

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN RURAL EVENTS: THE POTENTIAL TO DEVELOP AND UTILIZE SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Event management has attracted increased recognition within the academic literature over the last decade, however much of this research has been descriptive in nature and lacks a strong theoretical framework. This paper is a conceptual one in that it outlines the potential of employing community stakeholder participation in organizing and planning events. It is proposed that an outcome of this is the potential development and utilisation of social capital in communities. This is particularly important for rural communities that have suffered a number of hardships over recent decades. A consequence of this has been that the social fabric of rural communities has been endangered. By empowering rural communities through the development and organizing of events may enable communities to take control of their situations and foster new developments and opportunities in their area.

Key Words: Community Participation, Rural Events, Social Capital

INTRODUCTION

Rural communities have suffered increasing hardships over the last couple of decades. Changing agricultural practices have contributed to rural unemployment, which has led to outward migration, reduced rural services, and the marginal economic viability of many rural communities (Long, Perdue & Allen, 1990; Gill, 1991; Bramwell & Lane, 1994; Hjalager, 1996; Butler, Hall & Jenkins, 1999). The commercialisation of agriculture and the impacts of technology, such as improvements in transportation, mechanisation of farm equipment, refrigeration and chemicals have all played significant roles in changing rural areas over this time (Butler, Hall & Jenkins, 1999). Additionally, declining terms of trade, average real farm income and debt servicing ratios are also indicators of the declining importance of agriculture in regional economies (Moxham & Jay, 2000). Added to this is the burden of changing climatic conditions in many rural areas, with drought seriously impeding the financial viability and success of agricultural activities and businesses.

The loss of public services, high unemployment levels and the consequential out-migration of younger, better educated members of rural communities have collectively endangered the social fabric and structure of rural areas (OECD, 1993; Butler, Hall & Jenkins, 1999). Depopulation has been the result of the out-migration of younger people, rather than of whole families, with the result that the remaining local population being typically an aged one (Knight, 1996). This has resulted in the run down or withdrawal, at a local level of many essential services such as transport, medical, education, as well as the closure of small shops, garages and small locally based trading concerns (Gill, 1991). As a result rural communities and regions are looking to alternative sources of income and see events and tourism as options (Cavaco, 1995; Hoggart, Buller & Black, 1995; Opperman, 1996; Delamere, 1997; Williams & Shaw, 1998; Sharpley, 2001).

Events, particularly events that draw tourists, have the ability to draw outside investment and financial resources into local communities, which can lead to positive economic benefits that may sustain rural communities undergoing economic transition. However, Tosun and Jenkins (1996) observed that “using tourism as a kind of panacea for some of the macroeconomic problems, as an engine for social change and to create a favourable image on the international platform ushered in an era giving too generous incentives to the industry”. The impact of this approach on the Australian environment is noted by the excessive embracement of tourism as a means to halt the decline in economic activity levels and to protect basic servicing and investment levels in small, sometimes geographically isolated areas (Cooper, 1982). However, all too often the social consequences of tourism and events are overlooked in favour of the economic advantages (Allen, O’Toole, McDonnell & Harris, 2002).

