 2001; Schuller 2001). Other scholars have emphasized different core elements of social capital, elements such as reciprocity (Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993) and social agency (Leonard and Onyx 2004). Agency refers to the capacity to take the initiative, to be proactive. One of the early attempts to define social capital by empirical, statistical means identified several group factors, all of which contributed to an underlying common factor (Onyx and Bullen 2000). Those group factors included "community participation," "trust," and "social agency," as well as other aspects such as "neighbourhood connections" and "tolerance of diversity."

The point is not that some of these definitions or components are correct and others incorrect. Social capital, we are coming to understand, is a complex and multi-layered concept. Within the broad scope of social capital there are probably some elements that are core and others that are effects of the core. We are not yet in a position to clearly delineate the boundaries of the concept (any more than we can do so for concepts such as "beauty" or "governance" or "intelligence"). The contributors to this book each emphasize a slightly different aspect of social capital. However, we can all agree that the core to social capital includes "the networks that facilitate collective

action" (Woolcock 2001). These networks are not value neutral, but are held together by a set of implicit rules and underlying values (hence, "norms"). Social capital, we agree, does not refer to the collective action itself but to the potential for such collective action to occur. The outcome of social capital always concerns the "common good," as its members define it. However, that common good may in fact be quite destructive to individual members or to outsiders (Portes 1998). Social capital itself, like money, is neither good nor evil. It is always essential, but whether used for good or ill depends on those who shape it.

A related issue of considerable current debate is the relationship between social capital and social structure, or structural bases of power. It is important to recognize from the outset that social capital is not presented as a kind of spray-on solution to economic, environmental, and social problems. A political economy must be included in any analysis (Fine 2001). We know, for instance, that social capital is most likely to work effectively among equals; inequality, exploitation, and power tactics are highly destructive of working social capital. Several chapters in this book take a cautionary look at the negative impacts of such conflict. It is also clearly the case that the operation of social capital at the local level will be shaped and constrained by wider structural, economic, and political forces operating at the state (provincial), national, and global levels, and which impact on the local. Several chapters specifically acknowledge and examine these wider structural forces, including the chapters by Black and Hughes, and Barraket. However, we reject the structural determinism of authors such as Harriss (2001), who portray the ordinary citizen as victim and who see the only possibility of social change residing in the mobilization of political action along traditional (class) interests. The primary focus of the book is a positive one. If given the opportunity, what can be achieved at the local level through people's combined and cooperative actions?

This book focuses on small communities, particularly small rural communities. That of course raises the question of what a community is. Like the other concepts, this one is also ambiguous and contested. We take it to refer to all regularly interacting collectivities of people, or locally integrated institutional and social networks (Day and Murdoch 1993). A community is almost always self-defined as such. In most cases communities are geographically bounded, and characterized by multiple and overlapping networks of engagement. Place is important to them. However, communities do not have to be geographically focused. Communities of practice (Lesser and Prusak 2000) refer to networks of people with a common learning or action focus, as discussed by Kilpatrick and Vanclay in this book. Communities of interest are also bound by a common interest, or a common self-identifying feature such as ethnic origin, and may well be geographically dispersed. Virtual communities may exist in space rather than place. None-

theless, to maintain the label "community" requires that they form a regularly interacting system of networks.

Most of the cases in this book refer to rural communities. This should not be taken to mean that urban environments are not relevant to the arguments, simply that, being more complex, they require a separate analysis, one beyond the immediate scope of this book. We believe that smaller, rural communities are more vulnerable for two reasons. One is that small rural communities are experiencing high levels of stress within the current globalizing context. Many of them are single-resource economies and therefore more vulnerable to global market forces, and they are struggling to diversify their economies reactively. In both Canada and Australia, small rural communities are experiencing the highest levels of population loss and economic decline of all types of communities. On the other hand, they have the advantage of potentially high levels of bonding social capital. This creates the possibility for effective collective action. From an analytic point of view, this means that they make ideal natural laboratories in terms of identifying the dynamics operating within a clearly delineated system of social networks. Their achieving diversification, many of the authors in this book argue, is dependent on their access to resources, and particularly on their bridging and linking social capital and using it to draw on outside resources of expertise and financial capital, which urban centres because of their scale have in much greater abundance. Thus, we need to reconcile and reconnect small and urban communities in new, dynamic ways, in order to avoid large islands of haves and have-nots. Sustainable development is critical to this dynamic balance, as both are inversely affected by questions of scale.

