Tradition, society and development: social capital in Papua New Guinea

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Time and time again, comments on the status of social and economic development in Papua New Guinea have sounded the same concern: despite the great potential given by the existence of vast stocks of natural resources, Papua New Guinea has never managed to transform its riches into improvements in the standard of living for the majority of the population. Explanations given for these shortfalls include inefficiency and ineffectiveness of the public sector, lack of adequate infrastructure, difficulties in communication, and increasing corruption and rent-seeking. This paper contributes to the debate by discussing recent interest around the concept of social capital in development theory and policy, arguing that some of the constraints to Papua New Guinea's development stem from the problematic transition from a traditional social structure to a more modern one.

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Four kinds of capital

The wealth of a nation, and therefore the potential it has to develop, depends crucially on the stocks of different kinds of capital that it has at its disposal. Those stocks constitute a country's endowment that will influence its development path. Recent work at the World Bank defines sustainable development as 'a process whereby future generations receive as much capital per capita as—or more than—the current generation has available' (World Bank 1997b:77). Traditionally, the kinds of capital considered in this approach include natural capital, physical capital, and human capital. Natural capital depends on the stock of natural resources such as oil, minerals, forests, marine resources and others; physical capital is constituted by produced assets, for example in the form of machinery and infrastructure; and human capital is embodied in the skills and level of education of the population. Taken together, these have been seen as constituting the wealth of a nation, forming the basis for its social and economic development.

Nevertheless, history has shown that countries with similar endowments of these three kinds of capital have reached very differing levels of development. That can also be true of different communities within the same country (Putnam 1993a). Differing stocks of what has been termed 'social capital' have been proposed as a possible explanation for such differences. Social capital can be considered to be the 'missing link' (World Bank 1997b), the fourth kind of capital that determines a community's or a country's potential to achieve positive development outcomes.

What is social capital?

The concept of social capital has received a lot of attention in the field of social sciences in the last few years, as an important factor in promoting wellbeing, socioeconomic development and better government in societies, both in the developed and in the developing world. Despite the widespread interest it has raised among researchers and policymakers in international organisations, governments and non-government organisations alike, it is very difficult to find agreement on its exact meaning.

Coleman, in what is considered to be the pioneering work on the topic, says 'social capital…is created when the relations among persons change in ways that facilitate action' (Coleman 1990:304), and manifests itself in the form of obligations and expectations, information sharing, norms and sanctions, and social organisation. Thus, it constitutes an asset that individuals can use to their advantage, to reach goals they could not reach otherwise.

Along similar lines, Putnam, in his influential book on the performance of regional governments in Italy, claims that social capital can be described 'in the form of norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement', and that it refers to 'features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of a society by facilitating coordinated actions' (Putnam 1993a:167). Communities and societies which are endowed with a large stock of social capital are then considered to be more efficient and equitable, in the sense that they have a greater capability of resolving problems of collective action, relying on the reciprocal commitments that their members are willing to make on the base of the trust they place in each other. Putnam's case is based on the observation that Northern Italy has a long-standing tradition of what he terms 'horizontal associations', like choir groups, football clubs and similar others, within which people learn that cooperation and reciprocal trust can help them achieve their common objectives. This cooperation in turn leads to a higher level of citizen involvement in matters of public interest, giving governments an incentive to perform better. The fact that local governments in Northern Italy were much more effective than in Southern Italy, where social structures do not rely on trust but on 'vertical' patron–client relationships, proves in Putnam's view the hypothesis that social capital is a fundamental component of successful development.

More recently, the World Bank has defined social capital as 'the informal rules, norms and long-term relationships' (World Bank 1997a:114) which can explain differences in the nature and intensity of popular collective activity in different communities or nations. The World Bank has also claimed that social capital may contribute to the explanation of development success stories by defining the ways in which 'economic actors interact and organise themselves to generate growth and development' (World Bank 1997b:77). Their Social Capital Initiative tests these hypotheses by promoting projects that can shed light on definitions, measurements and possible impacts of social capital (World Bank 1998).

