

MACHINERY AND COMMUNITY: THE ATHERTON GARDENS COMMUNITY NETWORK

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1. Introduction

This paper explores the expectations associated with the establishment of a wired community initiative in a low income, multiethnic public housing estate in inner Melbourne. Reach for the Clouds will give approximately two thousand low income residents of this housing estate a free reconditioned personal computer in their home, with a broadband connection to a local intranet and low-cost Internet access available. The project is the initiative of InfoXchange Australia, a not for profit enterprise, working in conjunction with Government departments, private companies and other third sector agencies. The initiative is designed to consolidate the social and economic networks around the estate and to promote a sense of community. The server will allow the storage of a wide range of information provided by partner agencies. A number of community agencies will provide content and local, State and Commonwealth welfare service providers will be invited to develop resources. Eventually however, the organisers hope, the network will be owned and operated by residents, who will be able to use their involvement and developing skills as leverage to better their social and economic opportunities, re-entering the workforce and building a more cohesive local community.

This article describes the genesis and early directions of the project, outlining the organisers' range of concerns: to bridge the digital divide; to widen residents' choices about technology use; to build community; to promote online social service delivery; and to build employment and education options. The broad range of government, private and not for profit agencies interested and involved in Reach for the Clouds indicates the appeal of the project to diverse bodies with an array of agendas and goals for the estate and its residents. At the level of government, the stated aim of building social networks and trust as a means to combat social and economic marginalisation fits squarely within current social policy models, models which counterpose mutual obligation and participation to the passive receipt of welfare. The Victorian government has embraced public/private partnerships and the concept of joined-up government, in addition to the key concept of community building; the state now has a Department for Victorian Communities in which a Community Building Unit resides, to assist in putting the new social policy agenda into effect. However, despite the success of the project in gaining support, much work remains to be done, especially in negotiating between the different expectations and priorities of the partners concerned. Early interviews with partners and stakeholders offer some insights into the diversity of ends that can be served through initiatives such as this, even as they highlight the unpredictability of the social outcomes of the project as it unfolds.

In evaluating the project, it is tempting to use easily recognisable terms such as 'community' and 'social capital' as means to assess the impact of the investment made in the project. Such terms

have to be used with caution, though, given their indeterminacy. From a research perspective, one of the most interesting aspects of Reach for the Clouds, whatever happens as it develops, is its potential to test three linked propositions: that computer networks promote participation in local communities; that participation builds community; and that these outcomes can be monitored and described as 'social capital'. In this respect, it presents an intriguing, if not unique, point of departure from a theme running through much of the social capital literature, which sees electronic communications as antipathetic to the resources generated by human contact and collective experience. More immediately however, Reach for the Clouds offers an opportunity to gain a detailed understanding, over time, of how people on low incomes and on the one side use technology for their own purposes, once it is made available to them. Much of the emphasis so far has been on the technology, rather than its use, or its place in social technologies. What is needed is long-term analysis of how people use technology and create their own networks. The problem, then, is to describe the place and purchase of the political vocabulary of community-building and social capital, while finding ways to explore how low income people make use of technology when it is made available to them, and while assessing whether or not the initiative has broader significance for policy on housing, education, communications and social welfare.

