

What is Social Capital 2015 – a review

by PhD Alexander Dill, Managing Director

Summary

After a climax around the year 2000 Social Capital didn't make it's way as a topic for societal understanding and social innovation yet.

Cutting across with a lot of similar issues (see table), competing with better framed concepts such as *Sustainable Development*, the *Informal Sector*, *Social Cohesion*, *Human Development*, *Well-being* and *Civil Society*, Social Capital suffers on missing recognition, outdated literature and almost zero debate.

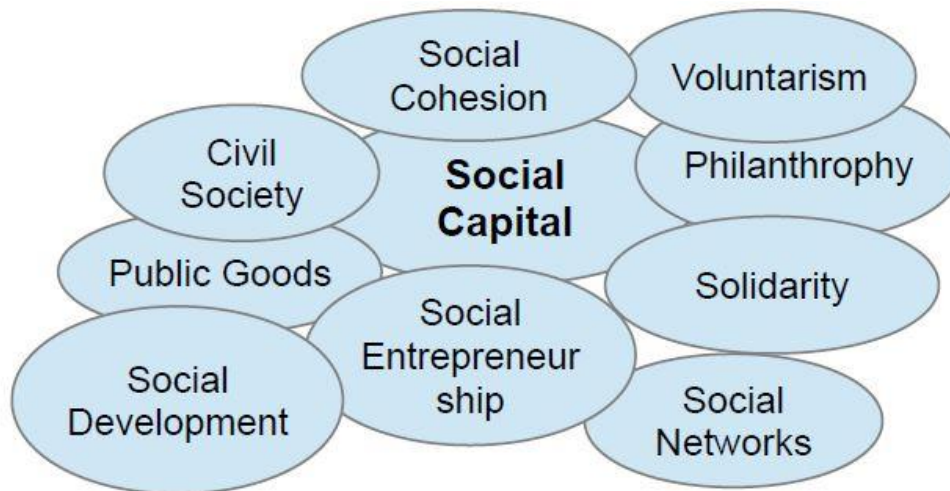
While this paper has been published and tweeted at high speed it includes recent statements that may be the start-up of a new debate on what Social Capital is, how it can be defined and identified, accelerated and enhanced, protected, reclaimed and rebuilt.

Therefore recent research contributions to Social Capital are presented within this paper, which is an attempt to conceptualize Social Capital and to explore the recent issues around Social Capital research. Credits can be verified through hyperlinks. Further comments are welcome. The author appreciates your feedback: dill@commons.ch.

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I Definition and operationalisation – one word, various concepts

Despite it's almost logical distinction from *Financial Capital* and *Human Capital*, Social Capital cuts across with a couple of societal, economical and political issues such as the following ones:



This confusion still is the major obstacle to measure and to assess and, as a consequence, to compare, to preserve, to stabilize or to enhance Social Capital.

Another popular meaning of Social Capital is the idea that it is a *more social* form of capital and representing the social responsibility of capital: a *compliant* capital. In that interpretation Social

Capital became an object of hope for social activists. The Social Capital World Forum, which has been attended by the author in the Swedish town of Goteborg in 2012, therefore remained a rather small reunion of activists, not a worldwide congress of scientists discussing their research results and assumptions on Social Capital.

Besides the theoretical work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu most of the research on Social Capital is based on the work of Robert Putnam. Since he published „Bowling alone“ (Putnam 1995) the Worldbank, the OECD and other international organizations referred to his definition of Social Capital. Putnam focussed on the relation of the amount and quantity of memberships in organized social networks with economic affluence; a positive relation being underlined with data from the U.S. federal states.

The European research also referring to Putnam, such as the work of Markus Freitag (Freitag 2014), was able to show a similar correlation for Switzerland.

In 2001 the OECD published a working paper of Robert Putnam with the title [„Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences.“](#) (Putnam 2001)

Putnam highlighted the voluntarism in many states and towns in the U.S. as a key for providing public services and goods.

According to his definition Social Capital is the value of social networks and is determined by voluntarism, donating, neighbourhood-activities and charity. Therefore, Social Capital is seen as a resource that could *in- or decrease* within a society or group.

Equipped with this knowledge we started talking about *positive* and *negative*, about *bonding* and *bridging* Social Capital.