Despite the diversity of definitions available, there are a number of themes running through all accounts of social capital, which help find some common ground for getting a clearer picture of its nature. First of all, all definitions agree that social capital is an aspect of social organisation, in the sense that it is concerned with relations between and among people and groups of people, and with the way in which these interactions are structured. Second, they all link together the economic, social and political spheres of life, and try and look at the way in which these influence each other. Third, they all refer to two distinct sets of issues: on one side to norms, values and traditions which promote cooperation and reciprocity, and on the other side to networks, relationships and organisations that bring people together to try and solve common problems. Finally, they all tend to view social capital as something inherently 'positive', contributing to economic growth and better quality of life for everyone, with no significant downside.

In general, looking at the various definitions of social capital and at the way in which the concept has been used, we can distinguish different areas or domains of social organisation that may constitute sources of what we have termed social capital (see Harriss and de Renzio 1997). They include

- family and kinship connections, relating to the single household, the extended family, the clan, based on 'strong' ties of blood or ethnicity. Family businesses, sharing practices, and traditional social security mechanisms are some of the important manifestations of this form of social capital
- wider social networks, related to groups and organisations that link individuals belonging to different families or kinship groups in common activities for different purposes (economic cooperatives, sports clubs, religious groups, social movements)
- cross-sectoral linkages, or 'networks of networks' that link together organisations belonging to different sectors of society (non-government organisations, grassroots organisations, government agencies, private firms) in the search for solutions to complex problems, by combining different resources and different kinds of knowledge
- political capital, representing the norms and networks that shape the relations between civil society and the state, giving a society the capability to mediate conflict by hearing, channeling, and composing multiple citizen demands; political capital relates to the 'informal institutional arrangements' that may lead, on one hand, to clientelism, rent-seeking and exclusion, and on the other to effective representation, accountability and participation; business associations, trade unions, and political parties are among the organisations through which this form of social capital works
- institutional and policy framework, or the set of formal rules and norms (constitutions, laws, regulations, policies) that regulate public life in a society, and that determine, for example, political and civil rights, regulate contract enforcement and the structure of property rights, and so on
- social norms and values, defined by a community's or a nation's shared cultural beliefs and the effects these have on the functioning of society as a whole; these norms and values bear on all other forms of social capital as well, but even so they can be considered to represent a further and more general form of social capital in themselves.

These different sources can be seen as functioning at different levels, from the very micro-level of the family to the very macro-level of the organisation of the State and its relations with society at large through shared norms. In our discussion on Papua New Guinea we will focus mostly on this more general distinction. We will look at the influence that kinship connections have in terms of regulating social interactions, and on state / society relations as they have come to be structured in the existing post-colonial regime and in its links with the traditional past.

Nature of social capital—a 'public good'

Another useful distinction that has emerged in the social capital debate and that will turn out to be useful in our discussion is that between sources and consequences of social capital (see Portes and Landolt 1996, Woolcock 1998). The sources of social capital identified above show us in which ways and in which contexts people come to rely on each other and to cooperate to reach a common objective. But they do not tell us about how individuals and groups will use their existing stocks of social capital, and what the costs and benefits of their common endeavors will be, both to themselves and to others. In the literature, this aspect has often been overlooked, and the argument that social capital has only positive effects has rarely been questioned.

Looking at the consequences of social capital within groups, and drawing from the literature on ethnic entrepreneurship, Woolcock (1998), points out how social capital also has a 'downside', since a group with strong ties can place heavy obligations on some individual members, while allowing other members to free-ride. These disincentives to personal motivation and advancement represent negative consequences of the existence of high stocks of social capital. He then goes on to argue that in order to contribute to positive developmental goals, social organisation needs to be characterised by a combination of 'embeddedness' (strong intra-community ties at the micro-level and healthy state-society relations at the macro-level) and 'autonomy' (links with broader extra-community institutions at the micro-level and independent, coherent bureaucracies at the macro-level).

