



Social Assets

summary report

A NEW APPROACH
TO UNDERSTANDING
AND WORKING
WITH COMMUNITIES

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This report describes the findings of a project designed to generate estimates of what have been called **'social assets'** at small area level. The term **'social assets'** has been used as short hand to describe supporting networks of relationships within and between communities together with the level and effectiveness of community organisation. It is argued that attention should be paid to such assets since they are pivotal in assisting the development of even the most deprived local communities.

Preface

On behalf of my colleagues listed below I wish to introduce you to an innovative research project which we believe makes an exciting contribution to the continuing debate on how best to develop and service local communities within NI.

This research was carried out during 2008 by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland [CFNI] and Community Evaluation Northern Ireland [CENI] and was managed by the inter organisational Steering Group shown overleaf. Whilst the steering group endorses the research, it should be noted that any views expressed are those of the research team and not necessarily of the Departments and agencies represented on the Steering Group.

This research, building on an earlier pilot project by the same team, aimed to generate estimates of “social assets” at local area level across Northern Ireland which could then be used to complement existing decision making mechanisms.

Funding for the research was provided by a number of the partner organisations represented on the Steering Group and the terms of reference for this assignment were agreed by all the partner organisations at the outset.

- This project was focussed on generating information on the social assets of communities in order to widen the policy debate and, hopefully, enhance existing decision making mechanisms;
- No attempt was being made to replace or disregard already established methodologies currently used within NI;
- Findings from the research have been professionally and robustly evaluated by the steering group to provide an opinion on their integrity, objectivity and usefulness;
- While professionally robust and defensible, the research methodology also had to be responsive to local situations, easily updateable and reasonably inexpensive;
- Potential models for future development and usage were to be identified if possible;
- Findings from the research were to be disseminated in an appropriate manner.

It is our opinion that these terms of reference have been achieved and can be substantiated by the evidence provided in the executive summary and main report. These reports outline some potential policy applications; however, we recommend that using the data within policy settings should only be undertaken with the following caveats:

- **the qualitative and quantitative data should be examined together.** Following assessment, different places may have been allocated the same scores, but the additional commentary on the respective Nominal Group Technique [NGT] sessions may point to different assessments of the local situation in each area. This is particularly important given that the NGT panels were made up of different sets of local stakeholders and, even though considerable care was taken to standardise the process, there may be some scoring variation amongst the various panels;
- **the quantitative scores are not normative**, i.e. low scores are not necessarily bad and high scores are not necessarily good. Rather, they capture some of the complexity of local social life to give a more textured understanding of the relationships and dynamics of geographical communities;

- **the quantitative scores are not an alternative to the Multiple Deprivation Measure nor can they be used in a similar ‘stand alone’ fashion.** Deprived areas may score highly on some of the social capital variables and affluent areas may score lowly – neither is a judgement on the areas concerned;
- **These data are time bound**, i.e. their validity and relevance will decay over time. If they prove useful to policy makers and to the voluntary and community sector, some thought should be given to repeating the NGT exercise every three to five years.

Final decisions have yet to be taken on how the data will be made available to the wider public, particularly in light of the above caveats. It is likely, however, that the data will be made available on the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service together with a short user guide.

Despite such cautions, the contention here is that this exercise has provided important complementary data for policy makers and community-based organisations alike in permitting a more textured understanding of community life.

In conclusion I would like to thank again all my colleagues in the Steering Group, Brendan , Mike & Kat and their colleagues from CFNI and CENI who carried out the research and all the people from statutory agencies and community organisations across all of NI who gave so freely of their time and experience in participating in this research.