The table below summarizes three definitions of Social Capital:

Definitions of Social Capital

OECD, Robert Putnam (OECD 2001)	<i>„Networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within or among groups.“</i>
WHO, Worldbank (WHO 2012)	<i>“Social capital is not just the sum of the institutions which underpin a society – it is the glue that holds them together”</i>
Basel Institute of Commons and Economics (Dill 2012)	<i>„Social Capital is the amount of non-material goods within a community.“</i>

Credits: see the literature at the end of the paper

If – and that’s the official definition up to now – Social Capital is represented, held and shared by successful networks, we quickly arrive at the bonmot of the Austrian Social Capital research Nestor Ernst Gehmacher: [„Also a gang possesses Social Capital“](#) (Gehmacher 2007).

Gehmacher is correct in that he challenges the implicit positive notion of Social Capital, by adding another layer to the discussion.

Social Capital can be successfully activated, as for instance by local cooperatives, citizens groups and charities based on voluntarism. On the other hand, negative forms of Social Capital such as Mafia clans, tax havens and militants, damaging the common goods (see: [A bit rich, New Economic Foundation 2009](#)) of a society, exist as well.

Of course, distinguishing between the various forms of Social Capital, ultimately is a highly philosophical, moral, ethical and political undertaking.

Although the empirical research on Social Capital focussed on the operationalisation of other available statistical data such as on membership in charities, donations and voluntarism, it remained in some way unilateral. Why?

In the European welfare economies most of the common and public goods such as health, education, security and social aid, are common goods paid by the government. The government is financed by taxes and contributions of the citizens and of course this process requires a lot of Social Capital. The whole of Western and Northern Europe in this respect appears as a Mecca of Social Capital as long as their citizens are willing to pay the bill, i.e. their taxes.

So the Social Capital in these countries doesn't start with voluntarism and donations for charities but with citizenship, its rights, its duties.

In Latin America ([Local commons in rural Sao Paulo, Dill 2011](#)), Africa and Asia ([Gift economy and trust in rural Nepal, Dill 2011](#)) Social Capital can neither be identified e.g. by counting the memberships in organized voluntarism or by donations for charities. In these countries Social Capital appears more as practising various cultural traditions in common life such as in religion, music, tribal rites and social initiation.

Many people in developing countries e.g. live from cash donations of their relatives in industrial countries (e.g. Africa) or are obliged to donate for common purposes (e.g. Myanmar). Of course those donations can not be compared with donations for charities in the United Kingdom or the U.S. There have been recent approaches to assess global unified indicators such as organized voluntarism and donations for charities in the *World Giving Index*. The top ranking of the US in the [2014 release](#) may be a proof for the assumption of unilateralism.

Global Index Benchmarks [comparing eight leading international indices in 2012](#) showed a small deviation from the ranking by GDP and can be interpreted as a proof for spreading unilateral standards. This unilateralism prefers by the way not only the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand, but also of established economies across Europe.

It is understandable that previous research tried to find a pragmatic way to gather robust data and therefore looking for a quantifiable operationalisation of Social Capital, such as memberships in organizations.

Nevertheless, this needs to be broadened by taking into consideration the functional equivalence and the various forms of Social Capital within different cultures, societies and countries.

II. History – little progress seen

After a short hype around the year 2000 when the Worldbank launched a study group on Social Capital and even provided a complicated SOCAT ([Social Capital Assessment Tool](#)), that has been used in only three countries, the research on Social Capital did not produce negotiable new results.

When the OECD published their report „On the Well-being of Nations“ in 2004, they considered Social Capital to be still „in an early phase of its exploration“. In 2006 the Worldbank released their last working paper on Social Capital titled [„Analyzing Social Capital in Context“](#). In 2008 „The handbook of Social Capital“ called Social Capital „a relatively new concept in the social sciences“. So most of the theoretical research is outdated which becomes apparent, when looking at contributions of major stakeholders to the discussion on „Social Capital“:

Top results for Social Capital on google.com (English), December 31st 2014

Google Rank	Provider	Last credits/literature
1	Wikipedia.en	2008
2	OECD	Feb 2007
3	Harvard Kennedy School	2000
4	YMCA George Williams College	2006
5	Office of National Statistics United Kingdom	2011
6	Harvard Kennedy School	2000
7	Harvard Kennedy School	2000
8	Euricse European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises	2011 (updates only for calls and conferences)
Average		2005 (ten years)

Thus, the implications of major global events such as the Financial Crisis of 2009 and the Arab Spring on Social Capital remain opaque, as does the ongoing technological revolution of Social Networks boosted by Social Networking Sites (SNS) like Facebook.

