

## **What relevance here? The Commonwealth Secretariat's model for rural community resource centres and its applicability to smaller rural libraries in New Zealand.**

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### **Introduction**

In mid 1985 the Commonwealth Secretariat, following an extensive survey of developing countries in the Commonwealth, determined that a practical handbook on establishing rural learning resource centres (RCRCs) for developing countries should be produced. The Secretariat recognised that lack of information and learning opportunities was holding back the development of rural areas world-wide.

Shirley Giggey, a librarian, researcher and consultant who had extensive personal experience in setting up RCRCs, was identified as the best person to produce the manual.

In January 1986 in Malawi, the Commonwealth Secretariat held a workshop with representatives from 12 Commonwealth countries to determine the role of RCRCs and also, significantly, it resolved to:

- a) collaborate with UNESCO to benefit other than Commonwealth countries
- b) translate any guide produced into national languages
- c) promote other workshops
- d) involve NGOs (non-governmental organisations) in the promotion of the concept of RCRCs. Since that time, the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) and other Commonwealth Foundation NGOs such as the Commonwealth Association for Adult Education, have promoted the RCRC concept through Africa, Asia, Caribbean, Mediterranean and Australia in a series of workshops and seminars.<sup>1</sup>

The International Federation of Library Associations has also been supportive of the RCRC concept through its ALP (Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World programme).<sup>2</sup>

### **Definition**

So what is a rural community resource centre?

Giggey in 'her' 1988 guide, stated the following:

A resource centre is a place where members of a community can:

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<sup>1</sup> Giggey, Shirley. *Rural Community Resource Centres: A Guide for Developing Countries*. London, Macmillan, 1998. p. vi – vii.

<sup>2</sup> Bergdahl, Birgitta. *IFLA's Programme Advancement of Librarianship in the Third World: A Proposal for the Future*. Stockholm, Swedish Library Association, 1990. 41 p.

- a) find information about subjects of interest to them
- b) take part in learning activities
- c) discuss and share knowledge, information and concerns with extension and other community workers, planners and administrators
- d) find materials to help them retain their literacy and numeracy skills
- e) meet to organise and work together on community projects
- f) use equipment to produce their own informational materials
- g) enjoy culture and leisure activities.<sup>3</sup>

### **Benefits of a Rural Community Resource Centre**

Giggey identified the benefits of a centre as being to:

- a) provide information and activities which will help community members acquire the skills, knowledge and confidence to participate more fully in community affairs
- b) provide information and activities about health, agricultural techniques, business, etc. to assist communities to improve their economic situation
- c) provide a forum through which governments and other agency workers can be informed about concerns, problems, and reactions of community members to their plans and programmes
- d) provide support to extension programmes and helping extension workers to coordinate their work in the community
- e) strengthen a community's involvement in, and appreciation of, local and national culture
- f) serve as a focal point for community activities thus enhancing a sense of belonging among community members<sup>4</sup>

An important point to note about Giggey's guide is that it is just that – a guide, not a manual – it was written to be modified to suit local circumstances. It was designed to be used by a whole variety of people in a community – not just librarians. Indeed, Giggey issued a warning to librarians “not to try to do it on our own”.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of every community being unique and thus shaping its resource centre to meet its own needs and conditions is germane to the concept of an RCRC.

There were some additional premises in addition to those listed above:

- a) the importance of people doing the day-to-day tasks being chosen from the community by the community
- b) the necessity of animation of information that is relevant, and usable to what could be a predominantly illiterate society
- c) the importance of coordination with other agencies working for the improvement of rural life

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.* p. viii

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* p. viii

<sup>5</sup> Giggey, Shirley, *The Concept of Rural Community Resource Centres in Developing Countries* [in] *Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres: Proceedings of the COMLA Workshop on Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres, Sydney, Australia, 5 – 7 September 1988 and the COMLA Workshop on Libraries in Rural Areas and Small Island Communities, Valletta, Malta, 4 – 6 April 1990*. Edited by Roy Sanders and James Henri. Wagga Wagga, International Association of Rural and Isolated Libraries (IARIL) for the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) 1990. p. 25

- d) the importance of utilising the immense knowledge of those who live in rural communities.
- e) that at the end of the day the services will only be successful if there is commitment and enthusiasm by all those involved. It is the only way to guarantee that the information available is what is really needed.<sup>6</sup>

You can see from all the above that the RCRC concept is one which:

- a. aims at improving social and economic capital
- b. fosters the concept of the civil society and the maintenance of a democracy
- c. sees the centre as the hub of a learning network throughout the community
- d. empowers community members
- e. sees the community very much in charge of the direction taken by the RCRC.

