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Measuring Community Strength

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Thank you very much.

I feel a bit like Neville's straight man, I have to admit.

The title of my presentation is "Measuring Community Strength" and I'm actually going to move through things fairly quickly.

I'm going to firstly describe some ABS work and some non-ABS work that is relevant to measuring community strength. I also will run through some international work, and provide some statistical results and make a few comments on the future.

I've deliberately going to go through this fairly quickly and give an overview of our work rather than a detailed knowledge.

We have produced a publication called Measuring Wellbeing. Statistics on the social side – or the wellbeing side – are much less mature than on the economic side.

We have produced this framework that has attracted a lot of interest around the world. I'll just highlight a few things – there's a list of areas on the left-hand side of that [referring to Powerpoint presentation] of the sorts of things you would normally expect.

But it is the right-hand side [of the Powerpoint slide] that I wanted to focus – that in measuring wellbeing we're not just looking at individual wellbeing, we're also looking at societal wellbeing and of course communities of various types fit into that; not only geographic communities which is a way we often think of communities, but other forms of communities as well.

First of all, looking at work measuring community strength: the first two things I've listed there are discussion documents which describe social capital in ways that we might measure it.

This work is very experimental, there's nothing we can copy. We are, in fact, towards the leading edge in international development of statistics in the area of social capital.

But there is a lot of collaboration, and the OECD is interested in this topic and has provided the focus for some of this collaboration.

These first two documents [referring to Powerpoint presentation] are available on the website if people are interested, or if people contact me I can actually for you to be given a copy.

We also, in 2002, ran a general social survey which included a bank of questions about social capital. In fact we are going to repeat that survey in 2006 but add more extensive questions on social capital.

We've been collaborating with key users on what the nature of those questions might be.

One of the advantages of the general social survey is that it doesn't just ask questions on social capital it covers a range of areas like health, education, crime victimisation, and so forth.

So it does enable people to study the interaction between all those different areas of social concern and I must admit that this data has not been utilised as much as it might so far, so we would certainly encourage the research community to work with us and make sure the data is used to a larger extent than what it has been done to date.

We also ran what we called an Indigenous general survey in 2003 and that also included a bank of questions on social capital - somewhat different to what was asked in the non-Indigenous survey, being a bit more sensitive to the cultural aspects of indigenous life.

Again this survey does enable some study between social capital type issues and some other areas of social concern.

We have run several of what we call community housing and infrastructure needs surveys. We ran one in 2001 – not long before the census – and the one before that was in 1998.

We are conducting another one prior to the 2006 survey. This will be done in collaboration with Family and Community Services (given the demise of ATSIIC).

And this survey does focus on communities and the infrastructure they have, the services they have or more importantly, the lack of services. So it is an important data source about Indigenous communities.

The population census is of course incredibly important. Neville Norman pointed to quite a few figures from the census, and it enables us to profile particular communities – not just geographic communities, but, for example, communities based on ethnicity within a city.

But the census does also provide a lot of information on living arrangements and, as Neville Norman pointed out, quite clearly a worrying trend is the increasing number of people living alone. The perception is that it is driven by older people, particularly older women and their husbands. But that is not correct – the driving force behind the increase in single people living alone is among younger adults.

And we also run a lot of surveys on volunteerism and participation in social sporting events and the like.

There is a lot of data there, and it really is necessary to have a framework to bring all of this data together in a reasonably coherent way.

The 2006 population census, which we'll be conducting in just over a year, will, for the first time, try to collect data on volunteerism and also on caring. Caring will cover not only caring for children, but importantly will also include caring for older people, people with disabilities and illness, and the like.

That will be the first time we collect that information, and I'm sure there'll be a lot of interest in it – especially amongst the types of organisations that are here today.

The next census will provide more flexibility in defining geographic communities because we will introduce another unit called the mesh block, which is a smaller unit - in urban areas, for example, it's a street; in rural areas it is slightly different.

But it also importantly enables data from the census – here I'm talking about aggregate data for the small geographic units – to be linked with other data sets which can be actually classified to the same geographic unit.

So it does enable a lot of analysis of communities – not just based on ABS data, but also combining with data from other sources.

And the census, we also compile what we call socio-economic indexes, which enables us to classify communities according to several indexes including advantage and disadvantage, and one of comparative disadvantage.

In the next census we will be able to improve the quality of these indexes from in the past with the availability of data from a smaller geographic level.

We're not the only organisation that is involved in measuring community strength. The Victorian Government has been running a Victorian Community Survey which, there's a publication available here which has been released by the Department of Victorian Communities.

I think that is an excellent study and groundbreaking work Victorians that should be proud of.

There is also another interesting exercise called Tasmania Together. Again, this is a publication based on indicators.

The interesting thing about this publication is that the indicators have been mainly determined by the communities – it's the things that the community feels are important, and that's the way that Tasmania Together has been brought together; they've got a coherent measurement framework underpinning it.

So both of these pieces of work are excellent, groundbreaking work that have attracted interest around other parts of the world.