2. E-ACE or 'Reach for the Clouds'

The Reach for the Clouds project (now known as e-ACE), aims to address the 'digital divide' between Australia's information 'haves' and 'have nots' by providing second hand computers free of charge to all households on a public housing estate in Fitzroy, inner Melbourne, along with software, computer training, wiring and network access.¹ Each household of the estate will receive a free personal computer, on completion of a training module. The machines are refurbished models, mainly end of lease machines donated by government departments. About two thousand residents will be affected: Atherton Gardens consists of four twenty storey tower blocks, with ten flats on each floor, comprising a total of eight hundred dwellings. The residents are generally on very low incomes, with 80 per cent receiving some form of income support from government and only 20 per cent having private or other income sources. Weekly incomes vary from \$150 to \$399 per week. Problems around the estate include a drug trade, violence and the fear of it, graffiti and vandalism of public areas. While a significant minority of residents on the estate have arrived in Australia from Vietnam and speak Vietnamese as their preferred language (~40%), other residents speak more than thirty languages and come from countries including Turkey, the former Yugoslavia, Spain, Greece, Iran, Iraq, China, Laos, the Philippines, Somalia and Ethiopia. Less than thirty per cent were born in Australia, and of these, a significant proportion suffer from problems of substance abuse, mental or physical ill health and social isolation. Not for profit agencies involved with or working on the estate include the Brotherhood of St Laurence, Outreach Victoria and Jesuit Social Services, each of whom were involved in this project.

The scheme has been in development for three years. It grew out of InfoXchange's commitment to the provision of access to online information for public housing tenants, particularly access to

¹ See the electronic-Atherton Gardens Enterprise website at <http://www.highrise.infoxchange.net.au/> See also <http://www.infoxchange.net.au/> to investigate the background to InfoXchange's activities. Publicity from partners in the project can be found at Victorian Department of Human Services <http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/peoplefocus/mar01/website.htm> and on the City of Yarra site: www.infoxchange.net.au/yarraweb

information relating to tenancies, such as Office of Housing policies and procedures.² In 1999 the millennium bug scare meant that suddenly there were a lot of reasonably new, internet ready computers being discarded by businesses and bureaucracies. InfoXchange had devised a project called "GreenPC" which used state government Community Jobs Program funding to employ long term unemployed people to refurbish the discarded computers, and then on-sold them at low cost to community groups and low-income individuals. The InfoXchange articulated its digital divide strategy in "Bridging the Digital Divide" (December 2000), a document that sets out its collaborative community building approach to the issue:

In the Australian context over two hundred thousand computers are retired every year. These could be revitalised and provided to communities that otherwise will be left behind in the information age. This is not a pie in the sky solution that requires huge investment, complex negotiations, or new legislation. It simply requires cooperation. If we work in partnership the solution is inexpensive and simple. It is environmentally responsible, it has the potential to create hundreds of jobs, and it bridges the divide between the information rich and information poor. This is the idea of the Green PC.

With large numbers of reconditioned computers available, InfoXchange were looking for an opportunity to give low-income people access to computers in their own homes. The Reach for the Clouds scheme, at least as the InfoXchange initially defined it, involved securing support from the Office of Housing to rewire the high-rise towers, using existing telecom cabling and high bandwidth communication controllers. The opportunity arose when the Office of Housing began to discuss the possibility of rewiring the tower blocks of Atherton Gardens, ahead of the installation of a new concierge-based security system. Although that plan was not realised – the concierge system was set up on another housing estate – it was the basis for an ambitious plan, to find the funding to wire Atherton Gardens and to build a computer network. InfoXchange's aim was to build on the Green PC project, donating the reconditioned computers and using the concierge wiring to establish a local intranet. The computers would come with software (at the time of the early project planning, this was intended to be a NuDeal package), along with access to email and the Atherton Gardens network. For a fee of five dollars a month, residents could also purchase access to the Web and other Internet services. Alternatively, they could be given Internet access free of charge, in exchange for time donated to training others and maintaining the network. Once established, the network was to be owned and operated by residents. The InfoXchange would provide some initial training and would seek to interest IT companies and software developers in offering training. However, the residents themselves would eventually be the workers and trainers, as they progressed towards community-based management. Initially, residents with computer skills would be employed as help desk workers and as trainers (the idea was that these would be younger people). Other residents would be invited to contribute in other ways, for instance as translators. The training, it was hoped, would be accredited; it was also to be linked to Work for the Dole programs run by local community employment agencies.