The definition of 'social capital' used for this paper is that of Robert Putnam, author of *Bowling Alone*,<sup>7</sup> and the concept's leading proponent.

Social capital "refers to the collective value of all 'social networks' and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other"<sup>8</sup>.

Thus social capital is a key component to building and maintaining democracy. This is a key concern of the Commonwealth Foundation and its many Non-Government Associations (NGOs) of which COMLA is one.

Putnam suggests that social capital is declining in the United States and this is seen in lower levels of trust in government and lower levels of civic participation. Putnam also says that television and urban sprawl have had a significant role in making America far less connected.<sup>9</sup> This is key factor leading to the development of the Turn Off TV Week movement in the United States and then its adoption in the Blueskin Bay Community with the motto – Turn Off TV and Turn on Life, which Louise will talk more of tomorrow.

*[For further notes on Social Capital see Annex One]*

## **Leadership**

Community leadership of an RCRC is vital. Giggey wrote "It is important to involve local community leaders from the beginning, and make sure you have their approval. If they are not involved they will not give their support or help to solve problems when they arise."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.* p. 25

<sup>7</sup> Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*. Social capital.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Giggey, Shirley. *Rural Community Resource Centres: A Guide for Developing Countries*. London, Macmillan, 1998. p. 4

There is a need to set up a planning or advisory group to meet the learning and information needs of the community. Giggey states that the individuals involved need to be:

- a) committed to the development of the community
- b) able to give time to the work of the committee
- c) responsible people respected by the community
- d) aware of how much time/energy will be involved.<sup>11</sup>

The librarian's expectations of an advisory committee must never be that it become a rubber stamp endorsing all proposals put forward. The librarian is better to be a member rather than chair of the advisory group. The librarian is there as an equal alongside other members of the community who carry responsibilities in terms of information, education, and community development.

You will see from the above that the factors, the benefits, the premises of rural community resource centres are entirely simpatico with the best of libraries which:

- a) are truly community centred,
- b) have well-oiled networks into their communities which are dynamic and not only used for pushing information out,
- c) have collaborative ventures with their communities,
- d) have robust means for evaluating feedback,
- e) are client-driven,
- f) seek to maintain, develop, restore and enhance their communities to make them richer societies and places of learning,
- g) engage with other providers,
- h) don't attempt to lead every initiative, but in cooperation with other community members help to set up and sustain programmes but also know when to withdraw and leave the community energies to further develop them as long as they are relevant.

While the concept of rural community resource centres was one principally developed for developing countries it is also clearly a concept relevant to developed countries.

The rural community resource centre concept is evident in countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. Tomorrow, Louise will talk of the relevance of the RCRC concept to the Blueskin Bay Library and what might be done to enhance it.

### **Defining Characteristics of Rural Community Resource Centres vis a vis Most Smaller NZ Public Libraries**

There are some key factors of RCRCs that are worth examining as to their relevance to the local situation.

The factors are:

- a) Governance/advisory group
- b) The adoption of a key educational role including close liaisons with educational providers
- c) Library is the pulsing heart of the community and distinctions between library and community are blurred / merged
- d) Library without walls?

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 7

- e) Key role in community planning - advancement of social and economic capital

### **Governance/Advisory**

Let us look at governance first. In New Zealand public libraries are a function of territorial local government - city and district councils. These provide the principal source of their funding, buildings, infrastructure, resources and access, monitor performance against plans, and employ staff, set policy, etc.

Because of local government amalgamation most of New Zealand's governing bodies are large and often distant from the smaller public libraries they control. Advisory / monitoring committees, similar to RCRC working groups, exist most often with a brief larger than purely library matters.

It is not easy, perhaps, to see a model which might see more local ownership, generous advice and real input into smaller libraries. Yet this has developed, at least to a degree, for the Blueskin Library which is the Dunedin Public Libraries' smallest unit.