And there are also a number of other inquiries into social capital. I am familiar with work in Victoria and Tasmania where they've asked questions on these types of issues often in association with their health survey.

As I mentioned a little while ago there is a lot of information available that's relevant to social capital, and it becomes much more meaningful if you can bring it together in a coherent way. So we've been working with others to develop a social capital framework.

And the emphasis of this framework is presenting the concept of social capital as attributes of networks, and I'll show you a diagram in a few moments. At the end of this [Powerpoint] slide I've listed the publication that this work is available in – its catalogue number is 1378.0, if you want to look it up.

People often think of capital in four different forms – natural capital, economic capital, human capital and social capital.

So this diagram [referring to Powerpoint slide] is just showing where social capital fits in that context.

At the very bottom of that you can see the words “areas of individual community wellbeing” and the way we try to measure social capital links individual and community wellbeing to the attributes of social capital.

Even though in my introduction I was given a lot of credit for leading this work, I probably shouldn't take that credit – it was the staff of the ABS, I guess my role has been more encouragement than leading.

But here's the diagram I did want to refer to – as I said a few moments ago, social capital revolves around networks, and a lot of the work we are doing is in trying to describe those networks.

[Extensive reference to Powerpoint slide] Network type, and then as you go down you can see the people who are actually participating in the networks, the types of transactions the networks undertake, their qualities and the structure of the network.

So that's the underpinning of the work on social capital. And we also link to other things including cultural, legal conditions, institutional conditions, political conditions.

And in this framework we are trying to measure both the positive and the negative effects of social capital – it's mostly positive, but there are negative effects. It's no hard to think of networks that haven't necessarily been good for society, and I guess the Mafia is one that often comes to mind; it's a very powerful network, but doesn't always deliver positive things.

International work on social capital [referring to Powerpoint slide] – people are really in the experimental stage.

Canada ran a community engagement survey two or three years ago and there is quite a bit of information available on the Statistics Canada website.

The United Kingdom has been doing some interesting work as well – in one of their surveys they ran what they called “neighbourhood perceptions” measuring neighbourhood perceptions. And they've also got a new statistical database called Neighbourhood Statistics which I'll come back to in a few moments.

This is also a consortium of universities in Europe which also run an annual survey of social cohesion values. So there's a lot of international work going on, mainly in the more developed parts of the world.

The UK Neighbourhood Statistics I became particularly interested in because it was a UK Government initiative – its wasn't an initiative of statisticians, it was something coming from the government down.

They were very keen to have good quality information available at the neighbourhood level – one to guide policymakers to make sure resources were being spent wisely, but also to facilitate a bit of self-help – so that neighbourhoods actually had information about their own neighbourhood and how they compared to other neighbourhoods, with the hope that that information would help them

collectively to make decisions and to do things that would improve their neighbourhoods.

So for those sorts of reasons this was an initiative that the UK Government spent quite a bit of money on. It is a database of small area data, supported by a range of analytical and presentation tools so that it doesn't require a lot of know-how to be able to access this information.

And even though it's the Office of National Statistics United Kingdom that manages this database, it did require partnerships with other data providers.

Sometime people get a bit possessive about their own data and don't like sharing it with people like the ABS. But because this development had some real clout from the government they were able to enforce those partnerships which were necessary to provide a full range of data.

[Referring to Powerpoint slide] The thing I wanted you to focus on was the white bit to the left of those charts. Basically the top line is for large cities (more than a million people) and the bottom line is for rural centres and small towns, while the intervening bars are in the middle. Not unexpectedly, you can see that the sense of belonging to a local community strengthens as the communities get smaller. Rather surprisingly, though, the differences between the first four bars aren't all that great. The sense of belonging doesn't seem to change very much after you get above about 50,000 inhabitants.

The book done by the Victorian Department of Communities showed some striking differences between local governments in rural and metropolitan areas – indeed, the differences were much higher than in the Canadian data I've just showed you. Rural areas score much higher on community strength – although there are also some downsides.

In measuring community strength they were using the type of variables I've mentioned before – percentage that feel valued by society, percentage that feel they have the opportunity to have a say on important issues, percentage that volunteer, percentage who

participate in decision-making Boards or committees, percentage who say they can get help from family or friends – to show that there was more community strength in rural areas than in cities.

[Referring to slide] In the general social survey data we ran in 2002, we also found that smaller communities were different in other ways. They had stronger feelings of safety, and also more ready to ask for help with small favours. In fact, our two biggest cities also had the lowest proportion of people who could ask for help.

Interestingly, the opposite is true with money. One of the questions we asked was whether people could raise \$2,000 in cases of real need, and that was actually smallest in the smaller communities where though even though people were more prepared to help, they were less able to give money, no doubt due to the lower level of assets prevalent in that level of society.

[Referring to next Powerpoint slide] This is some of the UK data on Neighbourhoods. You will see that about 59% of people thought they were well informed on local affairs, but the most interesting result is the fifty percent who thought that communities could influence decisions.