On a more general level, the same unquestioning attitude towards the positive nature of social capital has led to the claim that the higher the level of social capital, the better off a community or a society will be. The more people can trust each other, and the more they are involved in social networks that promote cooperation, the more the positive effects of their joint efforts will spread across society. This conclusion follows from considering social capital as a 'public good'; something that, once created, 'is not the private property of any of the persons who benefit from it' (Coleman 1990:315), and whose effects will spill over to the community at large.

This argument is flawed in many respects. For a good to qualify as 'public', two conditions have to hold: non-rivalry in consumption, which means that the good cannot be appropriated by any single individual for private consumption; and non-excludability of benefits, meaning that it is very costly to stop someone from enjoying the benefits provided by the good (as in the classic examples of clean air or safe streets). While the first condition seems to hold, 'by definition, social capital can only be acquired by a group of people and requires a form of cooperation among them' (World Bank 1997b:82), the second does not necessarily, since in many cases the benefits of social capital only belong to the people who actually share the same norms or the same level of trust, or who are part of the same network. In this sense social capital cannot be considered a public good, but is instead a 'club good', in which the members of the club enjoy a special status that they do not share with outsiders. This argument points to two important conclusions: first, 'if social capital is a resource available through social networks, the resources that some individuals claim come at the expense of others' (Portes and Landolt 1996); meaning that the distribution of social capital will be as important as its quantity, since it may be available to individuals on an unequal basis. In this sense, social exclusion may (and does) exist, even in societies characterised by high stocks of social capital. Second, it seems that the key issue is not whether or not social capital is a public good, but whether its use by persons or groups who possess it provides the wider community with collective benefits in the form of positive externalities.

For our purposes, it is useful to see social capital as belonging to a group (of whichever kind) that shares a certain set of values and goals. Most organisations are created or used by groups of people to pursue their specific goals. The effects of their joint actions will not necessarily benefit people outside the group (that is, kinship groups, business associations), and will not necessarily be positive (that is, criminal gangs, mafias). Nevertheless, the literature points to a number of characteristics of social relationships and of organisations that seem to contribute to the strengthening of social capital with positive consequences (see Narayan and Pritchett 1997, Putnam 1993b). Some of these characteristics can be defined as

- inclusive, diffuse, and voluntary membership, meaning that there are no rules that either automatically exclude certain individuals from becoming members of the organisation, or oblige them to become members
- participatory decision-making, relating to the functioning of the organisation; openness, transparency, and accountability should be looked at to ensure that norms of solidarity and trust exist inside the organisation
- horizontal linkages between individuals and organisations, bringing together agents from different backgrounds on equal terms, and therefore creating 'bridging' networks that 'link substantial sectors of the community and span underlying social cleavages' (Putnam 1995:665). Horizontal linkages are the opposite of vertical linkages based on authority, patronage and dependency
- positive impact, or positive 'externalities' associated with the activities of the organisation, to ensure that the embodied social capital is used for developmental ends and brings benefits to the wider community.

In the remainder of this paper we look at the ways in which social capital manifests itself at different levels in Papua New Guinea, at its sources and at its consequences, to try and draw some policy implications that can point to initiatives to build and strengthen social capital and its positive effects on development outcomes.

Micro-level social capital in Papua New Guinea: the *wantok* system

Papua New Guinea is a country of great cultural diversity. About 800 languages are spoken within its boundaries by tribes and clans belonging to a number of different ethnic groups. For a long time before the arrival of colonial powers, these groups lived in small isolated communities, existing as separate social systems, separated by geographical cleavages, differences in customs, and fear of warring tribes and sorcery (Simet and Iamo 1992). Over the decades, contact, communication and exchange intensified among some groups, mainly through trade networks and plantation work, while the more recent processes of urbanisation and nation-building have contributed to a partial overcoming of the inter-community cultural barriers. Nevertheless, there is hardly any doubt that geographic, ethnic and linguistic affiliation still represent the single most important source of social capital for individuals and groups in Papua New Guinea, mostly in the form of kinship connections. This can be easily seen in what has been termed the *wantok* system. The *wantok* system can be loosely defined as the system of relationships (or set of obligations) between individuals, characterised by some or all of the following

- common language (*wantok* = one talk)
- common kinship group
- common geographical area of origin
- common social associations or religious groups (Mannan 1978:200).