Yours sincerely

Jack O’Connor
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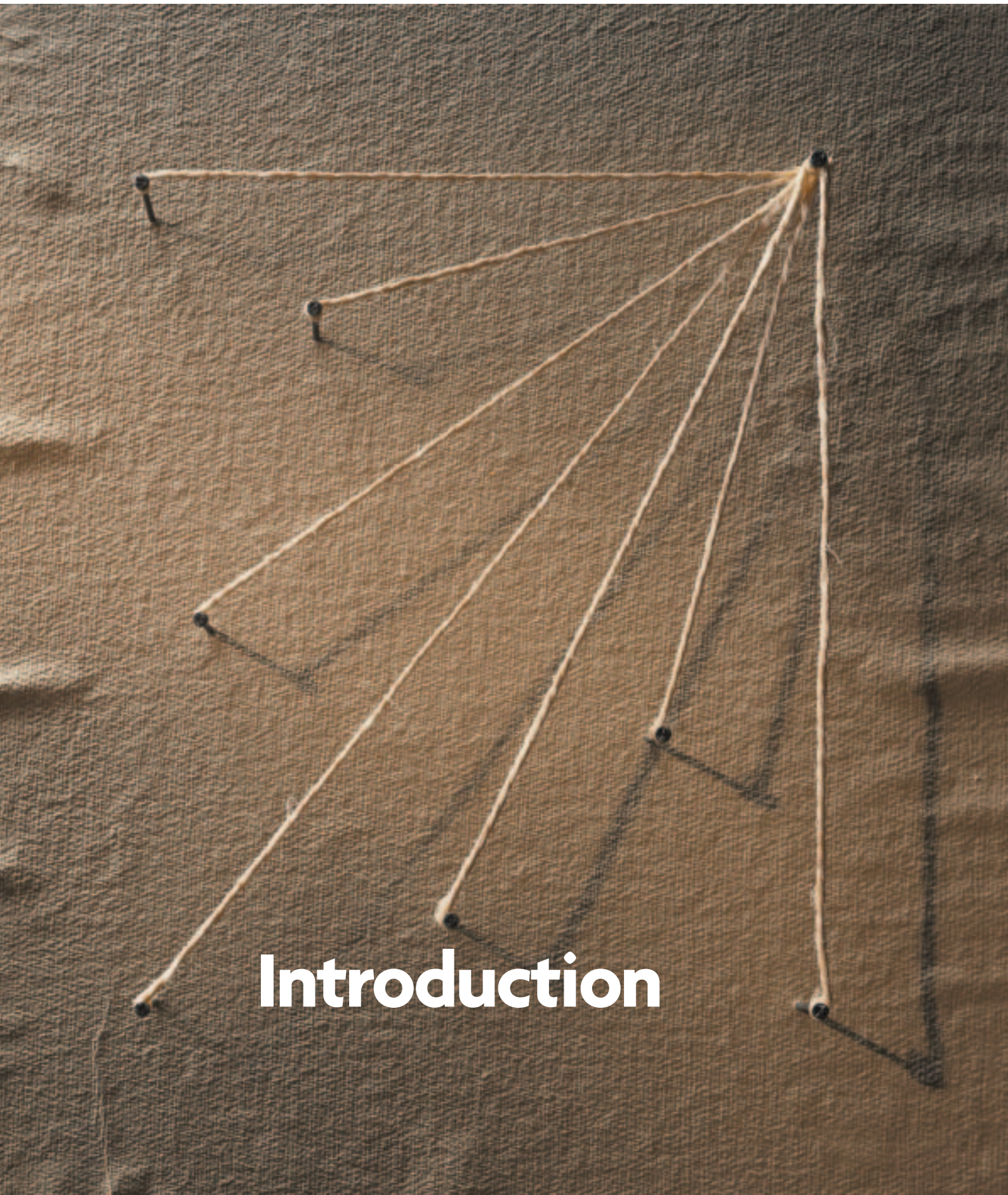
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Introduction

The Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) and Community Evaluation Northern Ireland (CENI) have recently completed a joint research project, supported by a range of funders and coordinated by the Department for Social Development [DSD].

This research was designed to explore local relationships and networks within small geographical areas across Northern Ireland that have been collectively entitled 'community social assets'. The core contention within the report is that policy makers and programme managers should be aware of the level of social assets within communities as well as their social needs as they plan and design interventions.

Traditionally, programmes have targeted areas using measures of need or deprivation. The objective of this research was not to suggest that levels of need/deprivation should be replaced as the determining factor, but rather that decision making could be complemented and enhanced by an understanding of the level and nature of social assets within communities.