Against the background it is hardly understandable that continuing the research on Social Capital does not seem to be a priority for the relevant stakeholders.

The Basel Institute of Commons and Economics has contacted Harvard Kennedy School and the Worldbank from 2010 on without achieving any response.

In 2010 the Institute contacted the *Human Development Index (HDI)*, which is inspired by Nobel laureate and Harvard professor Amartya Sen. Our aim was to deliver a Social Capital Assessment to provide an additional indicator. The former Prime Minister of New Zealand, Mrs. Helen Clark, is the administrator of the UN Development Programme releasing the Index, told the Institute Social Capital could not be included in the HDI.

Response from Helen Clark

My colleagues at the HDRO, however, have advised that the inclusion of an additional dimension about social capital in the Human Development Index is very unlikely. Unfortunately, UNDP is also unable to provide funding for this initiative at this time.

Please accept my best wishes for success in taking this forward.

Yours sincerely,



Helen Clark

Unfortunately international organizations such as the UN Development Programme, the World Economic Forum, the Worldbank, the European Commission, the European Statistics Office EUROSTAT, the European Parliament, the UNCTAD and even the OECD remain silent instead of joining forces to releasing a World Social Capital Report.

Drawing a conclusion, the research on Social Capital – following its remarkable efforts up to the year 2000 – remained a quite unilateral and static branch of social science. Especially it did not produce new results and insights, helping decision makers worldwide to consider Social Capital when building resilience against global risks such as war, financial crisis and natural disasters. If you are interested in understanding the early debate on Social Capital around the year 2000, you may enjoy the good written essay of Stefen N. Durlauf, „The Case ,against‘ Social Capital“ from 1999 (Durlauf 1999).

What may be the reasons that the research on Social Capital didn't progress since more than a decade?

- The rise of Social Networking Sites (SNS) on the Internet (Miller 2012) since 2008, e. g. Facebook, which changed the definition, the impact and the function of social networks and their influence. An aspect which in itself deserves attention and should urge researchers and major stakeholders to take measures.
- The World Financial Crisis in 2009 brought up new global networked risks that couldn't be identified and computed by tracking the „old“ social networks and their Social Capital (Helbing 2012/2013).
- The „publish or perish“-tradition to releasing new research only in „referenced“ scientific journals lead to a collective stagnation because new research didn't found it's way in the gated social networks of scientific communities. It is only as of 2008 that the online based scientific community researchgate.net allowed to spread scientific articles for a registered scientific audience without being reviewed by the existing networks of universities and their chairs.
- As [recently mentioned by Desmond Mc Neill](#), Director at the Research School on Development at the University of Oslo (Mc Neill 2015), Social Capital is not among the concepts and issues that have been successfully „framed“ such as *Sustainable Development*, *Human Development*, *Climate Change* or the *Informal Sector*.

III Present research – three examples

Of course present research on local forms of Social Capital takes place every week in many countries. Nevertheless there's a need to conduct global comparative studies as well, to discuss new developments challenging the view on Social Capital such as Social Networking Sites in the internet, global networked risks and sovereign risks, e.g. war, civil war and sovereign debt. The following three examples are featured to inspire and enhance the research on Social Capital.

1) Is location based networking replaced by internet based working?

In 2012 the British anthropologist Daniel Miller from the University College of London [published an article on „Social Networking Sites“](#). He mentioned that in 2006 (Barry Wellman 2006) web surveyors considered a replacement of location based networking – e.g. in dating – by internet networking. His word „Social Networking Sites“ is to be distinguished from what we know as „Social Media“, because Social Media may enable social networks, but are no social network for themselves.

Nevertheless, Facebook in the beginning was a network of Harvard students and developed to become a provider for social networking, so did Twitter and MyApp.

At the same the ongoing discussion on the „digital divide“ started, emphasizing that missing access to these new networks will cause a new poverty and social exclusion.

