

DEMOS

# SOCIAL CAPITAL 2025

## WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

BRIEFING PAPER

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**Local Trust**



national network  
for neighbourhood  
improvement

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# ABOUT SOCIAL CAPITAL 2025

The briefing paper is part of a Demos series, supported by **Local Trust** and **3ni**, examining social capital and the contribution that strengthening it makes to improving economic and social outcomes, including for children, improving health and wellbeing and reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. This briefing enables the rest of the project by defining the concept of social capital.

This series sits at the intersection of two pillars of Demos's work: the **Citizen Economy** and **Public Service Reform**. In this series we make the case that strengthening social capital through concerted government action will ultimately fuel economic growth and community wellbeing and create a virtuous cycle. It builds on ideas we first presented in the paper *The Preventative State*.

# WHAT IS SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Social capital is what communities are made of. It is the bond we feel to our neighbours, to our friends, to our colleagues and to our acquaintances. Social capital is the support, the assistance and the courtesies we give others. And it's everything we expect to get back in return.

Social capital manifests in subtle ways. And that makes it a difficult concept to define. To live in a neighbourhood or society that is rich in social capital is to live with a general feeling of ease. You trust the people you pass on the street. You have a long list of people you could call should things go wrong. You know where to go to make your voice heard.

So social capital is one of those concepts about which it's tempting to say: "I just know it when I see it." It's how people get on, get together and help each other to get by.

But the aim of this series is to develop practical policy solutions that improve community outcomes by increasing social capital. And to do that we need a clear working definition.

The term "social capital" was coined in 1916 by Lyda Judson Hanifan, the state supervisor of rural schools in West Virginia and a prominent Progressive Era educational reformer. Hanifan defined social capital as the "tangible substances [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse" (Putnam, 1993, 2000). The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduced the concept, relatively unchanged, into academic literature in 1972. However, it was Robert Putnam in his groundbreaking studies of the role of social capital in the economic development of Italy (1993) and then the United States in his book 'Bowling Alone' that inserted the fuzzy academic concept into political and policy agendas.

Since then, social capital has proved a useful analytical tool in social science disciplines from political economy to community development. Along with Bourdieu's related concepts of cultural capital, administrative capital and political capital, it is a way of describing value, power and wealth which goes beyond the purely economic.

## A CONTENTIOUS TERM

That is not to say that the term is uncontentious. As theorists including Kenneth Arrow and David Solow have argued, the use of "capital" is potentially misleading. A capital asset, in the classical economic sense, is quantifiable and exchangeable. Social capital, by definition, is neither. But here, as Elinor Ostrom insists, is precisely where the value of "social capital" lies: by showing the link between *intangible* social networks and the *tangible* benefits they bring, such as job opportunities or access to credit. None of social capital's various detractors over the years has been able to come up with an alternative concept that does the same thing quite as well. And the ubiquity of "social capital" across works by authors of diverse political and theoretical persuasions over the past fifty years is a testament to the concept's enduring salience.

## COMMONALITIES IN DEFINITIONS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Reviewing this half century's worth of academic literature, we see significant overlaps in diverse authors' definitions of social capital. Five key theoretical components of the concept of social capital emerge, upon which virtually every theorist to date has agreed.

1. **Social networks** are a structure through which resources, information and support pass between individuals and groups. Alejandro Portes, for instance, defines a person's social capital as: their "ability [...] to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks" such as families, friendship circles, clubs or community groups (Portes, 1998).
2. The **resources** which move along these networks are linked to favourable social and economic outcomes. Jonathan Turner defines social capital as "those forces that increase the potential for economic development in a society" by strengthening social bonds (Turner, 2000).
3. The flow of these resources depends upon mutual **trust** between individuals within a given network. Robert Solow's definition emphasises "[t]hings such as trust, the willingness and capacity to cooperate and coordinate, [and] the habit of contributing to a common effort even if no one is watching" (Solow, 2000).
4. Every **individual** in a given social network both contributes to and benefits from this flow of resources, even if some are overall net contributors and others net beneficiaries. Bourdieu called social capital the "aggregate" of resources that members contribute to a social network, and later the "sum" of all resources to which members share access (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992)
5. These individuals are bound together in this process through a collection of shared social **norms** and expectations. As Francis Fukuyama writes, it is "the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them" (Fukuyama, 1995). Social capital can benefit *the group*, in terms of the collective's ability to mount coordinated action (what Robert Sampson and colleagues (2006) call "collective efficacy") and exercise conformity to norms (e.g. via informal social control).