For example, two areas with relatively similar deprivation scores (i.e. using the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, 2005) could be regarded as experiencing the same levels of deprivation. However, objective observation might indicate a marked difference in terms of the state of the physical and social infrastructure between the two. This difference, it is suggested, can be explained by the possession or absence of particular social assets; for instance, how well connected and settled individuals are in such communities, or how well organised and represented they are by active and effective community organisations.

The term 'social assets' has been coined as shorthand for the visible and invisible features that make some communities appear more resilient and sustainable than others. The CFNI/CENI project defined social assets in terms of a number of factors including:

- **Capacity** (the number of community organisations)
- **Capability** (the assessed effectiveness of such organisations)
- **Social capital** (i.e. levels of bonding, bridging and linking social capital within the community).

It is the interaction of these factors that can determine the particular social asset base of a community.

The fact that community and voluntary organisations are based within civil society, depend for their very existence on community commitment and solidarity and claim to operate by enhancing both suggested that the concept of social capital might be crucial to capturing certain dimensions of their work.

Given that many organisations within the voluntary and community sector complain that this key dimension remains invisible to the evaluation and decision making frameworks employed by their funders it was considered that a social assets approach could offer:

- A framework for capturing (and therefore evaluating) aspects of community-based activity previously neglected affording community and voluntary organisations the opportunity to demonstrate (and be funded for) added value beyond the delivery of specific social welfare outputs;
- The opportunity for voluntary and community organisations to transparently demonstrate what they can achieve in this domain;
- An introduction of social capital into the debate about performance indicators for community and voluntary organisations. This challenges funders to recognise that community involvement and solidarity are important, but also challenges funded organisations to demonstrate their contribution to such civic involvement and solidarity.



Measuring Social Capital

Measuring Social Capital

There is a range of existing data available that would allow us to measure the capacity and capability elements of social assets such as the NICVA database and the Government database (which provides data on the spatial distribution of funded community-based organisations). In addition, the social needs or quality of life of local communities can be measured using the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measures (MDM) and other data held on the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service¹.

However, obtaining measures of local social capital is more difficult. This research project utilised a method known as the Nominal Group Technique (NGT) that seeks to tap into local knowledge and expertise to obtain a 'score' that indicates the strength of a particular phenomenon, in this case, dimensions of social capital. Local NGT panels were established in each District Council area in Northern Ireland (at least one, but as many as five panels for each District Council, depending on the size and geographic make-up of the area). These panels consisted of representatives from community and voluntary groups, statutory agencies, funding bodies and other specialist groups.

The project worked at the level of 'Super Output Area' (SOA). Super Output Areas are made up of census 'Output Areas' and consist of populations of approx 1500-2000 people. While SOAs as statistical entities are not descriptions of actual communities, they do have the advantage of being smaller than ward level and are readily identifiable by local people². The primary advantage is that deprivation scores were also presented at this level in the MDM index and other administrative data available on the Northern Ireland Neighbourhood Information Service³.

Social capital is theorised as having three forms:

- **Bonding**, which is about the ways in which we trust and relate to others who are like us. In this case, *bonding* reflects amounts of trust and the quality of relationships that exist within communities;
- **Bridging** is about trust and relationships between individuals and groups who are unlike each other. Here, *bridging* is concerned with a community's relationships with other communities, particularly where residential segregation is the dominant pattern;
- **Linking** concerns the quality of relations across social classes or between communities and decision makers.

In the NGT exercise, each panel of stakeholders assigned a score to each SOA for each form of social capital. The scores ranged from 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). They also assigned scores (between 1 and 5) to each SOA for community capacity (the number and density of community organisations in an area) and to their overall level of capability (How able they are at drawing in resources, managing funding and resources, carrying out programmes and activities based on need, being representative and working with other groups).

In addition to the scores, all stages of the group discussions were minuted and these comments and minutes provide valuable qualitative data for each area and add further explanatory value and detail to the findings. It is of course acknowledged that the scores arrived at are representative of the "time" that they were collated and that conditions and, therefore, scores assigned to the differing types of social capital may change over time.

At all stages of this research a steering group chaired by DSD and with representation from OFMdfM, PBNI, NIHE, EHSSB, Belfast City Council and NISRA reviewed and evaluated the process and outputs. Professional assessment of the methodology used and the outcomes derived from the research have brought a validity and robustness to the findings detailed on the next page.