While reading Facebook entries all over the world Miller remarks:

„In studying Facebook it is soon apparent that it exhibits a surplus communicative economy in that people seem to do all sorts of things with it that are hard to reduce to some simply communicative need or any other form of instrumentalism.“ (Miller 2012)

Miller regards the exploration of Social Network Sites as a follow-up of the research of Putnam and Sennett:

„Sociology was principally concerned with the consequences of an assumed decline from this condition (regarding the individual only as part of a social network) as a result of industrialisation, capitalism and urbanism. Still today many of the most influential books in sociology such as Putnam's (2001) Bowling Alone or Sennett's (1977) Fall of Public Man, along with works by Giddens, Beck and Bauman remain clearly within this dominant trajectory.“

In opposite to this view Miller sees in Social Networking Sites new spaces for individualism, creativity and cosmology by feeling as a part of a worldwide event.

Finally, according to Miller the internet doesn't replace local networks (and by the way neither creates real „global“ networks), but enhances a hedonistic surplus communication for a individual philosophical purpose, sort of micro-cosmology.

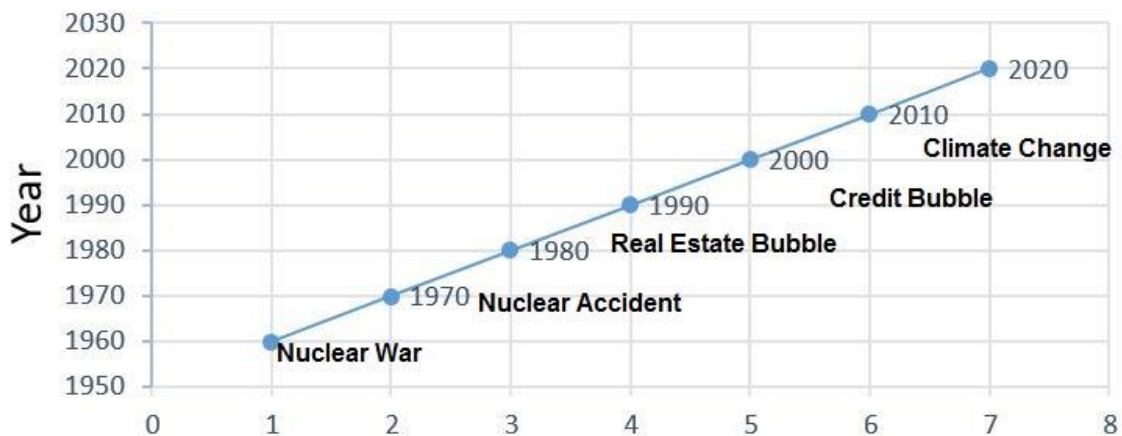
Miller didn't use the word „Social Capital“, but in order to keep the research on Social Capital updated, reflections on SNS are essential to avoid a digital divide within the research on Social Capital. Miller's essay is one of the best sources to do so.

2) Can understanding Social Capital help to understand global networked risks?

In June 2012 Professor Dirk Helbing from the Chair of Modelling and Simulation at the ETH Zurich in Switzerland started to interpret Social Capital as a „property“ and mentioned the evaporation of trust to have caused the financial crisis. Helbing regards Social Capital as a fragile part of the *Planetary Nervous System*. Helbing:

„Today, however, we're not considering the value of social capital. It can happen that we destroyed it or that we exploit it, such as we've exploited and destroyed our environment. If we learn how much is the value of social capital, we will start to protect it.“ ([Helbing 2012](#))

Global networked risks



Basel Institute of Commons and Economics 2015

In 2013 Helbing was one of the first sociologists ever who was allowed to publish an article in *Nature*. His Essay [„Globally networked risks and how to respond“](#) (Helbing 2013) appeared in the May issue of *Nature* 2013.

For Helbing understanding and measuring Social Capital is necessary to deal with global risks that are „networked“ risks, financial crises as well as natural disasters.

How important Social Capital is, when coping with crises can be seen when analysing the impact of the Fukushima incident on Japan. Despite widespread fear and the initial negative forecasts – for instance by rating agency Fitch which downgraded Japan in May 2012 – the country contained the catastrophe. As the Basel Institute pointed out [in the German TV ARD](#) Japan is an excellent position to overcome major catastrophes due to its Social Capital, e.g. the solidarity between the old and the young, trust and helpfulness. In a nutshell the Japanese society is more resilient due to its affluence of Social Capital.