This book is organized into four parts, similar to other titles in UBC Press's Sustainability and the Environment series. The first part, "Vision," contains chapters describing significant Canadian initiatives in some aspect of creating a sustainable society for Canada. The second part, "Connections," tries to reach beyond the field of sustainable development as conventionally defined. In this section we include authors and address topics from other fields, having in each case asked the author to draw connections to the field of sustainable development. In this way, we hope to increase interdisciplinary linkages between disciplines. The third part, "Action," is the heart of the book. It contains chapters and includes case studies making critical linkages between social capital and sustainable development, some more tenuous than others. The fourth part, "Assessing Progress," analyzes the contributions that sustainable development has made and can make to the social capital conversation. Authors were encouraged to make concrete proposals for action wherever possible, based on the premise that we know enough and, indeed, we must act now (Dale and Robinson 1995).

A number of themes guide the work of this book. Two in particular are worth mentioning at the outset. The first is the focus on collective action,

or at least its potential. In this we follow Melucci's (1996) analysis. Collective action is socially constructed, complex, and highly context-dependent within the system of relationships within which such action occurs. To quote Melucci,

> It [collective action] is a purposive orientation built on social relations within a field of opportunities and constraints. It therefore cannot be considered as either the simple effect of structural preconditions or the expression of values and beliefs. Individuals and groups acting collectively construct their action by means of organized investments: in other words, they define in cognitive and affective terms the field of possibilities and limits which they perceive, and they simultaneously activate their relationships to create meaning out of their joint behaviour, so as to give sense to their "being together" and to the goals they pursue. (Melucci 1996, 39)

We would argue, beyond this definition, that social capital is essential to sustainable development because reconciliation of the three imperatives can occur only through collective action, and collective action will not occur unless there is an adequate stock of social capital to provide the potential for this. Of course, that raises many questions, some of which will be pursued in the following chapters. How is social capital formed and mobilized? What prevents or inhibits its formation? Is it possible to have an adequate stock of social capital that nonetheless is not mobilized, and if so, what prevents its mobilization? More specifically, what are the mechanisms by which social capital is activated? How are decisions for action made and by whom? Is a democratic form of governance essential at this grounded level? What does that involve? What kind of leadership is effective? Are external resources required before collective action is productive, and if so, how are these resources accessed? Of recurring concern is the role of government in the mobilization of social capital for the implementation of sustainable development.

A second theme of the book starts to identify what goes wrong in the mobilization of collective action. We argue that, just as reconciliation of the three imperatives is essential for sustainability, so too a disconnection between these imperatives prevents effective collective action. There are many potential sources of disconnect. There is the obvious disconnection between the ecological, the social, and the economic. That occurs when one is pursued relentlessly at the expense of the others. It occurs when one of the capitals, usually the economic, dominates and swamps the other capitals (the ecological, the social, the human). However, our main focus in this book is the potential disconnection between levels of operation, that is, between the local or micro-level and the global or macro-level of operation. We have found a recurring tension between the interests and needs of the