The *wantok* system is a salient feature of social organisation in Papua New Guinea, especially in urban areas (in the more traditional rural areas people are *wantoks* by definition).

Going back to the definition of social capital, the *wantok* system clearly constitutes a source of social capital since first of all it is embedded in social relations, and second because it provides opportunities for trust, cooperation and mutual benefit. The benefits of the *wantok* system are numerous: it provides a strong support network based on trust and solidarity (Monsell-Davis 1993:1); it can 'provide the prospective entrepreneur or businessman with cheap capital, cheap labour and cheap land' (Mannan 1978:202) and 'with some degree of risk insurance through pooling resources' (Mannan 1978:205); and it supplements for the lack of publicly provided social security and social welfare mechanisms (or social safety nets), thereby giving rise to subsistence affluence, or a state of self-sufficiency. At the same time, though, supporting the concerns expressed by Portes and Landolt (1996) and Woolcock (1998), this form of social capital imposes costs on the members of the group. The common tale of the income-earning individual who finds himself / herself unable to save any money or to advance his / her economic position because of the heavy demands that unemployed (or simply lazy) *wantoks* impose on the scarce earnings when pay-day comes, can be used as an example (*The National*, 27 September 1996, 19 June 1998). It shows how social capital, when it lacks 'autonomy', can actually function as a 'disincentive to initiative' (Monsell-Davis 1993:10). Dickson (1995) notes how 'cultural constraints are a very common problem in enterprise development' (Dickson 1995:44) in Papua New Guinea, and how many small businesses end up closing because of the obligation to extend credit or '*dinau*' to *wantoks* and of the strong communal orientation, combined with egalitarianism (what Portes and Landolt (1996) would term 'downward leveling pressures'). Moreover, in some cases, the same strict rules of reciprocity that govern interactions among *wantoks* can bear grim consequences. Sister J.P. Chao (1987) described how at 9-Mile Settlement in Port Moresby some of the poorest households were facing terrible hardship because of their inability to 'reciprocate', or to fulfil obligations to their kin in terms of contributing to expenses for traditional ceremonies and other common activities. For them, the social safety net was just not tight enough.

Another negative effect of the *wantok* system is its influence on the public service, where often appointments are made based on nepotism along kinship lines, and where there is a widespread lack of coordination and cooperation between groups belonging to different regions or clans. The magnitude of these effects are such that with every change of government 'political cronies of ministers rush for the top positions in the public service and statutory bodies that come under the jurisdiction of their *wantok* ministers' (Kavanamur 1998:39). This practice has become more acute in recent years. A major review of the public service found that there was a deteriorating sense of nationalism within the PNG Public Service and a weakening of the principle of one nation, one public service (Public Service Rationalisation Task Force 1993).

As a source of social capital, therefore, despite its positive effects and its strong 'embeddedness' in Papua New Guinea society, the *wantok* system seems to lack an appropriate level of 'autonomy' that would allow for broader and more positive development impacts. As Putnam puts it, 'dense but segregated horizontal networks (like the ones present in the *wantok* system) sustain cooperation within each group, but networks of civic engagement that cut across social cleavages nourish wider cooperation' (Putnam 1993a:175). The *wantok* system also lacks some of the desirable characteristics described above. The way membership is defined depends clearly on strong ties of kinship, and is therefore neither voluntary nor inclusive; moreover, social relations are based on a very restricted kind of reciprocity, which often implies mistrust of outsiders.