¹See www.nisra.gov.uk/aboutus/default.asp2.htm

²This is generally the case, particularly in urban areas. There are 323 wards that are the same as their respective SOA and in Moyle Council 12 wards were combined to form 6 SOAs due to population size.

³See www.ninis.nisra.gov.uk



Research Findings

Research Findings

As expected, it was found that there was a tendency for most of the indicators to have a high proportion of middle scores (i.e. a high number of 3s) following the group discussions. This underlines the necessity to consider these allocated scores together with the written accounts of the NGT sessions. The involvement of a large number of local stakeholders in the scoring exercise generated useful qualitative material that will remain the more important of the two kinds of data.

(a) General Qualitative Findings

- **Bonding:** Areas which scored highly for bonding social capital were rare enough, but they represented areas with a good sense of community spirit, where relationships between residents of similar backgrounds were close and trusting and communities were tightly-knit. Areas which scored lowly, however, did so for a number of different reasons: sometimes this represented a “dormitory town” phenomenon where it was felt that residents simply used the area for sleeping, while they worked, shopped, socialised and sent their children to school somewhere else. Sometimes it was due to long-standing neighbourhood disputes. Sometimes there was a paramilitary element, or even a feud, which bitterly divided residents who were otherwise similar.
- **Bridging:** Areas which scored highly for bridging social capital represented communities which proactively reached out to others unlike themselves, where people of all different backgrounds would feel comfortable and welcome; whereas areas which scored lowly were affected by several different types of issues (occasionally all in the one place): severe sectarianism either between two communities within one single area or sectarian attitudes held by one community which kept it from reaching out to other areas; racism and racial attacks; insular and parochial tendencies which kept the area from interacting with any other communities; socio-economic class issues and, in one instance, homophobic attacks.
- **Linking:** The only real differences in scores for linking social capital revolved around the “latent linking” phenomenon. Because panels were asked to score the ability of residents in an area to link (to have access to those in power/decision makers, to lobby, to effect change in their area, to mobilise the community etc), this was not dependent upon the existence of community groups. In other words, some areas scored well because they had community organisations that carry out this linking role on behalf of the community. Other areas scored highly even though they did not have a community organisation, because the residents on their own were all perceived to have the ability to link, either through their political, professional or social connections. In these types of areas, community organisations might not be necessary or they might mobilise around a particular issue (the erection of a mobile phone mast, planning issues, an asbestos dump etc) and then fade away again.
- **Overall Social Capital:** Panellists were asked to consider an overall social capital score for an area by considering the “degree to which you would want to live in the area” and basing their responses solely on the community. The rationale for asking this was to get across the point that just adding bonding + bridging + linking does not give a composite social capital score. For example, some participants indicated a preference for areas that were very quiet and where you could remain anonymous, but in which a person of any type of background would feel safe and comfortable (i.e. low bonding and relatively high bridging). Other participants tended to prefer areas with a vibrant community life, where everyone knows each other and is attached to their own area, but does not feel the need to move outside of it for anything (i.e. high bonding and relatively low bridging).

- **Community Capacity:** Panels used the list of organisations identified at the start of the discussion on a particular area in order to score the number/density/type of groups (capacity). If an area had no groups or a very few groups that only served a small number of people or a single interest, then the area scored a 1. If an area had a large number of groups which served the entire population of the area and a wide range of interests (i.e. there were no gaps in provision for any age group, gender, ethnic background etc and they covered interests such as sport, church, cultural etc) then it scored a 5.
- **Community Capability:** These scores were based on five factors – How able are the groups in this area at 1) drawing in funding and resources; 2) managing funding and resources; 3) carrying out programmes and activities based on need; 4) working with other groups and communities; 5) being representative of the entire population of the area (or the sector they claim to represent, if a single interest group). If the groups in an area, on the whole, did none or only one of these things well, they scored a 1. If they did all of them well, they scored a 5.
- **Capacity and Capability:** It was frequently repeated how critical it was that community capacity and community capability were discussed/scored separately. This was due to the fact that some areas were characterised by large numbers of incapable or competing groups (high levels of capacity and low capability), while other areas had only one or a few groups, but they were perceived to be supremely competent and effective (low capacity and high capability). Finally, areas which had no groups automatically scored a 1 for capability (there were no groups to be capable); however, many of these areas scored very well on linking social capital, indicating that the residents themselves were adept at getting things done individually/independently and there might not be a need for a community group.

