

Risk Cooperation ... Bond, Bridge, Link by Bob Riley, President/CEO



Social Capital – bonding within groups, bridging between groups, and linking to further solidify cooperation – applies today more than ever to urban and agricultural interests.

While at the farmers market, I witnessed an attempt of two groups to bridge. The young urban professionals were bargain hunting for rhubarb. The small, local truck farmer was trying to make a living selling produce. Their back and forth bargaining was purely transactional, merely trading goods for currency without the benefit of sustainability, which has a social capital component. Because both parties lacked an ethos of sustainability, the bargaining ended. There was no sale. There was no rhubarb pie.

Let's rewind and try to fix this. Sustainability requires a balance of capitals, including social, financial, and environmental capitals. This vignette played out the way it did because neither party made use of their capital. Suppose the farmer had inquired about the future needs of the urban couple for local produce, had sold them two bags at a discount, had promised to reserve two bags each week for them, while in season, and offered them, and six of their friends, a tour of his farm and orchard. Suppose the urban couple had shown their interest in sustainable agriculture by indicating their desire to obtain local food for the season, and wondering if the farmer would agree to a long-term, multifaceted relationship.

Without a little work to expose areas of common interest (bonding), the relationships between different groups (bridging) will never improve, and the sustainability (linking) of each group is in peril. I thought about how social capital is built or destroyed in our urban and agricultural societies today. Social capital is the connection within and between social networks which facilitates cooperation for mutual benefit. It is the glue, like civility, that holds everything together.

This example exposes a big issue in our region – the disconnect that exists between our urban and our agricultural populations. As farms consolidate and farming communities disappear, there is little interaction between urban and rural. This lack of dialogue is causing a vacuum of empathy between urbanites, our rural population, government officials, and policy makers. Each group asks, “Why don't they understand us?”





We need to create forums for these diverse groups. We need to bank enough social capital to pay for the bridges that stretch across those interests. We need to develop networks, norms of reciprocity and trust (sometimes known as civility) which facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit. Through these efforts, the sense of isolation each group feels can be replaced by enthusiastic dialogue about innovative approaches for enhancing social capital and sustainable systems.

Adequate social capital, within and surrounding various sectors and communities, builds up trust and understanding. Trust is a prerequisite of cooperation, a precursor to the coexistence of varying opinions, different people, and disparate groups. This diverse coexistence and cooperation mimics nature, which has had billions of years to work out a balanced, integrated approach. Urban and agricultural interests would do well to risk cooperation, build up social capital and risk sustainability rather than risk extinction.

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