

**Building Social Capital:
A Formative Program Review of CIIF Projects**



Final Report
CIIF Research Team
Department of Social Work & Social Administration
The University of Hong Kong
6th February, 2006.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The HKU Research Team has conducted a formative evaluative study of social capital on 13 CIIF projects, 10 of which are towards the final stage of completion (Appendix II). The study documented the local experiences of the CIIF projects and hence examined the overall impacts, processes, strategies and factors contributing to building social capital. Case studies, familiarization visits, focus group interviews and a community forum were conducted.

What Has Been Achieved? - Social Capital Structural Features

Supportive Networks for Families and Individuals

Some projects targeted at families with low social capital and resources. These families are disconnected socially and often perceived as crisis-prone. Other CIIF projects targeted at groups of individuals who became disconnected with the social and economic mainstream as they were out of stable employment. Life chances of these people and families were transformed by their social participation and interactions with other members in the network. They were linked to a wider spectrum of community resources and organizational network through an enlarged social circle. Supportive networks are powerful vehicles to help families and individuals regain hope and faith in facing adversity and transforming their lives. Just knowing that somebody cares makes a whole world of difference to an individual or family who has long been experiencing social exclusion, dis-empowerment and isolation due to their life circumstances. Social networks increase and re-activate the potential and strength of families and individuals in transforming their life.

Mentoring

The 'Healthy Mothers-to-be' Project is a creative blending of traditional wisdom and modern knowledge of post-natal healthcare. It has trained up a group of middle-aged unemployed women to provide post-natal mentorship, companionship, babysitting and domestic services to middle class mothers. Another project bridges young people and adult mentors in different types of occupations. The traditional form of mentorship is revitalized to enhance the social capital of young people. It serves both the hands-on skills training and mentorship support in motivating and facilitating young people to have a clear direction in life. Mentors are expected to share their life experiences and values with young people and the relationship is more sustainable

than the post-natal mentorship program. The project has expanded young people's social capital through informal education and inter-generational socialization. The mentorship program is a form of bridging capital to include and transform the norms and values of young people.

Self Help

Many CIIF projects adopted the self help and peer networking strategies to empower service users to take up active roles and support others in need. Service users who received counselling services, workers having rehabilitated from occupational injuries, and homeless people who successfully regained employment and shelter were recruited to take up the supporting role of peer counsellors or helpers in services they previously received. Self help enables service recipients to be engaged in social networks and be affiliated to other people after addressing the key issues or difficulties they encountered. Their social capital and personal growth continue to develop after they step out of the client role and assist the social worker or other professionals in helping others. The self help network not only bonds people with similar problems but also provides a platform for peer counsellors to bridge themselves with the professionals and the NGOs and be nurtured to grow and develop in this helping role.

Volunteering

Among the CIIF projects under study, volunteers may come from faith based organizations, professional groups, and the community. Volunteers are motivated by philanthropy and altruism, an interest to broaden their scope of life, availability of time or boredom, and viewing community engagement as a leisure time pursuit. The range of activities included outreaching visits to frail elderly in rural areas, accompanying elderly people, home visits to residents in deprived communities, organizing educational programs and recreational activities, acting as instructors and trainers, child minding and doing household chores for neighbours etc. Volunteering enhances social capital for both the helpers and those being helped. Volunteers expressed satisfaction in social affiliation, deriving meaning and sense of achievement in bringing forth changes in people's lives.

Co-operatives

The co-operative is an organizational form that combined economic production

with social networking of people. It has a more formalized structure than a network and there are clear organizational norms to shape participants' expectations and behaviour. Three CIIF projects made use of the co-operative to network its target participants. They are the 'Healthy Mothers-to-be' post-natal mentors project, Tung Chung Sunny Community and Community Reciprocal Service Cooperative of the Modern Mentorship program. The co-operatives are largely horizontal in their organizational structure and provide a training platform for developing the necessary vocational skills, decision making mechanisms, business strategies and familiarize with the norms and culture of specific business or consumer characteristics.