Research has shown that while tourism’s economic impacts are generally welcomed (Kendall & Var, 1984; Liu & Var, 1986; Keogh, 1990; Faulkner, 1994; Mules & Faulkner, 1996; Burgan & Mules, 2000) many of the social consequences of tourism development are perceived in a more negative light (Pizam, 1978; Cooke, 1982; Liu, Sheldon & Var, 1987; Soutar & McLeod, 1993; Dwyer, Mellor, Mistilis & Mules, 2000). While the tension between the economic and social consequences builds within a community, attitudes towards tourism and tourists will deteriorate, therefore damaging the viability of tourism in such locations. The outcome of these studies has indicated that there is an increased need for public participation in tourism planning. The potential of applying this approach to event management also has widespread appeal, as local communities are more aware of the realities of their own environments than outside professionals in establishing events that will have a greater chance for community support. This paper is a conceptual one in that it examines how participation can contribute to the strengthening of the social fabric of communities, specifically involved in planning and developing events in rural areas.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Communities are defined by geographical location (Warren, 1983; Willmott & Thomas, 1984; Ife, 1995), social interaction (Plant, 1974; Willmott, 1989; Ife, 1995) and common ties (Poplin, 1972; Lee & Newby, 1983). Therefore, this paper proposes that it is within these confines that the concept of participation takes place. While most people support community participation as an ideal there is remarkably little agreement on what the term means. It tends to be subjectively defined, reflecting a wide range of interests, traditions, and ideologies that often are at odds with one another (Morrissey, 2000). However, widespread recognition has defined community participation in planning and development as a partnership built upon the basis of a dialogue among the various actors (stakeholders), during which the agenda is set jointly, and local views and knowledge are deliberately sought and respected (Vandervelde, 1983; Warren, 1983; Schneider & Libercier, 1995; Sanoff, 2000). This definition has among its objectives the empowerment of the local actors (individuals, groups or institutions) in order to make participation sustainable.

Empowerment is another ideologically laden word but it can be taken to imply the encouragement and enabling of communities to have direct involvement in and control over what happens in their lives (Davies, 1996). This implies that an empowered community would have real influence and control over local resources, accountable and representative local leadership and decentralised and democratised services with a context underpinned by the principle of equity (Barr, 1995). This is particularly relevant for rural communities to counteract some of the negative consequences that they have endured over recent times and to build their resources for future developments.

The act of participation is held to be a form of citizenship training, in which citizens work together to solve community problems, learn to value and appreciate cooperation as a problem-solving method. Shared learning among members and between members and facilitators is a vital factor in participation (O’Gorman, 1995). People begin to gain self-confidence as they proceed through the learning process of participating and cooperating with others to solve community issues, and success makes them feel capable of facing larger issues (Mathur, 1995; Schneider & Libercier, 1995).

To promote participation is to empower the people, a concept with which many are still ill at ease. Morrissey (2000) also identifies a number of factors that result from community participation and summarises these into three areas. The first relates to community capacity building through the expanding leadership base, strengthening of individual skills, sharing of understanding and vision, setting of community agendas and goals, the development of more effective community organisations, institutions and use of resources. The second is indicative of personal growth through skill development, relationships and networks within the community, confidence and leadership. The third factor relates to social capital, referred to in more depth below. This research (Morrissey, 2000) concludes that community participation can lead to the existence of a number of grassroots organizations, alliances among organisations, a level of community trust, involvement of existing organizations in broader community initiatives, building on previous community development efforts, development of new networks among groups, ability to leverage funds for new projects, ability of grassroots to withstand opposing forces and emergence of conflict in communities with a history of paternalistic leadership. These characteristics are all factors that contribute to the build up of social capital within communities. Therefore, the outcomes that can be derived from community participation can be very beneficial to the long term wellbeing of a community.

Basic to the concept of citizen participation is the assumption that value accrues to the system and the individual through the acts of participation and association (Gittel, 1980). The more citizens are involved in a decision-making process, the more likely it is that they will develop feelings of teamwork and cooperation, thereby increasing their motivation, commitment, and contribution to the process and the community (Brody, 1982; as cited in Sanoff, 2000). Participation also is the means of developing new leadership, involving larger segments of the population in the creation of public policy, and thus encouraging the development of more responsive policies for local communities. One of the primary objectives of community participation, achieved by citizens playing a central role and ‘owning’ projects, is the building of social capital (Sanoff, 2000).

SOCIAL CAPITAL

Despite the differences that abound over definition, the consensus is growing in the literature that social capital stands for the ability of citizens to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures (Portes, 1998, 2000). Social capital grows out of those social interactions and networks that are experienced in daily lives. It is not the quality of individuals but, rather, the quality of a group or community as a whole (Putnam, 1993; Cox, 1995; Grazier, 1997; Portes, 1998; Dhesi, 2000; Murray, 2000; Portes, 2000; Edgar, 2001). These definitions have been incorporated by the World Bank (2002) who state that “social capital refers to the institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions...Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together”.