(b) General Quantitative Findings

- Within the three dimensions of social capital, the general picture that emerges is one of higher levels of bonding and linking social capital and lower levels of bridging.
- The various social capital variables operated relatively independently of each other with the exception of the association between bridging and overall social capital.
- Social capital was unevenly distributed across space - there were significant differences between urban and rural areas with rural areas scoring higher in both bonding and bridging than urban areas.
- Rural areas were deemed to have greater organisational capacity, though differences in capability scores were less marked.
- Comparing across District Council areas, a more complicated picture emerges: For instance, Belfast and Lisburn, both urban and in the East, exhibit slightly higher bonding and bridging scores in contrast to Derry and Newry and Mourne, each more rural and located in the West and South respectively .

(c) Relationship between Variables

The strong association between the bonding social capital variable and the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005 found in the pilot research (conducted in 2006 across 447 SOAs) was replicated, with high deprivation found to be associated with high bonding and low bridging:

- SOAs with higher percentages of the population unemployed or economically inactive tended to have higher bonding social capital but lower bridging social capital.

- Conversely, SOAs with high rates of full-time employment had higher bridging social capital.
- SOAs with high percentages of the population without qualifications tended to exhibit high bonding scores.
- SOAs with higher percentages reporting good health tended to score lower on bonding social capital, but higher on bridging.

Comparing capacity or density of community organisation with data held on the Government Database, suggests that the capacity variable does give an indication of where community organisation is concentrated in Northern Ireland.

Comparing NGT data with social capital questions in the Continuous Household Survey indicates a similar pattern in the distributions.

The association between the social capital variables and community background was relatively weak so a separate residential segregation variable was created. The residential segregation variable was constructed as: 90 per cent or more of Catholic Community Background; 75 to 89 per cent Catholic Community Background, less than 75 per cent of either Catholic or Protestant Community Background; 75-89 per cent Protestant Community Background and; 90 per cent or more of Protestant Community Background. SOAs that did not fit into these categories were excluded.

This found that:

- SOAs that were at least 90 per cent of Catholic Community Background had the highest scores on bonding social capital.
- SOAs of concentrated Protestant Community Background had lower bonding social capital scores.
- The least residentially segregated SOAs were characterised by higher scores for bridging social capital.

(d) Comparison with Cohesion Indicators

NISRA made data available which allowed the social capital scores to be compared with a range of indicators of community cohesion. The comparison with the cohesion indicators suggests that more 'cohesive' areas tend to have higher bonding scores, but that more diverse areas score higher with bridging social capital.

- Bonding social capital scores tend to be higher in areas characterised by low population turnover.
- Bonding social capital scores tend to be lower in areas characterised by higher shares of migrant populations.
- There is higher bridging social capital in areas with greater migrant populations.
- Communities living in areas with moderate differences in capital values of domestic properties are the most bonded.
- Areas with large ranges between minimum and maximum capital values have more high bridging scores.

Conclusions

The various analyses exploring the relationship between the NGT scores and other indicators of social capital and community organisation suggest that this research exercise has captured something of the complexity of relationships within local areas in Northern Ireland.

Comparison with socio-economic variables suggests that deprived areas are characterised by strong internal relationships but weak external ones and this was consistent across a range of variables indicative of deprivation – high levels of unemployment, low levels of educational attainment etc. This was particularly so for areas that are residentially segregated.

These findings suggest that community development programmes should emphasise relationship building with other communities rather than just concentrate on strong internal support and identity, in order to build bridging social capital. Comparison with cohesion indicators also points to the ways in which diversity and bonding run in different directions. The impacts of more than thirty years of community division have not been overcome.