Extended negotiation followed, as various funding sources were pursued (Infoxchange 2001). The Office of Housing, paid for the network wiring to be installed, as well as providing flats for use as training facilities and some operational funding. The City of Yarra provided workshop space for the Green PC program. Two large companies were instrumental in the establishment of the project. Microsoft donated site licences for Windows 95 and Office 97 to be loaded onto all the donated computers. Hewlett-Packard provided hardware in the form of new computers, printers, scanners and a digital camera for use with training the residents and also donated four

² The Victorian State Government Office of Housing is responsible for the management of public housing in Victoria, which includes the Atherton Gardens estate.

servers, to be located in the basement of each of the four tower buildings on the estate, through which intranet and internet access could be provided. The not-for-profit enterprises have provided support to the project in various ways. The difficulty was to find infrastructure funding. The technology side of the project was initially of interest to the state government body Multimedia Victoria, who provided \$10,000 towards the development of a business plan. Once the plan was developed, however, Multimedia Victoria decided the project was less about technology than about community building, and referred the partners to the Community Support Fund (a state-wide fund set up with funds from State gambling taxes). The Project Implementation Document, written to satisfy the requirements of Multimedia Victoria, was substantially amended, highlighting the project's social sustainability. The CSF initially were willing to provide a further \$10,000 essentially for the development of another business plan. When this was presented, however, they decided the project was more about technology than about community building and hence refused further funding. Subsequent argument from the Office of Housing overcame this objection and eventually the CSF agreed to fund the project for three years. In the process, the rhetoric changed slightly. From a project initially pitched as an effort to bridge the digital divide, Reach for the Clouds has become "a community building project" designed to "assist the development and maintenance of community capacity and cohesiveness at the Atherton Gardens estate, by utilising new technologies." (InfoXchange, 2001).

E-ACE was launched on 23 June 2002. Over 400 computers have now been established in Atherton Gardens households, servers and routers have been installed in each building, the wiring has been connected to all apartments and the buildings have been wired. An intranet is under development, and access to the Internet is being arranged. Computers, monitors and printers are refurbished through "GreenPC". Training, which will be free of charge during the set-up phase, is carried out by a large pool of volunteer trainers drawn from the estate and the wider Melbourne community. All tenants who have received a computer have taken some training; the project has also provided a computer room with additional equipment, with daily training sessions. InfoXchange is still seeking funding to make these more frequent and comprehensive and to involve more tenants in the training, possibly with accreditation.

Meanwhile, the project has been linked to Commonwealth government research funding through an Australian Research Council grant awarded to Swinburne University in partnership with state government Primary Health Branch and Office of Housing. This grant supports a continuing evaluation of the social impact of the Reach for the Clouds computer network, in terms of its effects in promoting social and economic participation, community building and social capital. The project also aims to assess the extent to which the computer network enables government service providers to tailor services more directly and effectively to meet client needs and to investigate the implications of the case study for broader debates on the 'digital divide', on social policy and on social partnerships.

This paper stems from the early stages of this evaluation. A series of tenant meetings have been held, as well as forums that have drawn on joint planning between various community workers and agencies concerned with the estate. We have also held focus groups with tenants and carried out the first stage of a survey of all residents on the estate, asking them about their experience of using computers, their expectations of the computer network, their current income, employment and education patterns, their attitudes to living on the estate, their social networks and the ways in which they seek news and local information and staying touch with friends and family. These questions were shaped, to some extent, by our original research interest in the extent to which social capital was a useful term for describing the developing social impact of a computer network of this sort. However, the questions range more broadly, since it is already clear that the initiative has been organised by diverse and sometimes competing expectations, and is likely to

have outcomes and implications that are too disparate to be summed up by social capital indicators alone.

As part of the evaluation of Reach for the Clouds, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with the key partners who were involved in the early stages of the project. The interviews asked about views and expectations, successes and frustrations. The idea was to ascertain the different views of various players and to see how well the members of the steering committee understood each others' visions for the project. One of the key questions asked what, in the respondent's view, would constitute success for the project. The range of answers given to this question demonstrates the difficulties of evaluating a project where project partners have varying expectations and success indicators, many of them directly linked to the scope of their own agency's interests and priorities.