The basis of this release was the [Social Capital Assessment](#) the Basel Institute of Commons and Economics started to conduct in 89 countries basing on a diverse panel of experts.

3) How can we assess indicators of Social Capital such as trust, solidarity, friendliness and helpfulness?

Assessing Social Capital is an ongoing challenge, regardless of the different definitions and positions on the subject itself. It has often been criticised that Social Capital couldn't be quantified up to now and of course that's one major reason for which neither politicians nor decision makers in the private sector lend to accept Social Capital as a valuable indicator or in other words a „currency“ of societal information.

In June 2014 the Basel Institute visited Dirk Helbing and his team and showed them the first results of the Social Capital Assessment. The table below gives an overview on the eight indicators being assessed for five countries: To give a first impression of the eight indicators being assessed here a comparison of five countries:

Comparing the Social Capital of five countries

	Mexico	Ukraine	Tansania	Vietnam	Japan
Climate	6,6	7,0	4,3	6,0	4,1
Measures	6,2	6,5	7,0	5,6	5,2
Asset Levy	7,5	7,0	6,6	6,6	5,0
Local Assets	5	6,7	4,3	5,6	4,7
Trust	7,2	7,3	4,6	6,3	3,5
Helpfulness	3,3	5,6	2,0	2,6	2,2
Friendlyness	2,1	4,2	1,6	2,6	2,0
Hospitality	1,3	2,8	2,3	2,0	2,1

Source: Basel Institute of Commons and Economics, Social Capital Assessment 2013

Scale: 1=excellent, 10=poor

The participants of the assessment share their estimate on the social climate, the willingness to accept austerity measures and an asset levy, the willingness to invest in local assets, the amount of trust, friendliness and trust among the people on a scale between 1 (excellent) and 10 (poor).

You [can try it](#) yourself for your country and the countries you know.

What is new in this form of assessment and why does it achieve a 22-per-cent-rate of participation via e-mail?

- With only eight questions it doesn't require a lot of personal data and is practical.
- It is objective in that it asks for a neutral estimation of the eight categories „among the people“ in the respective country. Thus, it puts the respondents in the position of a researcher rather than asking for personal and subjective opinions.

Further contemporary research following the „old“ definition of Social Capital is published by:

- Siegler, Veronique, [Measuring National Well-being. An Analysis of Social Capital in the UK](#),

January 29th 2015, The National Statistics Office of the United Kingdom

- Scrivens, Katherine and Conal Smith, [Four Interpretations of Social Capital: An Agenda for Measurement](#). OECD Statistics Working Paper 2013/06.

- Ljunge, Martin, [Social capital and political institutions: Evidence that democracy fosters trust](#).

in: Economic Letters 22/2014, p. 44-49

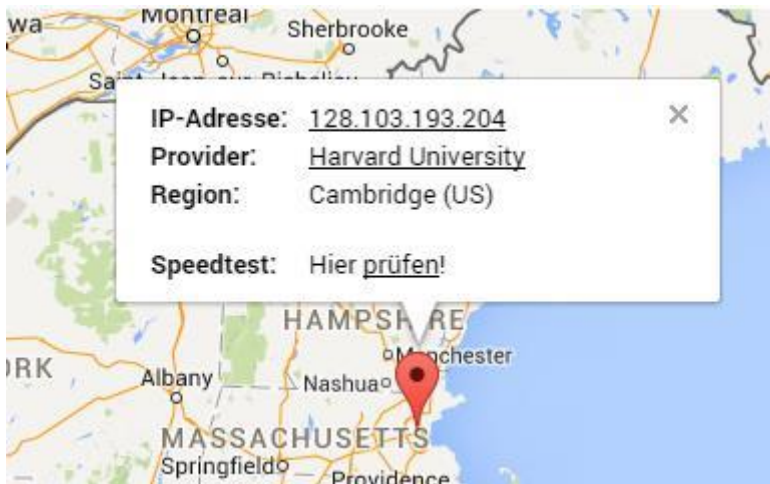
IV. Resume: ten facts about Social Capital