In addition to collecting a set of scores for each Super Output Area, supporting qualitative data was also collected from those stakeholders involved in the scoring process. This qualitative information has significant value in that it adds further detail to the scores, as well as identifying differences between areas which scored similarly, but often for a completely different set of reasons. It can enable statutory agencies, funders, community organisations or anyone else with a particular interest in a specific area to access a quick snapshot profile of the social assets in that area at the time of the panel sessions. This could serve as a basic baseline picture of the area, as a starting point for discussion on needs in the area or as a means of comparing two or more neighbourhoods/areas. Finally, it will be useful in terms of identifying a number of themes emerging in certain types of areas right across Northern Ireland.



Policy Applications

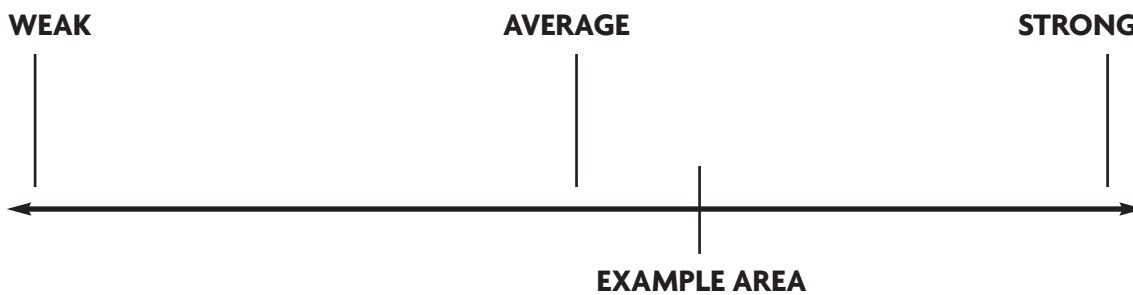
Policy Applications

Those working in communities and the variety of programmes targeted at them should pay attention to local relationships and local organisation as assets to help development. The data generated by this exercise can help do so in three ways:

1. First, as data that can increase the understanding of particular geographic communities and inform local development strategies;

Reviewing the combination of qualitative and quantitative NGT data for a particular area provides a short-hand description of the area's assets (scores), plus an understanding of the broader characteristics that determined the scores (qualitative data), which together can provide an evidence base on which to identify actions or tasks to inform a development agenda. A worked example from the data provides an illustration. The SOA chosen to exemplify an application for the data is an urban area.

On a social assets continuum the area would be considered as average to above average.



The issue is how to strengthen those assets so that they can be sustained to assist the area's development into a stronger, more sustainable community – or, more importantly, how to ensure that those existing assets do not deteriorate and so weaken the infrastructure of the community.

The following table indicates the social assets scores for the area explained in terms of a strengths/weaknesses/ challenges typology.

Score	Strengths	Weaknesses	Challenges
Bonding 3	Stable population, housing: low turnover-large demand, relatively low antisocial behaviour ('internal policing') engagement of local people in initiatives.	Disengagement of youth – middle teens esp. disaffected not involved. Inter-group rivalry excludes some from participating.	Investment in, and organisation of, youth provision for mid teens. Widening of engagement, participation of different groups in community.
Bridging 2	Poor but improving. Forum engaged in cross-border youth visits. Primary school and crèche have some mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds.	Single identity, isolated location - insular, parochial, exclusive to outsiders. Little collaborative working with outside groups.	Challenge to broaden perspective of community – collaborative/partnership projects with other groups/communities.
Linking 4	Improving relations with key agencies inc HE, DSD, BELB. Community robust in engaging and making its case.	Location of statutory services. Poor relations with DEL (funding) Excluded from Neighbourhood Renewal.	Formalise relations with key agencies, more strategic engagement in planning and delivery of services.
Capacity 4	Good infrastructure of groups centred around the Network, crèche & SureStart.	Dependent on short-term statutory funding. Lack of economic development initiatives.	More sustainable long-term funding. More emphasis on economic development initiatives.
Capability 4	Existing groups are well organised and respected with good leadership capable of engaging.	Dependency on key individuals poses questions re longer-term sustainability.	Succession planning to limit impact of loss of key individuals.