2. Partner expectations

It was always going to be difficult to articulate the link between giving low income people free access to computers in the home, opening skill development, employment and educational opportunities, creating a resident-run enterprise, and building community and social cohesion. According to Andrew Mahar, the Director of InfoXchange in an interview in 2002, the project was always conceived as "a way of looking at changing the way community development happens, and services are provided. It's about giving residents some power over how services are provided." This goal is not necessarily shared by the range of partners. Mahar remarked that most of the partners and parties involved "make the right noises [but] I don't know that many of them understand it. We haven't really been able to articulate the vision, so they don't really understand it. The high rise web site and Yarroweb site haven't really been utilised.... There is a need for service providers to start providing their services in a different way. It will need a major mind shift. They can't see that yet, so they can't really understand what this project is about."

Right from the beginning, it was clear that one of the risks entailed in garnering support from so many quarters was an increase in the number of stakeholders involved, each with expectations of a return on substantial public investment. The InfoXchange's initial rationale for government funding, in the 1999 Project Implementation Document, shows the way in which the project was pitched and re-pitched to different interests and potential partners. The document stressed the civic benefits of the Atherton Gardens experiment, arguing that its outcomes would include a 'better informed citizenry' and 'equality of access to public communications systems'. Improvements in information skills and literacy would give residents a 'greater voice in the wider community'. Residents would be better able to access community services and education and employment opportunities. However, the PID also put the case that government agencies could find reasons of their own for investing in the network. The network would offer direct operational gains to social agencies. Assuming, the document argued, that the take-up rate for the computers was as anticipated, then agencies would be able to make direct contact with seventy per cent of the residents on the estate, while reducing its communication costs. Welfare services would become more effective, since they would be better targeted to specific groups. Schools would be able to address truancy rates, by keeping up contact with parents. Health service providers would be able to use on-line social services as a way to make connection with the most isolated populations. At the same time, 'skill enhancement' would mean that residents were less dependent on welfare. Ultimately, if the network became self-sustaining, it would be owned and managed by residents who would be active members of self-help networks, capable of teaching one another how to use new technology and able to turn these new skills into vocational competencies, re-entering the labour market and re-connecting to outside social networks. Sustainability, the document noted, depended on many factors, including a sufficient take-up rate

on the estate, developing community enterprises online, and continued funding and support from the various stakeholders in the project.

Commenting on the project in 2002, Mahar placed less emphasis on the benefits for welfare services and social administration, and more on the idea of giving residents choice and control. The ultimate promise of Reach for the Clouds lay in the prospect of handing over the network to the community as a sustainable operation, after the three years of initial funding. Key indicators of success would be “that the building is wired, there is a computer in everybody’s flat that wants one and the people in the community have been trained. Once that’s happened it’s up to the community”.

The view of the InfoXchange staff on the ground was more pragmatic and more closely tied to the infrastructure of the project and the delivery of services to residents. For one staff member, a sign of success would be “that the computers get used a lot. That tenants enjoy having them there and use them for good reasons. You do worry about whether people are going to use it for things that cost money and then we have to ask ‘what have we set them up for?’” Another staff member assessed the success of the project as “awareness of the technology. People being able to use it in the way that they see fit – and even if they don’t use it, but have been trained, then that is an outcome. It’s only a tool – its effectiveness is only if the community embraces it as something that they want to use. Young people aren’t that interested in using the technology, except to send email and play games. Older people have more interest in the technology as a tool for accessing information. It is a success if people are using the technology.” He also added that it was an expectation of InfoXchange that the project would “lead to training and jobs for residents. Technology is not the be all and end all, it is only a tool for access to what the communities need – education, training, employment. [We expect] that the community and communities will get what they want and what they need, based on what they say they want and need.”