## DIFFERENT FORMS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

We can also identify three distinct ways in which social capital operates.

1. **Bonding** social capital binds people within a group or community closer together. Resources flow horizontally within a social network of people who are similar to one another in terms of background, interests or social status: family friends, hobby clubs or alumni networks, for instance. These resources might include childcare, borrowed money or simply emotional support. Bonding social capital helps people to *get by*: to maintain their status or standard of living.
2. **Bridging** social capital brings people from different groups or communities together. Resources flow vertically from individuals of relatively high social status to those of lower social status. These might include career opportunities, access to institutions, or specialist knowledge and information. Bridging social capital helps us to *get on and get ahead*: to improve our circumstances or opportunities.
3. **Linking** social capital connects individuals or groups to institutions or organisations that hold power and influence. Resources flow from formal structures, such as government agencies, businesses or NGOs, to individuals or communities that might otherwise lack direct access to them. These might include public services, funding opportunities or policy advocacy

support. Linking social capital helps people and communities to *get things done*: to effect systemic change or gain access to resources that require institutional mediation.

## CONCLUSION AND DEFINITION

Social capital has many definitions and many elements. But for it to be of any use in public policy, there needs to be some level of consensus around a working definition. Based on our review of the literature, four main active elements of social capital emerge as relevant for the purposes of this series of papers:

1. Social trust/ reciprocity;
2. Collective efficacy;
3. Social networks
4. Social integration for mutual benefit.

As the best encapsulation of these four elements, we recommend Ichiro Kawachi's 2006 definition of social capital for practical policy use:

*A network-based process: that is the resources available to individuals and communities through their social networks, ties, and social support.*

This definition is not without its limitations but for the purposes of this series of papers, it is a robust and clear definition. It is the definition we refer to throughout the papers that follow.

**TABLE 1**  
SOCIAL CAPITAL DEFINITIONS AVAILABLE ACROSS THE LITERATURE

NO.	DEFINITION	AUTHOR	DISCIPLINE	YEAR
1	"The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248)" [...] "made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility" (p. 243)	Pierre Bourdieu	Sociology	1986
2	"Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity, but a variety of different entities having two characteristics in common: They all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure" (Coleman, 1990, p. 302)"	James Coleman	Sociology	1990
3	"a resource that actors derive from specific social structures and then use to pursue their interests; it is created by changes in the relationship among actors" (Baker, 1990, p. 619).	Wayne Baker	Sociology, Business Administration	1990
4	"the number of people who can be expected to provide support and the resources those people have at their disposal" (Boxman et al., 1991, p. 52)	Ed Boxman, Nan Dirk de Graaf and Hendrik de Flap	Sociology	1991
5	"The sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119)	Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant	Sociology	1992
6	"The set of elements of the social structure that affects relations among people and are inputs or arguments of the production and/or utility function" (Schiff, 1992, p. 160)	Maurice Schiff	Economics	1992