Translating the example into a more generalised approach to area development might result in the following priorities:

Community Profile	Intervention
High Deprivation Low Social Assets	Community Development to build assets and capacity within communities and contribute to positive change i.e. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting/developing community infrastructure Promoting volunteering and new models of community & civic engagement e.g. Time Banks Building relations and cross sectoral partnership.
High Deprivation Moderate Social Assets	Capacity building to strengthen assets , support infrastructure and encourage collaboration i.e. skills development in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership, governance structures, quality standards, evaluation, volunteer development, partnership working etc.
High Deprivation High Social Assets	Facilitation to utilise assets i.e. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting partnership initiatives with statutory bodies to deliver local services or Supporting the development of social economy initiatives.

In each of the above scenarios, it is assumed that the local area has been deemed deprived using MDM; however, the different character of social assets in each suggests different forms of intervention. Therefore, the idea is to tailor interventions to what will have the most impact. Importantly, this process is not about curtailing the flow of funding to one community and increasing it to another but of aligning the alleviation of social need to development opportunity.

2. Second, by combining these with other socio-economic data to inform the design, delivery and evaluation of community development programmes;

For example, the Communities in Transition Programme (CIT) managed by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland, is a proactive development programme of support and funding to areas of weak community infrastructure and community tension. This programme used the CFNI/CENI social assets data in conjunction with other quantitative and qualitative datasets in order to identify a shortlist of areas for inclusion in the programme throughout Northern Ireland, as well as building the social assets model into the framework for evaluating the local projects.

3. Finally, as supporting evidence to help develop tailored programmes of service delivery.

A variety of statutory providers represented on the steering group see utility in these datasets in the delivery of programmes, particularly in profiling areas being considered for area based regeneration strategies. The social assets information will help these agencies to target interventions where they will have most impact and also in the evaluation of the impact of such interventions on a community. For example:

Health

The information presented from this research provides a 3 dimensional effect to looking at small area statistics. It can provide staff in health and social care with an excellent additional tool which will add to our understanding of community. This data, added to the existing measures and local knowledge, will help focus the type of health intervention that is needed. Added to existing information available on health the datasets can assist in:

- ▀ Identifying local communities that do not directly engage with the statutory health sector on policy development;
- ▀ Helping local health and social care staff to identify the most appropriate method of intervention which best suits the capacity and capability of the local community;
- ▀ Enabling the design of bespoke health improvement interventions, and;
- ▀ Ensuring active local engagement in the development of health services.

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

The data will be useful to the Housing Executive in profiling areas being considered for area based regeneration strategies. The data will also be useful in measuring the impact of the Executive's work with the voluntary and community sectors and identifying communities with limited social capital, capacity and capability.

The data may also inform the Housing Executive's Community Safety Strategy Communication Plan. In areas with poor community infrastructure, capacity and hard to reach groups the community may not have the confidence to report incidents of antisocial behaviour. Identifying and offering support to these communities in reporting antisocial behaviour will help stabilise the estates and contribute to more sustainable and confident communities.

Probation Board, NI

- PBNI allocated 7% of its annual budget to community development and voluntary organisations. This equates to over £1 million per year. The Social Assets information will help PBNI to allocate funds where they will have most impact and also in the evaluation of the impact of such interventions on a community.
- Reducing Re-offending Strategy: IMPACT is an example of how appropriate funding has impacted on crime within an area. Any additional information that will assist in the appropriate allocation of funds to a project is therefore welcome.
- Estates Review: Primarily decisions on office locations have been 'needs based' within areas, i.e. areas where there is a high residential population of offenders. This information could add to the decision making process by also providing information on useful voluntary agencies within an area or particular needs within an area.

Finally the Volunteer Development Agency has conducted research to inform the development of a Volunteer Strategy for Northern Ireland. The social assets data will provide an additional evidence base to help identify capacity across different areas and inform the development of volunteering at a local level.

In summary, the core aim of the project was to assist decision making for policy makers and the voluntary and community sector in working within geographic communities. While the caveats for the proper use of the data should be stressed, there is ample reason to suggest its broad utility. The research findings have clearly indicated three potential uses:

- adding to what we already know about geographical communities;
- helping design and target community development programmes;
- assisting the design and delivery of mainstream statutory programmes.

This publication has received support from the Northern Ireland Community Relations Council which aims to promote a pluralist society characterised by equity, respect for diversity, and recognition of interdependence. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Council.

Community Relations Council