He went on to comment that the community building side of the project “could be assessed through greater community employment on the estate and community participation in estate events. People [will] have the opportunity to communicate directly with one another. They also want to communicate with friends and relatives overseas via email and to access foreign language newspapers and news services.” Over the longer term, the project “involves employment and training, creating a self-sufficient enterprise. There is no one point where it can be seen to be finished and successful. The timeframe is a 3-4 year plan. In that time period, InfoXchange will step away and the community will take over the project.”

The Office of Housing staff member interviewed about reasons for supporting the project placed some emphasis on community renewal objectives, but also pointed to the extent to which Reach for the Clouds was “consistent with government’s aim to do business online by a certain date, and [being] able to address differences between school children’s access. Also because of the different communities, it could improve communication both on and off the estate and between tenants and the Office of Housing.” Despite the cost advantages for the Office of building the project infrastructure into the planned rewiring of the Atherton Gardens buildings, there were “considerable unknowns with the project”. One risk was that the project would come to be seen as “an extension of the tenant’s rights like access to a laundry or heating”. The Office was reluctant to be responsible for the costs of computer access: “[g]overnment does like to be acknowledged for putting money into things, but equally we like to have things owned by the local community and if it has Office of Housing written all over it, that tends to take away from that ownership.” The rationale for the project articulated by this public sector manager chimes with Andrew Mahar’s:

I try to describe this as an innovative project in public housing around the digital divide that is giving access to the internet or intranet to people who would otherwise not have it at a cost they can afford. I also talk about its capacity as a community development tool and something which could potentially over a period of time strengthen what is largely an alienated and in some ways alienating community. It gives it an opportunity to make decisions about interacting with the broader community. I also talk about the opportunities to create a business that a community owns and that the community might at some stage develop the capacity to make some local money out of to put into other projects or issues that they identify that need attention

The local government partner is also enthusiastic about the potential benefits of the project, citing not only access to computers and to content in the tenants' own languages, but also the prospect of achieving educational, employment and training outcomes, behavioural change for young people, and increased use of council facilities and services, through communication and advertising on the intranet. Indicators of the project's success as a community building tool would be "reduced violence, increased social events, communication between neighbours, and [getting] democratic representation on council by low income people." Initially, however, the council was cautious and keenly aware of potential risks:

It was hard to grasp the concept and why it might work. It seemed like a lot of money for something that seemed like it might not get off the ground. Everyone was saying 'this is very pie in the sky'. It's not a traditional model of community renewal. It also seemed very expensive. Initially we went in just with a watching brief, we didn't commit a lot in terms of financial contributions, it's mostly been in kind. We weren't holding our breath that it would come off. Once there were the 800 computers then we know that at least there would be a computer for every flat and that would be a fantastic outcome, even if none of the rest of the project eventuated.

There were also delicate issues involved in establishing understanding between the agencies involved. Initially, for instance, the local council was resistant to the "knee jerk" requests and planning processes of the not for-profit sector partner, feeling that its own procedures were under-appreciated, as for example when a request was made for funding for a coordinator for Reach for the Clouds: "We don't have a slush fund that we can just find money from. We need to plan these things well in advance, get them into the budget."

InfoXchange also established working relationships with a range of other not for profit agencies, despite apparent differences in their views of the benefits of the project. For one not for profit, the project "was going to do all sorts of things – provide access to computers that people wouldn't have had, give kids access to computers to do their homework and teach their parents things, integrate the community by giving people a reason to go into the community centre through the training facility." However, the interviewee was sceptical about the potential of online communities, which "are for people who know what they want and how to use the technology". At Atherton Gardens, face to face communication "is much more important because people are isolated. It [Reach for the Clouds] could provide useful, up to date information for those people, but bringing them out to share experiences is more important." Reach for the Clouds posed risks for the tenants if it built up expectations and failed to deliver. Tenants were likely to be "fearful of surveillance", of "being watched." Nevertheless, there were potential benefits for this organisation, which aims "to give people information and the confidence and skills to tackle their own problems", because the computer network presents a chance to "put information out there...in community languages". If the project were successful

in making people on the estate happier, then there would be less pressure on the organisation “to help people out who have complaints driven by a lack of satisfaction about living on the estate.”