It can be argued that the definition of *wantok* system adopted above is too narrow, and that the concept of *wantok* in Papua New Guinea today can be interpreted in a much broader way, for example to include individuals from the same region, from the same university, with similar interests or other kinds of connection. The practice of inter-marriage has also partially contributed to changing the original meaning of the term (see Institute of National Affairs 1996). Moreover, there are examples in Papua New Guinea of organisations that are based on horizontal ties cutting across kinship lines, or wider social networks. Sports clubs, church groups, women and youth organisations, trade unions and other non-government organisations may fall among these. These organisations can work both at the micro and at the meso-level, promoting in some cases useful cross-sectoral linkages. However, they do not seem to have reached the degree of cohesion and capacity that would allow them to really 'make a difference' in terms of bringing about positive social change. What seems to be needed is a process of 'scaling up' (Fox 1996), whereby these organisations can overcome locally confined solidarities, gain bargaining power and access wider information networks (Fox 1996:1091).

Macro-level social capital in Papua New Guinea: bigmen, patronage and 'cargo mentality'

Unsurprisingly, the nature of state-society relations in Papua New Guinea also depends crucially on its traditional past. Peter Larmour describes traditional Papua New Guinea political systems as 'small and stateless… Order within them was maintained by a mixture of self-help, reciprocity, gossip, shaming and supernatural sanctions' (Larmour 1995:40). Within each clan, there were 'few social divisions based on rank or superior and inferior status. Everyone [had] more or less equal access to resources' (Lawrence 1967:21). The social capital based on kinship provided strong solidarity ties, and linkages that were mostly of a horizontal kind. Problems of coordination were addressed through the presence of bigmen, individuals who possessed exclusive knowledge and who 'imposed discipline, upheld the traditional way of life and gave executive directions' (Cochrane 1970:137).

The arrival of missionaries and of colonial powers with their administrative machinery and their 'goods' brought about big changes in the religious and economic spheres of life, sometimes in such an abrupt manner that people developed what have been known as ‘cargo cults’. These consisted in ‘an appeal to the supernatural to resolve the intolerable paradoxes of white rule’ (White 1965:120), especially in terms of the mere quantity of ‘cargo’ (tools, houses, ships, planes) hitherto unknown to local communities, and were based on the belief that through some magic ritual people would have been able to access the white man’s riches. The traditional bigman was replaced by the colonial government official, whom on top of possessing exclusive knowledge held the ‘key’ to the cargo. In general this has meant that the people of Papua New Guinea have developed a concept of development as something that is ‘delivered from outside’, and ‘approach the whole question of improvement of the quality of their lives with a profound sense of powerlessness’ (Scholl 1997:5). This has become even more evident after the introduction of an independent, modern state system after independence, in 1975. Lawrence had warned against the effects of such an attitude. He claimed that in the political field, as a consequence of the ‘cargo mentality’, ‘people may vote for specific candidates…in the belief that these men possess the secret of wealth and will reveal it after…election to office. Such people will make impossible demands for lightning-quick development on the successful candidates, without realising that development can come only through hard and long labour’ (Lawrence 1967:24). The elected politician, in the new structure of state-society relations, has become the new vehicle for ‘cargo’ now repackaged as ‘development’ to be delivered to communities. This can be seen in the emphasis repeatedly put in government discourse on the ‘delivery of goods and services’ (Scholl 1997) and in the formulation of programs like the Electoral Development Funds and the Rural Development Program, which now add up to K1.5 million for each of the 89 open electorates, and whereby elected politicians have control over a large share of the resources that are distributed at the local level for development initiatives. The distribution of wealth in PNG electorates nowadays may also take the form of purchasing of airline tickets for clan members who wish to witness parliament sittings, attend election-related cases involving their *wantok* members, visit the city of Port Moresby or take a trip to Cairns, make financial contributions to a feast, bride price ceremony or compensation claims, or just simply handing out cash whenever the politician is in the village. Undue pressures placed on politicians by voters and clansmen often lead to widespread corruption involving, for instance, the awarding of multi-million kina projects funded by the state to preferred bidders. In such cases, politicians tend to receive commissions which are built into the final tender prices by bidders who often do not have much choice (Kavanamur 1998).