small community and national agendas, between the discourse of the parochial and the discourse of big science. We are not arguing that one be privileged over the other, only that the validity of each be recognized. We are beginning to identify the complex set of interdependencies between all levels of action in which the total (or the global) is much more than the sum of its individual parts. But if those individual parts are ignored, or invalidated, or dominated, then the local disconnects from the larger level, and collective action at the local level is diminished. As you will discover in the following chapters, the outcomes of such disconnects are not only that the local is swamped by global forces, but that the integrity of the local community and its constituent groups is destroyed (see especially the chapters by Boydell and by Benn and Onyx). In those circumstances the small, local community simply is not viable. Two chapters in particular examine ecological and social capital in the context of Indigenous communities (Memmott and Meltzer, Moody and Cordua-von Specht). Although drawn from different regions of the world and seen through the eyes of different disciplines, the message of these two chapters is the same. The wisdom of traditional Indigenous practices provided far more sustainable ecological practices than is now the case. At the same time, the social capital that has always been generated from traditional Indigenous ways of organizing is regularly discounted by the requirements of the modern Anglo state. The disconnect is almost total. In the longer run, trust in government, and in science, is eroded, and the national agenda is not achieved either (see the chapter by Sheng).

As Schuurman (2003, 1008) argues, social capital has the potential to help understand the link between the social and the political: "Explicit attention should be awarded to the extent that power differentials within the social as well as between the social domain and the political domain are related to the absence of social capital and trust." If we are to understand the connections between social capital and sustainable development at the local level, we must understand power and conflict and how these are played out in the subpolitics of the local (Beck 1992). We go beyond the warm and fuzzies of social capital to identify the factionalism of vested interests and how these may create a kind of disconnect within the local. Collective action will not be effective if the collective is characterized by ongoing conflict. Yet conflict is surely inevitable. Several chapters explore the genesis and outcomes of such factionalism and vested interests, including those by Barraket, by Onyx and Osburn, by Boydell, and by Sheng. The issue then becomes how such conflict is managed. Silence and avoidance is unlikely to resolve the issues. Nor is dominance by a small elite, particularly one that draws its advantage from national or global economic interests. Yet on the positive side, there are examples of communities that are able to bridge their own divides and mobilize themselves for collective action, thus creating the "power to" of people power. A collective determination can overcome

external obstacles. We need to understand more about what makes this collective capacity possible in the face of conflict. We will explore the complexity and chaos of new forms of decision making. Democratic forms of governance require the active participation of many stakeholders at all levels of decision making. Several chapters argue for new ways of engaging citizen participation in decision making, and the potentially positive role government agencies can play (see chapters by Sparkes, Tansey, and Sheng in particular). New ideas are likely to emerge from new and diverse actors. One side of this positive positioning almost certainly entails the mobilization of new forms of collective learning, as described by Kilpatrick and Vanclay, and the constructive mobilization of diversity.

Of course, all these developments depend on the capacity for measurement. We are in the very early stages of realizing our capacity to measure either ecological integrity or social capital at the local level, let alone the impact of either on current practices. The chapters that follow provide an exploration of a variety of forms of measurement, from the use of community surveys (see chapters by Black and Hughes, and by Sheng) to in-depth case studies (Onyx and Osburn, Memmott and Meltzer) to the creative use of simulations (Tansey) and various applications of action research techniques (Sparkes, Kirkpatrick and Vanclay). Several chapters argue that the measurement itself must be located and contextualized within the specific communities in question. Again, the failure to do so is most graphically evident in the case of Indigenous communities (Moody and Cordua-von Specht, Memmott and Meltzer)

The first two chapters provide interesting new theoretical perspectives on the potential relationships between social and ecological capital. Dale provides a vision of how the relationship between social capital and sustainable development may be conceptualized. Wilson explores the uncanny parallels between the essential system conditions of both ecological and social systems. Then follows the core of the book: ten chapters, which explore "Actions." We each grapple with some of the complexities of the themes outlined above, within and through the empirical specificity of real situations, communities, dilemmas. Notice that we draw on the knowledge of different disciplines and different literatures, yet come back to the same or very similar conclusions.