What has been Achieved? - Social Capital Outcomes on Three Main Themes

Social network and support

In terms of social capital generation, CIIF projects facilitate social interaction between service users, ex-service users and current service users, volunteers and vulnerable populations. The interaction facilitates sharing of experiences and support. In all the focus group meetings, respondents reported an increase in number of close friends and an enriched social life through their participation in the CIIF projects. This outcome is irrespective of the types of social networks aforementioned to which the respondents belonged. Apart from social affiliation, participants received different forms of social support as members of the network. There were the tangible ones including practical tips, information exchange and also small favours in everyday social interactions. Examples of tangible support noted in focus group meetings included child minding, running errands, advice or practical tips, cooking, looking after the household etc. Support in time of crisis refers to support requiring intense and immediate assistance than providing small favours. Such contingency support is crucial to families especially those without strong kinship ties and single parent headed households.

Development of Trust & Efficacy

Many focus group respondents expressed a strong sense of isolation and insecurity before they got involved in the project. This was especially true for those residents newly arrived from the mainland and those who had experienced great transitions in their lives. Many respondents reported a change of personal values and increase in self confidence because of engaging in new roles and positive human relationships. The empowerment of individuals and communities has been striking

and many focus group participants shared personal witness of transformation and growth. Trust level has obviously been improved within the social network of participants and also towards NGOs and other stakeholder organizations. But trust towards the government and society in general is not apparent as it may involve more extensive participation from different government departments and social institutions on a long term basis.

Civic Engagement

The range of civic engagement of participants and stakeholders in current CIIF projects is mainly in social services, economic activities and interpersonal helping. There was little mentioning of involvement in voicing concerns towards community or policy issues or civic and political engagement in community betterment. There was little linking social capital that connects the participants with the more powerful stakeholders in the community such as district board members, government departments and other institutions. Co-operations and joint activities with these institutions might be frequent but there was little community activism and collaboration that worked towards the overall community problem solving and cohesion.

How and Why the Projects Work? Four Basic Tenets of CIIF:

Four basic tenets of CIIF were highlighted as the critical success factor, viz. the community building orientation, empowerment approach, fostering self reliance and inter-sector collaboration. CIIF projects have tried out the four basic tenets and they have demonstrated the effectiveness in building social capital. Examples of good practices were identified and grouped under the four basic tenets.

Community Building

CIIF projects would gain entry into communities with due considerations of the community history, pre-existing networks and also learn to respect and make use of the community assets to strength social ties and bridge the segregated groups with other stakeholder. CIIF projects aim to foster community awareness, cohesion and mutual concern through strengthening social ties and their capacity to address community and personal needs.

Empowerment Approach

The present research has affirmed the CIIF motto of ‘There is strength in every man’. Service users and volunteers shared personal stories of growth and empowerment through connecting and serving others. Four elements of social capital noted by Lin (1999), viz. information, influence, social credentials and reinforcement, may explain the subsequent personal, economical and social benefits for individuals and communities.

Fostering Self Reliance

On the other hand, self reliance and mutual support are another two main themes of the CIIF. Social connections were found to serve as a crucial platform for building self esteem and re-activate some of the participants to return to gainful employment. The gainful employment created through CIIF projects might only be temporary or low pay but these attempts were meaningful in enabling participants to engage in positive roles and gain hands-on experiences. These initiatives served as intermediate measures for people to restore their confidence and explore new career opportunities.

Inter-sector Collaboration

There was enhancement in bridging social capital in most of the CIIF projects under study. Residents of different socio-economic backgrounds have chances of mutual understanding, developing social relationships or co-operating in serving the community. However, few projects have demonstrated success in terms of enhancing linking social capital. The study has been unable to identify cases of a sustainable and long term linkage between project participants and the more powerful and resourceful stakeholders in the community. This may be due to sample bias or the limitation of project duration. The success of inter-sector collaboration hinges on the social capital of the project operators and their parent NGOs. Project operators are the most important agents to identify community stakeholders, formulate appropriate strategies, approach different stakeholders and build up platforms for such collaboration.

What Next on the Agenda?: Recommendations

At the Participant Level

1. Social capital of individuals is shown to be able to increase personal capital

and also to function as cushions in adversities. These networks must be preserved and appropriately steered for the trust and cohesion among members be maintained and further enhanced.