That's quite a large number, and it's obviously an asset that we should take advantage of. The number who thought that they personally could influence such a decision was 26%, which is slightly higher than I'd expected but still a lot lower than when we talked about a community centre collective.

18% felt civically engaged (where 'civically engaged' meant saying yes to all three questions. It would be interesting to see how that data compares to Australia.

[Referring to next Powerpoint slide] I now want to talk for a few minutes about the changes that are occurring in our geographic communities. Let me highlight a few points from this table.

The first is that Sydney has a high negative number, so it's possible that Bob Carr's comments about Sydney being full are having an

impact. Going north, there are significantly positive numbers for both Brisbane and for the rest of Queensland.

The other interesting figure is the strong positive number in Tasmania outside Hobart over 1996-2001. In net terms, more people have been moving to the rest of the state outside the capital cities (coastal communities, not inland communities; what's known as the Sea Change syndrome).

The first point I want to make about that table is that if you look at the two bottom lines about 65% of Australians live in capital cities. About another 25% live in large population centres, and 10% live in country areas. The Sea Change, that is, isn't dominated by people moving from the capital cities but by people moving from inland areas to coastal communities.

The other interesting thing is that new residents in the coastal area tend to be younger rather than older. The perception of older people moving from the cities to the coast isn't quite true. Some do, of course, but the dominant group are younger adults from the inland.

Using statistical jargon, I've said that these new residents are less likely to be a 'couple family', and that those that are couples are less likely to have children. They are also more likely to be employed and less likely to be born overseas – and those who were born overseas are largely from the UK, New Zealand, and Ireland.

[Referring to next slide] This change is having an impact on rural communities. If you look at the purple section (I'm colourblind; if you have difficulty recognising my descriptions, please bear with me) that refers to urban areas, and you can see that there's a much higher proportion of young adults in urban areas than in rural.

Non-urban populations tend to be a bit older, and to have more children. In non-urban areas the population pyramid has a big dent in the side – which I think is a worrying sign for the future of those communities, because it's that group that often provide vitality.

[Referring to next slide] This slide compares non-urban inland communities with those on the coast. You can see that at the

moment coastal communities have an older age profile, although internal migration is tending to diminish that difference.

In our 2002 general survey we collected some items regarding social capital – the ability to ask for small favours, unpaid voluntary work, frequency of face-to-face contact with family or friends, and so forth.

[Referring to Powerpoint slide] These are some of the questions we asked. Whether you have support from outside the family in case of a crisis, and the source of that support: ability to raise \$2,000 in a week.

We're looking at extending these questions in the 2006 survey, particularly in areas such as trust and civic participation.

Sources of support – community, charity and religious organisations, local councils, government services, and health, legal and financial professionals – there are many different types of people there, yet 6% of people feel that they can't get support from any of them.

In general the main sources of support are family, first, and friends, second. Older people rely much more on family and neighbours, while younger people rely more on family and friends.

Those who are using community, charity and religious organisations are predominantly in the lowest income quintile. These are also a source of strong support outside the major cities, particularly for women.

[Referring to next slide] There's not a huge amount of difference between age groups in their amount of voluntary work, though it is slightly higher in the 35-64 age groups. The extent of voluntary work is stronger outside capital cities, and there's also a positive correlation with income. The more income people have, the more likely they are to be involved in voluntary work.

In the groups where voluntary work is highest, sport and recreation activities tend to dominate. Welfare and community work is more prominent among the older age groups, 55-74.

To summarise the statistical conclusions, it does appear that social capital is much stronger in communities outside capital cities, and that is an asset that could be utilised.

People do believe communities can have an influence, which is another reason why we should work closely with communities.

The Sea Change effect is real, although the people doing the changing are not the ones that most people would expect – they're younger, and they don't come from the capital cities. They're coming from inland towns, and this loss of young adults may well have some impact on rural communities. That presents real risks.

Most people feel they can get support in a crisis from people living outside their household – although 6% can't, and that's where we need to focus our effort. If you break that 6% down by ethnicity or family type, you'll find that indigenous people and single parents are least able to get help outside the household.

[Referring to last slide] How can the ABS help measure community strength?

We're hoping that the framework we've developed to measure social capital will be an asset. We're loading data to it – not simply ABS data, but data from a whole range of sources.

We're hoping that with that data we'll have a cohesive database, a one-stop shop on social capital that people can use (linked, of course, to the databases that provide the more detailed original data).

We are extending the information that's available in the field of social capital from the next population census and the next General Social Survey.

If people want to run more community-level surveys we can provide some benchmark data so that people can see how their own community sits in relation to other communities – how it compares to the average community, where it sits on the distribution.

We could also help communities that want to run their own surveys of community strength by providing some survey models and some guidelines on how to run a good survey.

There is also scope for us to work more closely with the research community – and here I'm not just talking about people who work in universities, but also those in NGOs and government agencies – to analyse the links between the strength of the community and other social, economic and environmental outcomes.

There's a lot of under-utilised data out there, and if we can bring that data into the system we'd be making a real contribution.

Thank you for inviting me.