Dunedin Public Libraries as a whole reports through the City Librarian to the Community Development Committee of the Dunedin City Council. There is also the Waikouaiti Coast Community Board containing elected representatives of this larger coastal area to which the Library Services Manager and the BBL Librarian report and take advice to weigh and consider.

As well, at Blueskin Bay, the Librarian has a key role in terms of the Turn Off TV Week working group. Since 2004 she has been its leader. It is at these latter levels between the Community Board and the Turn Off TV Week working group, now developing year-long programmes with the emphasis on switching onto life rather than any potentially accompanying negative message of turning off tv, where we see similarities with the RCRC model of advice.

Marion Bannister, speaking of the New South Wales experience at a conference on rural libraries and community resource centres, emphasises the following:

“... I feel that one of the most important tools that we librarians and community information people must utilise is that of building strong communications networks starting at the most important level, the user. Then being aware of one's own staff needs to make the library network function effectively. Finally, being politically astute and aware with the people on committees at both local and state government levels who make the decisions that have important ramifications for the funding and continued existence of the library service.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bannister, Marion. *Rural Libraries and Regionalisation: Issues and Practicalities. Countries* [in] *Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres: Proceedings of the COMLA Workshop on Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres, Sydney, Australia, 5 – 7 September 1988 and the COMLA Workshop on Libraries in Rural Areas and Small Island Communities, Valletta, Malta, 4 – 6 April 1990*. Edited by Roy Sanders and James Henri. Wagga Wagga, International Association of Rural and Isolated Libraries (IARIL) for the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) 1990. p. 32

## Education

The really close association of the library with educational goals is critical to fulfil the role of an RCRC. It was often said of New Zealand's public libraries that they had three key roles – education, information, and recreation. Public libraries were oftentimes called “the poor man's university”. What poor women did, I don't know. I jest!

With the rapid development of The Information Age and burgeoning amounts of data and information and the eagerness of librarians to associate themselves with ‘Information’ we must be careful not to underplay the strong educational role that the public library can play. Many public libraries sprang from early Mechanics Institutes and Athenaeums, after all.

When Archie Dunningham was City Librarian, the Dunedin Public Library played a very strong role in education. The harmonious and fruitful partnership between Archie and Peggy, his wife, who was heavily involved in adult and continuing education, was recognised nationally, and is memorialised now in the Dunningham Suite in the Dunedin Public Libraries, central library building.

Sue Pharo, University Librarian at Otago, and I first met one another at the National Conference of the New Zealand Association for Continuing and Community Education when we were both active on the regional and later, national, committees of the same, she as City Librarian at Tauranga and me as City Librarian in Dunedin. It would be good to know how widespread and active the links between public libraries and NZACCE are now, or whether they have been superseded by links with different educational groups.

In the rural areas the REAP (Rural Education Assistance Programmes) programmes have been a vital enabler of rural education in New Zealand. I understand that the one at Alexandra is still active. In the towns, as well as the countryside, tertiary education institutions such as The Open Polytechnic, and regional polytechnics and institutes of technology might be the obvious institutions with which to form links because they offer strong community and vocational programmes.

There is a clear need as Giggey states: “to integrate information/education and services that, as librarians, we alone cannot undertake.”<sup>13</sup>

Louise will talk about the potential for twinning with the Otago Polytechnic tomorrow.

I wonder, too, whether the concept of the school/community library concept successfully developed in New Zealand could not be more often employed in some rural and semi-rural areas to enhance the educational role of the public library,

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<sup>13</sup> Giggey, Shirley, *The Concept of Rural Community Resource Centres in Developing Countries* [in] *Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres: Proceedings of the COMLA Workshop on Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres, Sydney, Australia, 5 – 7 September 1988 and the COMLA Workshop on Libraries in Rural Areas and Small Island Communities, Valletta, Malta, 4 – 6 April 1990*. Edited by Roy Sanders and James Henri. Wagga Wagga, International Association of Rural and Isolated Libraries (IARIL) for the Commonwealth Library Association (COMLA) 1990. p. 25

strengthen collections, and make the school library resources available all year round.<sup>14</sup>

## **Library and Community**

In the RCRC model, the distinctions between the library and community are blurred. There has been discussion within Dunedin Public Libraries recently about what is 'library' and what is 'community'. This discussion will no doubt continue and it will be interesting to see how it develops. What I wish to say here is that in RCRCs there is no clear line and certainly no gap between the two. The Library is an integral part of the informational, educational, and socially binding functions of an RCRC, providing and accessing resources, co-planning and managing, and often providing the venue for and facilitation of these community functions.