2. The empowerment strategy of CIIF has been very successful but participants would still need training, support and guidance in learning new roles and transforming their lives through contributing and participating.
3. There should be due consideration for effective maintenance and development of these networks if they have demonstrated positive social outcomes and effectiveness in enhancing personal and community well-being.
4. The mentorship network strategy should be further experimented on a broader and more intensive level to enhance understanding on its effectiveness to increase bridging social capital.
5. The experiences of CIIF projects should be generalized on a wider scale especially in remote and marginalized communities like Tung Chung, Po Tin and Tin Shui Wai. More resource support and effective liaison between service agencies should be provided to incorporate and further extend the scope of the social networking approach in helping low income families.

At the Project Level:

6. There should be considerations of expanding, incorporating or transforming some of the successful strategies and service models into mainstream social service practices.
7. There should be consideration on the continuity of network development in involving service users, transfer of the know-how and expertise in community building and resource mobilization and strategic partnership with different stake holders and organization in the community.
8. CIIF project experiences are precious learning for their respective NGOs, other community stakeholders and other social service sectors like housing, healthcare and education.
9. The generalization of project experiences into different human service sectors and policy arenas can maximize the effects of social experimentation in building social capital. It can also expand the scope of inter-sector collaboration for different vulnerable and marginal communities.
10. Most of the project operators and focus group participants expressed the need for resource and staffing support. Volunteers and helpers need training

and support as they render assistance to each others. They drew the parallel of social networks as plants needing water and sunshine for their healthy growth and development. Project operators are the gardeners to bring about the fruits of social capital.

At the Community Level

11. Social capital experiences of CIIF have set a good example for district level government institutions to make use of inter-sector collaboration in fostering solidarity and civic engagement at the community level. District officials should consider involving more NGOs and community stakeholders at the district level and work towards mezzo-level social capital outcome goals on a longer duration.
12. It would be much more desirable and sustainable for a well established and high power stakeholder to take up overall leadership for the long term development of inter-sector collaboration at the community level. Institutions like DSWO or District Council have the potential to plan and co-ordinate inter-sector social capital development at the district level.

At the Societal Level

13. Increasing burden of welfare and health care has pushed the government to redefine its role in welfare provision. The role of the government becomes the provider of tools for people to solve their own problems through family and informal social ties. But self reliance is easier said than done when unifying social institutions such as community, family and the church are declining in face of rapid social changes.
14. A corresponding policy formulation and implementation mechanism should be in place to actualize this new governance ideology. A new social contract between government, citizens and the corporate sector has to be developed. CIIF initiatives would be crucial to build up a strategic platform for citizen participation and problem solving at the grassroot level.
15. The government should take up a more proactive role to involve the commercial sector in bringing forth sustainable development and collective well being. Policy incentives, channels of communication and participation would have to be in place. Government institutions such as DSWO, DO or District Councils should be active players in building up linking social capital with the most powerful and resourceful stakeholders in society.

At the Academic Level

16. Research teams can be the accompanying consultants throughout the project intervention. Action research strategies can help to provide constant user feedbacks and reflections from community stakeholders throughout the project intervention.
17. There should be comparison, triangulation and cross-examination of findings and conclusions among research teams, particularly those teams working on the same group of projects or adopting similar measuring instruments.
18. A longitudinal design with more refined measuring instruments and vigorous and representative sampling frame is more appropriate for more conclusive observations on the aggregated effects of social capital intervention for certain groups or community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

What Next on the Agenda?

Recommendations are made in relation to the development of social capital at the participant, project, community and societal levels. They incorporate suggestions to strengthen the capacities and connections of participants, the systems of supports, and also the connections between communities and the large policy environment. On the other hand, recommendations were also made regarding the best use of the present research findings to inform further social capital research in the local context.

At the Participant Level:

Deprivation and poverty are complicated social issues and the community is in a continuous state of change and evolution. Economic situations are unstable and the family is no longer a reliable haven of support and nurturance. Individual and families have become all the more fragile and crisis prone. At the participant level, the social networks built up through CIIF project interventions are now the key social capital of these marginal and vulnerably groups. Social capital of individuals is shown to be able to increase personal capital and also to function as cushions in adversities. These networks must be preserved and appropriately steered for the trust and cohesion among members be maintained and further enhanced. The empowerment strategy of CIIF has been very successful but participants would still need training, support and guidance in learning new roles and transforming their lives through contributing and participating.