Social capital is the ability of people to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures and is referred to as a quality of a group or community (Portes, 1998, 2000). Social capital both arises out of and helps build a sense of social trust, the norm of reciprocity on which social exchange and networks is based (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1993; Sirianni & Friedland, 1995; London, 1997). Without trust, cooperation is impossible; without cooperation, society-building cannot happen. Social capital is embodied in norms and networks of civic engagement (Putnam, 1993; Livermore & Midgley, 1998). Social networks and social institutions are social structures that support communication between individuals (Cox, 1995). Networks of civic engagement foster sturdy norms of generalized reciprocity and encourage the emergence of social trust (Sirianni & Friedland, 1995). Such networks facilitate coordination and communication, amplify reputations, and thus allow dilemmas of collective action to be resolved (Putnam, 1995; Sirianni & Friedland, 1995). Social capital is developed through active relationships with each other, therefore accumulating trust and increased by continual use (Cox, 1995b). These stocks of social capital tend to accumulate when used, and can also be depleted when not, thus creating the possibility of both virtuous and vicious cycles that manifest themselves in highly civic and uncivic communities (Sirianni & Friedland, 1995).

Strong participatory citizenship, whereby people are involved in planning and implementation, in facilitative leadership roles and in creating better futures for their own communities, is inextricably linked to the existence of social capital networks of engagement (Murray, 2000). The formation of local social capital can thus lead to the promotion of shared values and a common vision, integrated planning and resource utilization, and ultimately to systematic change. People acting collectively on the basis of relationships, which have been nurtured through trust, respect and reciprocity can solve many problems. This involvement will always remain complementary to the work of public and private organizations, but it is a contribution, which can make a difference by strengthening community life, providing hope for the future, and a belief that local people can make a difference.

Building social capital is also a means of building human capital, strengthening the capacities of individuals and families to overcome adversities and take advantage of opportunities (Sanoff, 2000). Therefore, rural communities can look to events, especially those events that are developed by the community, as a source of celebration of their community and as a source to build social capital within their community through stakeholder community participation.

APPLICABILITY TO RURAL EVENTS

As discussed by Sirianni & Friedland (1995) the issue should not be the increase or decrease in social capital, but how social capital and community assets can be mobilized. This research proposes that events can achieve this outcome. Events can be a catalyst for new community partnerships and provide a model for cooperation. Those involved in organising these events within their communities can draw out the expertise from within the community, this assists in utilising the existing human and social capital that exists. Additionally, it develops a training ground for the transfer of knowledge to other community members and develops this capital further.

The networks of relationships that form as a result of the organising and planning for a community festival strengthens or develops relationships that form the basis of trust. Events that build new linkages across denominational, class or racial lines, as events can do, and engage in complex partnerships with business and political actors could be beneficial in developing the trust and networks further (Arcodia & Whitford, 2002). Events develop a forum for social capital to

develop, be utilised and cumulate with the aim of providing an exciting and good time during the event and a healthier social community as a lasting legacy.

The process of including all citizens in a community in the process of organising and developing a community event is unrealistic. This is due to the constraints of time, resources and the decision-making processes that would need to be implemented. Burke (1983) notes that community participation ultimately seeks two objectives: legitimacy and a change in citizens' attitudes and opinions. Legitimacy depends on bringing a broad range of people into the process representing a variety of interests and sources of power. Developing a typology of event stakeholders and mapping their participation in an event to ensure that all key groups and stakeholders are represented can achieve this (Reid & Arcodia, 2002b).