These are but some of the themes that will emerge in the following chapters. They have transpired from a deliberative dialogue between the authors, at a research conference where most papers were presented for scrutiny, not only by each other but also by an audience of other academics, government policy makers, and practitioners. Thus, we were able to explore the meaning of diversity within social capital but also within our own research. We, the writers of this book, are also diverse. We come from diverse disciplines and background expertise. We carry different values and assumptions. We

use diverse methodologies and theoretical paradigms. The project of this book represents a deliberative dialogue between Canadian and Australian research, culture, contexts, and policies. We share much in common, being large, resource-rich, English-speaking countries with a shared British tradition and common dilemmas within the global context. We share similar colonial histories, a similar disregard for Indigenous people's rights, a similar struggle to settle and exploit vast empty spaces, and similar development of single-industry towns, many of which are now struggling as resources are exhausted. *The Wellbeing of Nations* (Prescott-Allen 2001) identifies both countries as having relatively good human well-being indicators but an ecosystem deficit, meaning that they have high standards of living but excessive impacts on the global environment. Australia's performance is worse on this measure of ecosystem well-being.

We also share a common passion that should be apparent in these chapters: a shared commitment to sustainable development and the search for knowledge to allow us to realize its implementation in this decade. Our epistemological base is also consistent. We hold neither a functionalist nor a structuralist position, as these both imply the kind of social determinism that makes deliberative collective action impossible. We fundamentally hold that it is both necessary and possible for deliberative human action to create a more sustainable world.

References

Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. 1980. *The Logic of Practice.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

–. 1985. "The Forms of Capital." In J.G. Richardson, ed., *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education.* New York: Greenwood Press.

Canadian Consortium for Sustainable Development Research (CCSDR). 1998. Mandate Statement.

Coleman, J. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 94: 95-120.

Dale, A. Forthcoming. *Integrated Resource Management.* Toronto: Oxford Press.

–. 2001. *At the Edge: Sustainable Development in the 21st Century.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Dale, A., and J.B. Robinson. 1995. *Achieving Sustainable Development.* Vancouver: UBC Press.

Day, G., and J. Murdoch. 1993. "Locality and Community: Coming to Terms with Place." *Sociological Review* 41(1): 82-111.

Fine, B. 2001. *Social Capital versus Social Theory: Political Economy and Social Science at the Turn of the Millennium.* London: Routledge.

Fukuyama, F. 1995. *Trust: The Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity.* London: Penguin.

Harriss, J. 2002. *Depoliticizing Development: The World Bank and Social Capital.* London: Anthem Press.

Leonard and Onyx. 2004. *Social Capital and Community Building: Spinning Straw into Gold.* London: Janus.

Lesser, E., and L. Prusak. 2000. "Communities of Practice, Social Capital and Organisational Knowledge." In E.L. Lesser, M.A. Fontaine, and J.A. Slusher, eds., *Knowledge and Communities.* Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Melucci, A. 1996. *Challenging Codes: Collective Action in the Information Age.* Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press.

Misztal, B. 1996. *Trust in Modern Societies.* Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

Onyx, J., and P. Bullen. 2000. "Measuring Social Capital in Five Communities." *Journal of Applied Behavioural Science* 36(1): 23-42.

Portes, A. 1998. "Social Capital: Its Origins and Applications in Modern Sociology." *Annual Review of Sociology* 24(1): 1-24.

Prescott-Allen, R. 2001. *The Wellbeing of Nations.* Washington, DC: Island Press.

Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Putnam, R., R. Leonardi, and R. Nanetti. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Robinson, J., and J. Tinker. 1998. "Reconciling Ecological, Economic, and Social Imperatives." In J. Schnurr and S. Holtz, eds., *The Cornerstone of Development: Integrating Environmental, Social and Economic Policies.* Ottawa: International Development Research Centre; New York: Lewis Publishers.

Schuller, T. 2001. "The Complementary Roles of Human and Social Capital." *Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 2(1): 18-24.

Schuurman, F. 2003. "Social Capital: The Politico-Emancipatory Potential of a Disputed Concept." *Third World Quarterly* 24(6): 991-1010.

Woolcock, M. 1998. "Social Capital and Economic Development: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis and Policy Framework." *Theory and Society,* 27: 151-208.

–. 2001. "The Place of Social Capital in Understanding Social and Economic Outcomes." *Canadian Journal of Policy Research* 2(1): 11-17.

Woolcock, M., and D. Narayan. 2001. "Implications for Development Theory, Research and Policy." *World Bank Research Observer* 15: 225-49.