Another service provider on the estate expected a similar range of positive outcomes from Reach for the Clouds, placing strong emphasis on the project’s potential to help resolve safety issues and enhance community contact, although the risks included the possibility that residents would either sell the computers or use them subversively, for instance to facilitate drug selling.

One steering committee representative described himself as “lukewarm on the project”, partly because it was slow to start (“spinning its wheels for a bit”), but also because of scepticism about how much computer access is likely to achieve. As he put it,

The theory is that this is an incredibly empowering tool and maybe it will be, but it feels like space age technology in a stone age environment. I think it might be stillborn. Most people on the estate aren’t ready for it. I think it won’t have much of an uptake. This may be different further down the track, but people aren’t ready for it yet. It has potential for the future – if you had sufficient literacy and interest it could help engagement across cultural groups, across the estate, helping kids with their homework, and could have security impacts. It has lots of potential but people have to have the right mindset and I don’t think they do.

Does this comment indicate a problem that the partners concerned “can’t really understand what this project is about”, as Andrew Mahar put it? Have they failed to make the “major mind shift” required to understand the social potential of computer access and networking? The challenge with a project of this complexity is that its protagonists must be able to clearly articulate a vision for the project and then find partners committed to the same vision. This may be particularly difficult when partners are drawn from across the spectrum of government, private and not for profit agencies and further, when more than one tier of government, more than one State government department, and several other agencies are involved. Given the progress of the Reach for the Clouds project to date, it is clear that large, complex partnerships can accommodate a diversity of roles and needs from a variety of partners. In fact it may even be of benefit to have some room for conflicting or at least diverging opinions about a project’s aims, outcomes, risks and benefits.

One problem lies in being able to show that the technology delivers identifiable social outcomes, of the kind to which these non-profit groups are committed (Wellman et al 1996, Rheingold 1994, Stoll 1995, Doheny-Farina 1996). Is communication the same as community? The classic sociological definitions of community involve groups which have more than just a single strand of interest to bind members, but consist of a network of people linked by a shared set of interests and concerns (Bender, 1982, cited in Galston, 1999, p. 8). If the residents do involve themselves in shared online activities will this make them into a community of interest, or will they continue to be linked by location, circumstance and chance? This is likely to depend on whether or not the online resources and activities provided by the community network replicate the make-up and concerns of the resident population on-the-ground. This may be the case, if the intranet features information about local facilities, local issues and local events. However, this is a diasporic population, deeply connected to a variety of homelands and cultures, with links to other places and other societies. Given the diverse and fragmented nature of this group of residents, uses of the hardware and the network are likely to be complex and unpredictable.

Focus groups held with residents on the estate, as well as on two comparable Melbourne housing estates, highlighted the gap between simple conceptions of a resident community and the complex associational relations within these sites. Across the three estates in question, it is clear that social connections exist within language and ethnic groups, within kinship and friendship networks and, to a limited extent, across individual floors of each tower. Within these smaller groups there can be very high levels of mutual support, friendship, trust and reciprocity. Connection between ethnic groups and between estate residents and the wider community is low to non-existent. Language is a major fault line within the estate population, with those whose English is poor or non-existent (or who are not confident in using their English) isolated from the wider community and dependent on relationships within their own language and ethnic group. While this limits the development of community feeling across groups, it is a powerful reinforcement of relationships of mutual dependence within each group. Thus, neighbours who speak the same language are more ‘neighbourly’ than those who can only nod or smile at each other in the corridor. Even the groups whose members have friendly relationships, and who see each other often, maintain a certain wary independence. In general, and unsurprisingly, most people would ask for help from a family member or friend before they would ask a neighbour. Participation in the wider community also seems to follow language and ethnic divisions, with Chinese and Vietnamese residents choosing to shop where they can both communicate with shopkeepers and buy culturally specific foodstuffs. Civic and political engagement also reflects language diversity, with few people displaying much interest in mainstream political news and current affairs, but several mentioning listening to language specific radio.