NO.	DEFINITION	AUTHOR	DISCIPLINE	YEAR
7	"Naturally occurring social relationships among persons which promote or assist the acquisition of skills and traits valued in the marketplace. . . an asset which may be as significant as financial bequests in accounting for the maintenance of inequality in our society" (Loury 1992, as cited by Claridge, 2004, p.27)	Glenn Loury (as cited by Claridge 2004)	Economics	1992
8	"Those expectations for action within a collectively that affect the economic goals and goal-seeking behaviour of its members, even if these expectations are not oriented toward the economic sphere" (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993, p. 1323)	Alejandro Portes and Julia Sensenbrenner	Sociology	1993
9	"Features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995, p. 67) The collective value of all "social networks" [who people know] and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other ["norms of reciprocity"].	Robert Putnam	Political Science, Sociology	1995, 2000
10	"The ability of people to work together for common purposes in groups and organisations. Social capital can be defined simply as the existence of a certain set of informal values or norms shared among members of a group that permit cooperation among them" (Fukuyama, 1995).	Francis Fukuyama	Political Theory, Political Economy	1995
11	"a culture of trust and tolerance, in which extensive networks of voluntary associations emerge" (Inglehart 1997, p. 188)	Ronald Inglehart	Political Science	1997
12	"the web of social relationships that influences individual behaviour and thereby affects economic growth" (Pennar 1997, p. 154 as cited by Salajegheh & Primoradi, 2013, p.42))	K. Pennar as cited by Salajegheh & Primoradi, 2013, p.42)	Business Journalism	1997
13	"Those voluntary means and processes developed within civil society which promote development for the collective whole" (Thomas, 1996, p. 11)	Clive Thomas	Economics	1996



NO.	DEFINITION	AUTHOR	DISCIPLINE	YEAR
14	'The ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures' (Portes, 1998, p. 6)	Alejandro Portes	Sociology	1998
15	"The sum of the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through, and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit. Social capital thus comprises both the network and the assets that may be mobilised through that network" (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998, p. 243)"	Janine Nahapiet and Sumantra Ghoshal	Management	1998
16	"The information, trust, and norms of reciprocity inhering in one's social networks" (Woolcock, 1998, p.153, as cited by Claridge (2004))	Michael Woolcock	Sociology, Development Studies	1998
17	"First, social capital is tacit knowledge; it is partly the social glue that produces cohesion but also a set of cognitive aptitudes and predispositions. [...] Second, social capital may be thought of as a collection of networks, what sociologists used to call the "social group" into which one is socialised or aspires to be socialised. Third, social capital is both an aggregation of reputations and a way to sort out reputations. [...] Finally, social capital includes the organisational capital that managers have developed through their styles of administration, incentives and command, their labor practices, hiring decisions, systems of dispute resolution, style of marketing, and so on" "It is capital because it takes time and effort to produce (it has an opportunity cost)" (Stiglitz, 1999, pp. 60–61).	Joseph Stiglitz	Economics, Public Policy	1999
18	"My definition of social capital is, therefore, broad: those forces that increase the potential for economic development in a society by creating and sustaining social relations and patterns of social organisation" (Turner, 2000, p. 95)	Jonathan Turner	Sociology	2000

NO.	DEFINITION	AUTHOR	DISCIPLINE	YEAR
19	"Social capital is the shared knowledge, understandings, norms, rules, and expectations about patterns of interactions that groups of individuals bring to a recurrent activity" (Ostrom, 2000, p. 176)	Elinor Ostrom	Political Economy	2000
20	"Things such as trust, the willingness and capacity to cooperate and coordinate, the habit of contributing to a common effort even if no one is watching" (Solow, 2000, p. 7)	Robert Solow	Economics	2000
21	"The resources available to individuals and communities through their social relationships" (Kawachi et al., 2004, p. 5).	Ichiro Kawachi, Daniel Kim, Adam Coutts and SV Subramanian	Epidemiology, Management, Public Policy	2004
22	"Social capital is broadly defined to be a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing a stock of social norms, values, beliefs, trusts, obligations, relationships, networks, friends, memberships, civic engagement, information flows, and institutions that foster cooperation and collective actions for mutual benefits and contributes to economic and social development" (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009, p. 480)	Humnath Bhandari and Kumi Yasunobu	Agricultural Economics	2009

Source: Expanded upon Claridge (2004) table of social capital definitions

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