Although participants gradually took up a more active leadership role in their social networks, they were of the view that volunteers are less dependable than staff members in sustaining the social networks and maintaining the momentum of change in the community. Volunteers and helpers would always come and go as participants frankly shared in focus group interviews. While they treasured membership in a network, some of the participants also expressed anxiety or even reluctance to shoulder up formal duties and responsibilities in running the organization. Unanimously participants and community stakeholders voiced concern towards the sustainability of the social networks and social capital outcomes after the project ceased to receive funding from CIIF. There should be due consideration for effective maintenance and development of these networks if they have demonstrated positive

social outcomes and effectiveness in enhancing personal and community well-being.

Among the five types of social networks identified, the functioning and operation of the mentorship and co-operative networks would need further exploration and experimentation. The success of co-operatives, in particular, would require knowledge in market analysis and entrepreneurship. Some co-operatives may have the potential to become a business or social enterprise, and less based on volunteering work. As for mentorship networks, few mentors have shared their experiences with the research team and thus the present study was unable to make observations on the characteristics and critical success factors. In the international literature, many researchers considered mentorship a good strategy to equip young people with the necessary life experiences. The mentorship network strategy should be further experimented on a broader and more intensive level to enhance understanding on its effectiveness to increase bridging social capital.

Many CIIF project participants were groups of individuals disconnected with the social and economic mainstream either because of the physical location of the community, or unemployment and other personal crisis. The community building and empowerment strategy of the CIIF has been found to be a very effective strategy in reconnecting and empowering these target groups. CIIF projects have been flexible and holistic in helping these individuals and families to survive through crisis and state of hopelessness. The experiences of CIIF projects in helping these low income families and individuals should be generalized on a wider scale especially in remote communities like Tung Chung, Po Tin and Tin Shui Wai. More resource support and effective liaison between service agencies should be provided to incorporate and further extend the scope of the social networking approach in helping low income families.

At the Project Level

Project operators were overloaded with administrative procedures and the pressure to prove their effectiveness within a short time span. They have real commitment towards the social capital ideas and most of the projects have operationalized the concept into real practice. Their contribution and achievement should be recognized and generalized to their own agency and also the community. While it is the intention of CIIF to demonstrate innovative approaches in building social capital, project operators' experiences and expertise should further be tapped to help expand the projects or replicate the project on other communities or service

settings. There should be considerations of expanding, incorporating or transforming some of the successful strategies and service models into mainstream social service practices.

The long term development of CIIF projects is uncertain. Staff members have been striving diligently to meet project objectives and serve the community. But it is difficult for the project to plan for the sustainability and continuity of the network development when they have a relatively short project duration. There should be consideration on the continuity of network development in involving service users, transfer of the know-how and expertise in community building and resource mobilization and continuity in strategic partnership with different stake holders and organization in the community. CIIF project experiences are precious learning for their respective NGOs, other community stakeholders and other social service sectors like housing, healthcare and education. The generalization of project experiences into different human service sectors and policy arenas can maximize the effects of social experimentation in building social capital.

Some of the NGOs can maintain the networks and social capital outcomes by absorbing and reshuffling the workload among other staff members or service units. But in cases of CIIF projects attaching to non-government funded NGOs, there would not be resources for employing social work trained personnel after project termination. The continuity and sustainability of social capital outcomes would be difficult to be ensured. Most of the project operators and focus group participants expressed the need for resources and staffing support. They drew the parallel of social networks as plants needing water and sunshine for their healthy growth and development. Volunteers and helpers need training and support as they render assistance to others.

At the Community Level

“I will issue internal guidelines asking all government departments to better complement the work of DOs with a view to raising the capacity to resolve problems, deal with issues concerning people's livelihood, strengthen community building, and promote community and charity work at the district level.” Donald Tsang, 2005 Policy Address

CIIF projects have enlightened us with the potential of the community. But their effort and achievement are still confined to a small spectrum of residents and it was still at some distance from the CIIF ideal of ‘cultural transformation’ 移風易俗.

There were too few players to share this vision at the district level. The government is going to re-vitalize the community and social capital experiences of CIIF have set a good example for district level government institutions to make use of inter-sector collaboration in fostering solidarity and civic engagement at the community level. District officials should consider involving more NGOs and community stakeholders at the district level and work towards mezzo-level social capital outcome goals on a longer duration.