Residents activities in training sessions to date has suggested that for recently arrived migrant groups the attraction of emailing friends and families in their country of origin may be of much greater importance to these users than using the technology to develop their local ties. Whilst educational uses have been evident amongst residents undertaking training, equally evident has been interest in the entertainment and gaming opportunities offered by internet access.

Tracking such unpredictable social uses of the network, and their flow on effects in social relationships, economic circumstances, skills and attitudes, will form the basis for much of the ongoing evaluation of Reach for the Clouds. Part of the problem lies in working with fuzzy concepts such as ‘community’, ‘connectivity’, and ‘social networks’. Some measures and indicators can be used: they include social capital matrices, longitudinal surveys of patterns of technology use, interviews and focus groups to track changes in household behaviour, attitudes and expectations and aggregated data from the server. One model for understanding how healthy, vibrant and successful communities function is that of social capital. In the rest of this paper, we discuss the process of evaluating the project — and communicating its successes and impact to the different partners involved — using social capital indicators.

4. Evaluating outcomes

A long debate about the usefulness of social capital as a policy term has gone on in Australia and elsewhere. Despite that debate, or more likely because of it, there is no consensus about what social capital means in practical terms. It is unclear whether social capital exists as the property of individuals or groups: does social networking improve an individual’s social capital by enabling them to draw on the collective resources of others, or is social capital the collective product of social relations between people? Can social capital be generated through any type of social interactions, or is it limited to social interactions that have beneficial outcomes? Is social capital increased or lessened when there are beneficial outcomes for participants but not for the wider community (an instance might be a residents’ group which acts to protect existing housing forms,

but which may adversely affect those who cannot afford such housing). To overcome this difficulty, it has been suggested that there can be both “bonding capital” (social interactions in which members provide mutual support and reinforce social solidarity), and “bridging capital” (in which groups may encourage members to seek or establish relationships with others outside the group) (Woolcock 1998). There is then the further problem of whether governments can help create the conditions in which social capital flourishes. Do governments sometimes create (or consume) social capital as the unintended outcome of their policies? For example, local protests about the location of a prison or a toxic waste dump create may create social capital and a sense of community, but are a perverse policy outcome. These definitional difficulties extend to the problem of measuring social capital. Putnam’s work has monitored factors such as declining membership of organisations, voter turnout, volunteering and religious participation (see for example Putnam 2000). But these may well be caused by other factors. For example, a decline in membership of playgroups and babysitting clubs may be due to an increase in paid employment amongst women. It is unclear whether one form of participation (unpaid) creates more social capital than participation in the paid workforce and the well-documented social relations inherent in work.³

What might a model of social capital look like at Atherton Gardens, where the ‘community’ under discussion is a complex configuration of language groups, cultures and religious affiliations? The idea of the traditional community tends to feature small-scale, closely knit groups of people residing in close proximity to each other and co-operating to tackle issues of local import. Not only is this rare in post-industrial societies, but the notion of social cohesion and harmony is somewhat romantic. Even where such circumstances exist, social life can be characterised by “gross inequalities, rigid status groups, blood feuds, persecution, intolerance, bondage and ignorance” as much as by co-operation and harmony (Bryson and Mowbray 1981, p.256). In a multicultural, heterogeneous society there may be several, overlapping levels at which community might be seen to exist. Communities of interest may well be centred on very localised issues such as urban redevelopment (Save our suburbs, anti-freeway protests), or around global concerns such as war or biodiversity. Place-based communities such as a local council area or suburb may be as much characterised by their diversity of communities (the Turkish community, the local school community) as by their unity or cohesion at an area level.