1. Social Capital is not clearly defined and cuts across with a lot of similar issues such as social cohesion, common goods, charity and voluntarism and thus is hard to operationalize.
2. The research on Social Capital is on average ten years old and therefore no longer up-to-date.
3. Most research is clearly biased as it unilaterally focusses on the United States of America and other developed economies. The results can hardly be transferred to other cultures and countries.
4. Exploring and understanding Social Capital, is key to identifying and controlling global networked risks.
5. If Social Capital is to find its way into a broader community of researchers and gain the acceptance by politicians and other decision makers, it has to be measured in a quantified and in a more consistent fashion.
6. Social Capital therefore has to be redefined from a theoretical „concept of Social Capital“ to a consistent set of indicators that can be assessed empirically.
7. The assessment of Social Capital has to start right now and on a global level in order to allow to comparing Social Capital across countries on all sorts of geographical levels such as it is done on www.trustyourplace.com.
8. Social Capital is an interdisciplinary field which is also rooted in Communication and Media Science, Anthropology, Health Science and other disciplines, not only in Sociology.
9. To avoid unilateral obstacles for international comparison, such as they appear in the discussion of Human Rights, Governance or Climate Change, we have to respect, that Social Capital can have various local contents and meanings that cannot be compared at a international level.
10. Social Capital in any case can be practised without any theoretical knowledge by providing tolerance, friendliness, solidarity, trust, helpfulness, hospitality and other social virtues at any time and without the need of money or other material resources.
As long as man exists, Social Capital remains to be an endless resource.

V Recent Statements to this paper

Statement of Thomas Sanders, Executive Director of the Sarguaro Seminar of Harvard Kennedy School from January 12th 2015 (Sanders 2015)

Six days after this paper has been published and tweeted it found 300 downloads from all over the world. For the first time in the history of the Basel Institute of Commons and Economics we may have been seeing the following image:



And here is the statement of Tom Sanders to this paper:

“What was the methodology used to construct country-level scores in the attachment you sent? And what were the underlying questions used to generate the “social capital” scores on those dimensions? Who conducted these surveys and with what approach?”

I don't think you use social capital at all in the same way as we do. By social capital, we are referring to the value of social connections in a country or community or neighborhood, which is empirically closely related to trust since people behave in a more trustworthy manner when they are deeply embedded social ties across society. You have a very vague definition of social capital on your home page that “Social Capital in our definition is the amount of non-material assets within a community” with which I would not agree. For example, training is a valuable asset in a community but has nothing to do per se with social capital although that knowledge could be used to strengthen interpersonal relationships or make them more valuable. Even if everyone in a society were hermits, their greater training would make them more productive, but wouldn't involve social capital in the least.

Moreover, you make it sound like social capital research is basically limited to the United States and that we are not interested in social capital. We operationalized how to measure social capital in the United States in 3 different surveys, involving a partnership with about 4 dozen community foundations. We have worked with the US government to get the US government measuring social capital. We also advised the UK government on how to measure social capital and their governmental measurement of social capital is among the most sophisticated of all developed countries. There has been a huge explosion of research on social capital worldwide, not just in the United States. For a tasting of some of this research, you can peruse the Social Capital Gateway. The World Bank used to also actively keep a library on social capital research worldwide, but I'm not sure if this is still active.

With regard to some of the questions that you ask in your 12-page brief about the intersection of Facebook and social capital or the role of social capital in the Arab Spring, we have not published scholarly papers on this topic but have discussed these topics in postings in the "Social Capital Blog." We have discussed elements of technology in 'Better Together' (Putnam/Feldstein) and in "Still Bowling Alone?" (Sander/Putnam)."

Thank you for your contribution to the discussion on Social Capital, Tom!
Further statements are welcome and will be published here.

Statement of Jan BM Goossenaerts, Founder of Wikiworx Academy, Feb 9th 2015

Dear Alexander,

Thank you for sharing the discussion about the definition of social capital here.

When defining social capital as the amount of non-material assets within a community, then, on the one hand I see a problem with intellectual property rights. They are non-material assets, yet they are individually owned (though within a socially constructed institution).