Right now the present study can only adopt a retrospective perspective to maximize lessons learnt through the CIIF project intervention. On a district level, social capital indicators can be taken as its social and civic landscape. Sense of belonging, civic engagement and citizen participation can be promoted as a long term goal of community building. It would be much more desirable and sustainable for a well established and high power stakeholder to take up overall leadership for the long term development of inter-sector collaboration at the community level. Institutions like DSWO or District Council have the potential to plan and co-ordinate inter-sector social capital development at the district level.

At the Societal Level

At the societal level, the increasing burden on welfare and health care has pushed the government to redefine its role in welfare provision. The new blueprint for social welfare in HK is built upon the Strategic Framework of Social Welfare which has been formulated and deliberated in Social Welfare Advisory Committee (SWAC) in 2004. The government is attempting to play the role of a safety net and civic catalyst. It explicitly states that the values in social welfare provision in HK are: self reliance; mutual concern; equal opportunities and fair competition and mobility. The role of the government becomes the provider of tools for people to solve their own problems rather than the main problem-solver or the regulator. But self reliance is easier said than done when unifying social institutions such as community, family and the church are declining in face of rapid social changes.

A new strategy and policy mechanism have to accompany this new thinking. A corresponding policy formulation and implementation mechanism should be in place to actualize this ideology of governance and co-ordinate different government institutions to work towards its goals. A new social contract between government, citizens and the corporate sector has to be developed through dialogue, policy frameworks and community initiatives. This new contract is essential a new

citizenship that emphasizes mutual support and cross sector interaction and cohesion. The informal sector and the community are seen as a basis for citizen involvement in helping each other. Under this new thinking, CIIF initiatives would be crucial to build up a strategic platform for citizen participation and problem solving at the grassroots level. It would be the crucial role of CIIF project operators to educate and mobilize citizens in assuming this new citizenship through formal and informal social and civic engagement.

On the other hand, the development of corporate citizenship is essential. The government should take up a more proactive role to involve the commercial sector in bringing forth sustainable development and collective well-being. While low income groups are encouraged to be self reliant and help each other in stormy times, the rich should not be washing their hands off in serving the community. But it should be the role of other government institutions rather than project operators to encourage corporate institutions and the commercial sectors to take up the responsibility of corporate citizenship. Policy incentives, channels of communication and participation would have to be in place. Project operators should direct their energy and effort in engaging the most vulnerable and segregated while the other government institutions such as DSWO, DO or District Councils should be actively playing the linking function of mobilizing the most powerful and resourceful stakeholders in community betterment.

At the Academic Level

The present study is largely a formative evaluative research on existing CIIF projects. It adopts a retrospective and qualitative approach. It would be much more desirable for research frameworks be established before project commencement so that the theories of change of project operators and funding body be made explicit. Research teams can then become the accompanying consultants throughout the project intervention. Action research strategies can help to provide constant user feedbacks and reflections from community stakeholders throughout the project intervention. The partnership between researchers and operators would be more fruitful and beneficial.

It has been an invaluable chance to have different research teams examining the project intervention, social capital outcomes, process and strategies. A mixed methodology utilizing both quantitative and qualitative measures has been particularly

useful to work towards a conceptual and operational framework of social capital. There should be comparison, triangulation and cross-examination of findings and conclusions among research teams, particularly those teams working on the same group of projects or adopting similar measuring instruments.

There is much more room in broadening the scope and usefulness of social capital research in the local context. Social capital research cannot be separated from social goals and related policy formulation. If the social capital agenda is to be taken seriously by the government, the scope of the accompanying research should be on a larger scale and the duration be much longer. A longitudinal design with more refined measuring instruments and vigorous and representative sampling frame would be appropriate for the findings of social capital research to inform policies.

CONCLUSION

Social capital is an umbrella term in describing human interactions and relationships. Its manifestation and structural features are different and unique to each community setting. The study has basically affirm the effectiveness of CIIF projects and proven the basic tenets of CIIF in community building, empowerment, self reliance and inter-sector collaboration. But is hard to give conclusive and absolute answers to how it can solve complex social problems such as poverty and discrimination. So far the CIIF project experiences have been encouraging and positive. Project participants and stakeholders have been co-operative and frank in sharing their personal experiences. They are enthusiastic and eager to move forward to continue the journey of building social capital and a caring society. It's time to witness social harmony in deeds rather than words. But it is very essential for the government to hear these voices and take the lead to mobilize different sectors to build up a warm, caring and strong community.