A word of caution... we need to be careful, as proactive enthusiastic librarians, not to assume that we know what the community wants without actually testing that. It is all too easy to provide programmes which look enticing, and on the surface relevant, but which in fact draw only library staff, their close friends and family – the 'rabbits' friends and relations' syndrome. As Diana Rosenberg, Dean of the Faculty of Information Services at Moi University states:

“... the failure of various attempts to set up rural libraries [and their programmes] arose because the demand for such services did not come from the rural communities themselves. More research therefore is required at the micro-level on information needs in rural areas...”<sup>15</sup>

## **Library without walls?**

The concept of 'the Library without walls' is in vogue with technology allowing access to distant resources and services and so much of what formerly happened only within libraries being placed in the hands of members to access and place holds, for instance, from their own homes and workplaces.

As something of a counter to this the concept of 'library as place' has been reassessed: - place to which people come for stimulation and refreshment of intellect and spirit; a place at which things happen, a place which is a springboard to community engagement and advancement. There is more than enough on this issue for the substance of several papers.

All I would say here is that it is not a matter of 'either / or' but of 'both /and'. The traditional concept of library as place is not contrary to the concept of library without walls. Places can be physical and virtual. The best of libraries have for many decades provided outreach beyond their walls for several services.

What is key is that in the RCRC concept, place is important as everywhere else within the community.

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<sup>14</sup> Frater, Janice, *School/Community Libraries in New Zealand*. [in] *COMLA Newsletter*, no. 75, March 1992 p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Rosenberg, Diana. *Rural Libraries and Community Resources Centres: Proceedings of the COMLA Workshops, Australia 1988, Malta 1990* a review [in] *COMLA Newsletter*, no. 75, September 1991. p. 40

## Social and economic capital

RCRCs focus on developing the social and economic capital of a community. It is a key role, as I mentioned earlier, even though that concept was not defined as such at the time that the RCRC concept was developed.

A strong sense of community has traditionally been quite marked in rural and semi-rural areas in New Zealand. Through the 1980s and 1990s some small towns took a hammering in this regard – something I will refer to again later.

Churches, shops, post offices, hotels, and the like often fostered social networks. But with the general decline of at least the mainstream churches, as part of the increasing secularisation of New Zealand, added to the extensive closing of post offices and courthouses, and the trend for people to travel greater distances to buy their food at supermarkets rather than local stores, a vacuum opened up which provided further opportunities for rural community resources centres and libraries to fill.

A recent document *Mission Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside* has this to add about English rural life but it is also relevant to New Zealand:

“In addition, the population shift from urban to rural has contributed to social fragmentation and this is set to continue. Some incomers arrive with unrealistic expectations – of peace and quiet or a slower pace of life. In their own desire to retreat from industrialization, they do not always recognize that in the countryside they are living in a working environment under threat.

Stories abound of urban incomers who object to the smells and noises of the farm and rural business. To those who have lived in the countryside longer, it can feel than an invasion of articulate powerful people with fantasies about the countryside is misinforming policies from politicians and planners.

Another point of tension is that people have sometimes arrived in the countryside with an imagined view of the rural ideal and expect locals to conform to it – attempts to ‘create community’ by newcomers may not go down too well with those whose understanding of ‘community’ is rather different.”<sup>16</sup>

We see recently in Karitane, on the East Coast of Otago, homes being sold by long-term residents to newcomers from Dunedin City and Central Otago wanting weekend and holiday homes. In time, of course, some of these newcomers may end up occupying these houses on a permanent basis as I did in the neighbouring village of Waikouaiti after 13 years of owning my weekender there.

The value of a culture of celebration fostering a sense of place and contributing to social capital is recognised in *A Manual for Small Town Renewal*, an excellent Australian publication which very helpfully sets out comprehensively how to create a

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<sup>16</sup> Gaze, Sally. *Mission Shaped and Rural: Growing Churches in the Countryside*. London, Church House Publishing, 2006. p. 22

more positive future for communities.<sup>17</sup> Libraries can have a key role in providing a venue for, inspiration of, and practical assistance towards celebratory events in our communities.