On the other hand, your definition makes sense in the context of the sustainable livelihoods framework, a framework to which I have referred in some of my earlier work. In this framework social capital is defined as *social resources, including networks for cooperation, mutual trust, and support* (see the link below) alongside:

- *Human capital* (i.e. the amount and quality of knowledge and labor available in a household)
- *Natural capital* (i.e. the quality and quantity of natural resources, ranging from fisheries to air quality)
- *Financial capital* (i.e. savings and regular inflows of money)
- *Physical capital* (i.e. the infrastructure, tools, and equipment used for increasing productivity)

Seen in this framework, the definition of Tom Sanders probably is too narrow, even though it may allow more rigorous measurement (and "better" science..). A similar kind of "reductionism" is quite common in science paradigms, however.

The sustainable livelihoods framework is not very particular about Intellectual property rights. In its area of application they hardly matter. Yet as such "institutions" are part of our social reality, we must be able to position them. This has prompted me to introduce "techno order" as a third order building upon the natural and the social order. This is explained in the second link (work in progress).

Links: <http://www.atha.se/content/sustainable-livelihoods-framework>

<http://www.ens-dictionary.info/mr-item-overview>

Statement of Fabio Sabatini from the EURICSE Institute in Trento, Italy, Feb 19th 2015

Dear Mr. Dill,

I read your brief report and I do not think it is best placed in the Social Capital Gateway (SCG). Works advised in the SCG tend to be scientific papers that have made a contribution to the scholarly debate and may therefore be of interest for an academic audience.

My view of the manuscript in its current form is that it is unscientific, it does not make any contribution to the debate, and it cannot raise any interest among scholars visiting my portal.

Regards,

FS

Statement of Sertaç Hopoğlu, Iğdır Üniversitesi, Turkey, Feb 20th 2015

Dear Dr. Dill,

I am simply taking social capital as those unseen assets in a community that directly or indirectly amplifies or facilitates the development (including economic) in that community.

I agree that being bounded by previous definitions may be limiting the scope of any study on social capital, so it would be better to think of it as a facilitator/amplifier resource, which has or might have different effects on different types of social organization.

I also agree with you in that different societies might have different "occurrences" or levels of social capital. Although I am not defending that social capital as an Anglo-Saxon concept is a fit for everyone in the world, a little understanding of "adaptable" qualities of this concept may be useful in order to be competitive and develop in a liberal world, as it is shown by intra-regional cooperation of Italian regions.

The problem with the rest of the world is that this cooperation does not voluntarily/automatically occur everytime within a community or networks of a community. So, if a region wants to survive in a liberalist world (a term as Anglo-Saxon as social capital), I think government intervention may play a role in connecting the bits of, let's say, "free social capital" stocks in a community.

Of course, taking something from an ecosystem and hoping it fit in another is not a solution, but maybe using it for cooperation between official parts of a society (public bodies and organizations, and even some CSOs) and civil parts of a society. In thinking this, would the resulting asset can be called as "social capital" since it is somehow built officially, in contrast to what we have read in the literature so far? Then there must sure be new variables, but how to measure them, for example, how can cooperation between two different public organizations or a public organization and a CSO can be measured? Trust among them?? In my PhD study you found I tried to investigate this with trust, level of cooperation, communication frequency among organizations, and organizational demographics as

variables, I am trying to look at this research question from a different angle, focusing on organizational variables that may be effective in creating social capital

All Islamic states as well as Turkey have social capital in different forms as you suggest, I think the problem is unproductive use of this social capital. As far as Turkey concerned, I think that the resources shift to solidarity and construction associations instead of productive areas such as community-building organizations or economic-life organizations (unions, cooperatives, businessmen associations, etc.), which, in my opinion, directly in relation with your "will to invest in local/regional assets/companies" variable. This is a good variable for studies of local economic development and social capital, but I also think and agree with you that social capital indicators may change according to context.

VI Credits and literature

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Social Capital Assessment of the Basel Institute of Commons and Economics

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About the author: Alexander Dill holds a diploma and a PhD in Sociology. After two decades in business, where he developed software and biomass heating systems, he returned to his profession as a social researcher. In 2009 he founded the [Basel Institute of Commons and Economics](#) in Basel, Switzerland, where he serves as a managing director.

Interview with Dill on Social Capital: <http://trustyourplace.com/mission/>



From left to right: author Alexander Dill, Willi Schroll, Rafael Reinehr, Leila País de Miranda, Patricia Mellin, Anni Roof, Bert-Ola Bergstrand, Philippe Greier, Justo Mendez Aramburu at the World Social Capital Forum in Göteborg, Sweden 2012.

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