As defined by Reid and Arcodia (2002a: 346) event stakeholders are "groups or individuals who are affected or could be affected by an event's existence". This definition then differentiates between primary stakeholders, that without whose support the event would cease to exist, and secondary stakeholders, who although are not directly involved in the event can seriously impede the event's existence. As discussed by Allen, O'Toole, McDonnell and Harris (2002) events do not operate within a void and affect almost every aspect of people's lives. To include stakeholders in and throughout the planning and development stages of an event will enable the organisers to balance the overall impact of the event. This is due to community stakeholder views drawing on the intimate knowledge and insights of local issues.

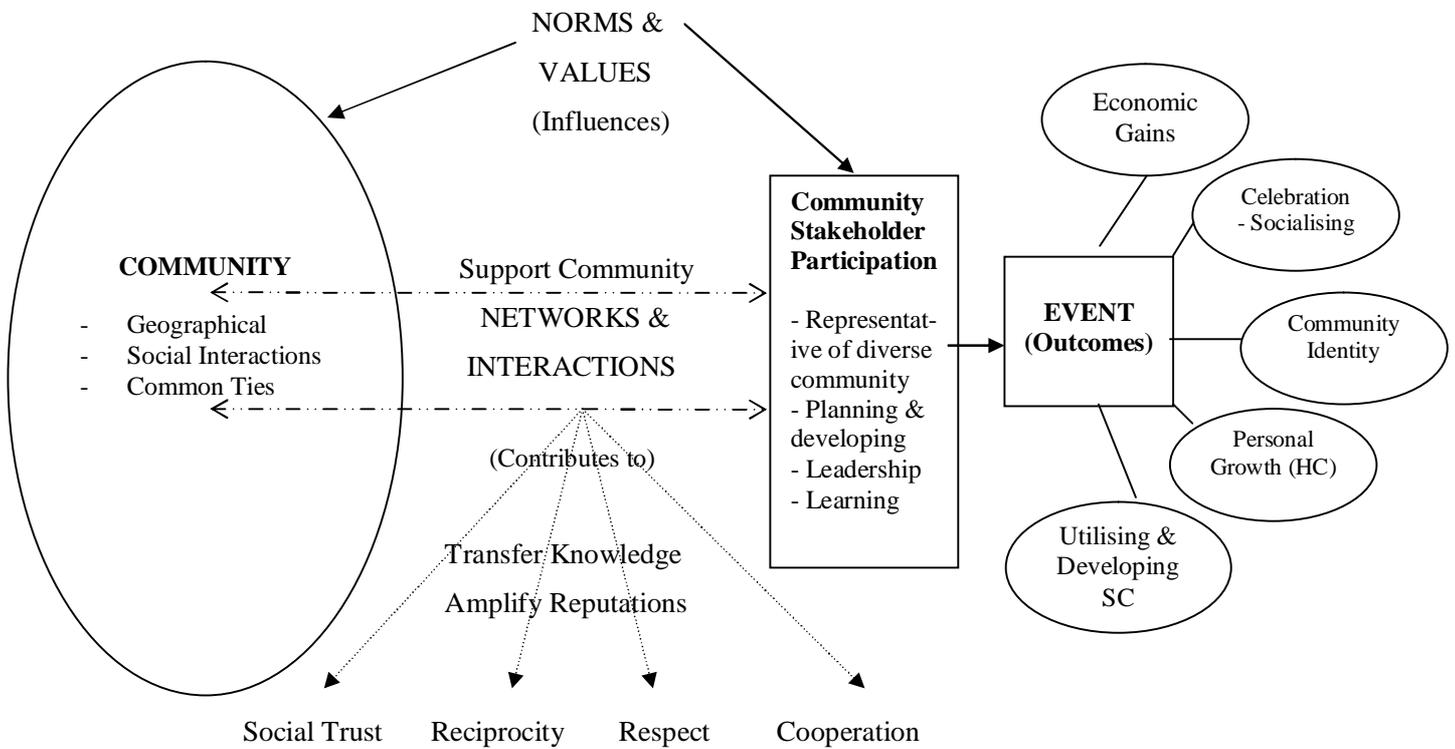
As a result of the review of the literature a conceptual model of the role that community stakeholder participation has on social capital has been developed. Figure One depicts the relationships that exist between communities, participation in the developing of events and the consequences of this.