Going back to the different sources of social capital, it seems that political capital in Papua New Guinea is characterised by vertical links of patronage and dependence similar to those existing in Southern Italy, as described by Putnam (1993a). Individuals and communities will find it easier and more rational to look for access to public resources that can bring development either through the channels provided by the *wantok* system, linking them to individuals within the state structure, or through giving their vote to the candidate delivering electoral gifts and promises which often cannot be kept. Reilly (1998) has brilliantly described how the interplay between existing traditional social structures and an alien electoral-political system inherited from the colonial days can reinforce these negative consequences, by promoting localisation and fragmentation of politics along kinship lines and allowing candidates to be elected with a small percentage of the votes. The more positive aspects of high rates of voter participation (used by Putnam as an indicator of 'high social capital') and marked turnover rates of incumbent politicians (which supports the view that electors choose independently) can also be related to the 'clientelist style of PNG politics' (Reilly 1998:18) and to the effects of existing electoral rules.

At the same time, the 'weakness' and 'lack of autonomy' of state institutions (Larmour 1995:44) means that the institutional framework can hardly be considered as an available source of social capital. The lack of appropriate mechanisms for participation and accountability in the form of cross-sectoral linkages instead allows for the exploitation of public resources by individuals and reinforces the dependency and patronage that characterise state–society relations.

Building social capital for development

The theoretical debate around the concept of social capital is still very much alive, and points to a number of areas that need further research and refinement. Nevertheless, the above analysis of existing sources and consequences of social capital in Papua New Guinea, both at the micro and macro-level, point to possible ways in which social capital leading to positive development outcomes could be built and strengthened. A number of possible policy directions are identified below, mainly to stimulate debate on the significance of the concept of social capital in Papua New Guinea and on ways in which it can contribute to policy design.

Reformist individuals and organisations within and outside the PNG Government could consider the following suggestions

- to promote associational life based on forms of social capital that overcome the limitations of the *wantok* system and that possess the desirable characteristics described above. The strengthening and 'scaling up' of groups such as sports clubs, church groups, trade unions and other associations that encompass different and broader segments of society can lead to more widespread trust and cooperation. Existing societal associations need to extend their coverage beyond existing boundaries through vigorous campaigns and seek to thicken existing intra and inter-relationships via intense horizontal networking. Networking has the power to permeate and break down barriers of compartmentalisation. Networks are whole systems composed of relatively autonomous participants and are created and sustained by bonds of shared values among participants
- to recognise the role that traditional social structures will still play in the foreseeable future. The challenge here would be, for example, that of promoting the positive aspects of the wantok system (that is, its role as a social safety net) while at the same time dealing with its negative consequences
- to promote programs and projects that reward initiative and self-reliance at the local level, instead of being based on the 'delivery of goods and services'. For example, demand-driven social funds could stimulate new forms of cooperation for social and economic projects that would highlight the advantages of overcoming barriers of mistrust. The practice of volunteerism also needs to be widely promoted. To start off with, university and college students who tend to be less prone to localistic attitudes could be encouraged to volunteer their services for civic projects up to a semester of their studies

- to open avenues for 'synergy' between state and civil society organisations (Evans 1996). Opportunities for constructive dialogue and collaboration across the public-private divide can bring about improvements in state–society relations. This could mean, for example, focusing on implementation of the provincial reforms under the New Organic Law. It could also mean promoting the sort of cross-sectoral linkages embodied in organisations such as the Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council (CIMC), where representatives of government, the private sector and non-government organisations gather periodically to discuss issues of public concern and policy solutions
- to push for changes in the electoral system that promote a less clientelist style of politics, forcing candidates to broaden their support base beyond their clan and to address more widely felt problems, strengthening the party system, and creating mechanisms for greater accountability.

These and other processes of change in Papua New Guinea's structures of social organisation are likely to have a great impact on the country's long-term development opportunities.

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