Identifying the relevant communities and their local leaders is an important first step in understanding how areas function and what the power relationships are within a regional or suburban context. Communities are also acted upon and react to people and events that are external to them. Non-residents with an interest in a place might include people who work there such as teachers, health workers, local government employees and social workers, or visitors including tourists. Private businesses with substantial investments in a region may exert a powerful sway over local opinion and behaviour. It is important, then, to identify not only residents in a community, but other stakeholders with interests in the events and outcomes for that community (or communities). The geographical definition of a community as a group of people living in the same area becomes even more inadequate when online and virtual communities come into being (Meredyth, Hopkins & Ewing 2002, Hopkins & Thomas 2002).

Some of the more simple adoptions of the social capital model have proposed that only social relationships that have a positive outcome can be considered to be social capital (eg Cox

³ Despite these difficulties, the Australian Bureau of Statistics is working on incorporating measures of social capital into its community surveys and the Australian Institute of Family Studies has published measures of social capital within the Australian communities. See Stone 2001.

&Caldwell 2000). A more sophisticated response is to see that some dimensions of social capital impact on other dimensions, and to understand that social networks may have both positive and negative outcomes (Woolcock 1998). From this perspective, the strong, mutually supportive and self-sustaining small ethnic communities on the Atherton Gardens estate can be seen to be high in social capital at one level (what Granovetter calls strong ties and Woolcock calls bonding capital) as they support their members and reinforce social solidarity among them (Granovetter 1973, Woolcock 1998). On the other hand, such groups may be both exclusive of outsiders and unduly restrictive of members seeking or establishing relationships with others outside the group (Granovetter's weak ties or Woolcock's bridging capital). Thus the ethnically or linguistically based social groups can sometimes be seen as low in bridging social capital. Attempts at "community strengthening", "community building" and "community renewal" need to take these different levels of social capital into account if they are to contribute to building healthy, inclusive communities.

5. Conclusion

The Reach for the Clouds initiative, as we have said, is still in its early stages. It remains to be seen whether Reach for the Clouds can work as a model beyond Atherton Gardens, although there is evidently considerable enthusiasm for it, both in Victorian housing initiatives and more widely. In the meantime, we will need to tackle the difficult question of how to monitor the outcomes of the computers, training, network and other social exchanges on individuals and community groups on the estate.

At the simplest level of the initiative, enabling people with limited prior experience to gain access to computers and to become confident and skilled users of the hardware and software is a major step in contributing to social inclusion for a disadvantaged group. In particular, improved educational outcomes for school aged children given access to computers at home would be evidence of a positive outcome to the project. Other indicators of success would include improved opportunities for adult education, employment and training, as well as increased opportunities to participate in civic and political life.

Taking a more complex view, indicators of successful outcomes at the community level would include a range of elements. These might include self-reported increases in neighbourhood trust, communication and social networks within and beyond the estate, or improved levels of empowerment and participation by resident groups in running their own affairs. Other indications might include increased levels of communication between individual residents and between groups of residents, or increased participation in the affairs of bodies that have an impact on tenants' lives (such as local kindergartens and schools, local, state and federal governments, cleaning, maintenance and other contractors on the estate). It might also be possible to track changes in the degree to which tenants report having a sense of ownership of estate affairs, or a sense of control over their own lives.

A crude measurement of social capital will miss subtle changes in people's perceptions of trust, satisfaction, levels of participation and interest. Even small increases in people's satisfaction with life on the estate, or their sense of personal safety or interaction with neighbours would be a positive outcome from the Reach for the Clouds project, whether or not a strong community identity materialises across the estate. Further, many of the changes that are likely to result from the implementation of a project such as this are difficult or impossible to predict, and unexpected results will be at least as interesting as some of the effects which might have been anticipated. Finally, the case study helps us appreciate that social change is a long term phenomenon, whose effects and results may be observed years and even decades from now.

6. References

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