The norms and values of a community will strongly influence the community and also the activities of the community, such as participation and consequently events. This ensures that individuals identify with and share membership in the community through common ties. The networks and interactions that occur within communities contributes to supporting the community, amplifying social reputations of members that participate and transfers knowledge among members. Additionally, factors such as social trust, reciprocity, respect and cooperation are potential consequences of utilising and developing these social interactions.

Community stakeholder participation in organising an event utilises these networks to identify potential event stakeholders and to ensure that there are representatives from all of the groups that make up a diverse community. These individuals ensure that the views, ideals and objectives of the diverse group are heard in organising an event that is representative of the norms and values of the community. As a result of being involved in the planning and development of the event these networks are further utilised by making use of the existing knowledge and resources that are within a community. Therefore, these networks and interactions are strengthened by communication and personal relationships. Additionally, those within the community stakeholder group are developing leadership skills, learning through experience and through the transfer of knowledge. All of these features aim to strengthen the social trust, reciprocity, respect and cooperation factors that result from social interactions. As a result an event is held that embraces the norms and values of the community.

Figure 1

Conceptual Model



This provides the rural community with extrinsic and intrinsic characteristics for the community and individuals within the community. Economic gains are derived from enticing tourists to the community to participate in the event and result from the money that they spend within the community, which would otherwise not occur. The event provides the community with a sense of occasion and celebration, as well as the opportunity to socialise. This is important in strengthening the social networks of the community and wellbeing of members within rural areas that have had to cope with increasing hardships. Events can contribute to a sense of community identity, both internally and externally. Internally through the sense of ownership and pride in the event and externally through people acknowledging where the town is situated and that it has an event.

The potential for those involved to develop personal growth, for example self confidence, new skills and empowerment in their abilities, is strengthened. Factors such as this then have the benefit of contributing to human capital in the area. Additionally, the utilisation and development of these networks and interactions in developing and planning the event contribute to the utilisation of existing stocks of social capital within the community and the development of contributing further to these stocks.

CONCLUSIONS

Therefore, it can be seen that events have the potential to strongly influence communities. Due to the decline in rural areas, specifically, there is a need to utilise and develop their own capacity to alter the trend towards decline. Through utilising the existing stocks of human and social capital in rural areas the community is in a stronger position to make decisions, mobilise and manage resources, communicate and resolve conflicts. Therefore, these communities are potentially able to organise development and to seek opportunities for their community to reverse some of the decline and hardships that they have suffered. Community participation is an important tool in encouraging communities to take ownership of their situations and provides the framework in which development can proceed. However, it is beyond the scope of all but the smallest of communities to ensure that every citizen is involved. Therefore, this research proposes that through community event stakeholders, participation is more likely to succeed.

The conceptual model that has been developed identifies that the outcomes of community stakeholder participation in the planning and development of events are: the utilisation of the networks and interactions that exist in communities, as well as the development of new ones; social trust, reciprocity, respect, cooperation that are all factors in developing social capital; economic gains through outside investment and purchases within the community; a celebratory sense of occasion that encourages socialisation, thus further developing networks and social relationships; a sense of community ownership of the event and pride in the community, as well as a community identity; personal development, which develops the skills and knowledge base within the community further; and the utilisation and development of social capital.

Additionally this has ramifications for the business community which need to be investigated further, particularly in relation to participation and membership. As the event industry continues to grow and consolidate there is an increasing demand for professional event practitioners. Associations also have an increasingly important role to play in providing professional support to these practitioners. However, the general decline in membership of clubs and organisations was a finding for the decline in social capital. Therefore further research is required to determine whether membership in event management associations and participation in association activities has the potential of developing and utilising individual skills, knowledge and experience as well as the social capital of these groups. What would be of interest in future research would be to discover if there has been a general decline in membership numbers of these associations and the reasoning behind this, particularly relating to the general trend of declining social capital.

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