## The Power of the Public Library

Serendipitously, as I was just setting down the possible headings for this paper, a hiking/biking buddy of mine loaned me his copy of Neville Peat's *Detours: A Journey Through Small-Town New Zealand*.<sup>18</sup> Peat undertook this significant ride in the early 1980s when the whole country, and the countryside particularly, was extraordinarily challenged by lean economic times and major changes of government policy.

He decided to cycle on his 10 speed bike from North Cape to Stewart Island deliberately taking the by-ways rather than the highways. He planned his route to take in small town New Zealand talking with locals about how they were managing to cope.

When Peat wrote of cycling through the Wairarapa he mentions a character called Danna Glendining, a campaigner for the rights of rural communities. Peat said that her life "was full of newsletters, phone calls and committees."<sup>19</sup> (Not unlike a certain librarian of my acquaintance.)

Danna Glendining started an organisation mostly known by its acronym (TREC) – Towards Rural Equality of Citizenship. He noted that it didn't have a committee or constitution but was a veritable powerhouse running under her own steam.

"It's a journey" [she said] "a movement towards improved social services for rural areas, better health services, secure schooling, more sensitive district planning, that sort of thing. Anyone who does anything to bring equality for rural citizens a little closer is part of the journey."<sup>20</sup>

When asked how it worked she replied.

"Well, we exchange information and I act as a kind of broker – you know, respond to requests for information and send out newsletters. Last week I had an enquiry from Gisborne about how to set up a work co-operative for unemployed women. And some people up Whangarei wanted to know how to improve their school bus service. Really, it's a matter of knowing how the "system" works and how to use it. It's a squeaky wheel that gets the oil, and unless rural people make the squeaks, the oil will go to other wheels."<sup>21</sup>

It was clear to me that Danna was performing some of the key functions of an RCRC and we all know those dynamic librarians today whose daily efforts contribute to their communities being that much richer in all sorts of ways.

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<sup>17</sup> *A Manual for Small Town Renewal. Vol 2. Change the Future of Your Community.* [by] Peter Kenyon and Alan Black, etc. Kingston ACT, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, 2001. p. 8

<sup>18</sup> Peat, Neville. *Detours: A Journey Through Small-Town New Zealand.* Christchurch, Whitcoulls, 1982. 250 p.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* p. 146

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* p. 146

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* p. 147

When Neville Peat reached Collingwood we see more evidence of the dynamic library...

“To round off my visit I booked in for dinner at the Lighthouse Guest House at the top end of Collingwood’s short main street. It was formerly the police station. The old lock-up was a museum now. Another part of the museum occupied the old bank building. The bank used the library once a week. [Now there’s a thought.] The library... [and] Collingwood had evolved in weird and wonderful ways.”<sup>22</sup>

It was interesting to reflect, as I read this, that what seemed weird and wonderful to Peat in the early 1980s seems commonplace and ordinary now as public and commercial buildings have been re-adapted for other uses, not only in small towns but in cities as well.

Another worthwhile connection which public libraries can make, is with their local Citizens’ Advice Bureau. I was unsuccessful in getting Dunedin’s Emergency and Citizens’ Advice Service (as it was known then) into the new Dunedin Public Library building in the early 1980s but some other libraries have done this to enhance the undoubted synergies which exist between the two services.

My last quotation from *Detours* concerns Peat’s visit to Tapawera, a forestry village, an hour’s drive to Nelson city. He writes of the residents who had:

“...persuaded the Forest Service not to demolish an old house but allow its use as a community centre. Now the house was a venue for charity fund-raising ventures, beer and curry evenings, seminars, and a library.”<sup>23</sup>

Just like the best of public libraries and community centres, I contentedly thought.

## Conclusions

Stephney Ferguson, a former President of COMLA, former Jamaica National Librarian, and also sometime University Librarian at the University of West Indies, Mona Campus, Jamaica made the following observation:

“Librarians from the developing countries seem to be primarily interested in rural library services and those from the developed world show a leaning towards community resource centres. I would like to suggest that there need not be such a division but rather a coalescence and that librarians should attempt to re-evaluate their approach to rural librarianship with a view to developing what I like to call “appropriate librarianship” for rural communities.

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[we need to] show creativity and initiative in spearheading new types of services which are likely to be more relevant to the communities we are trying to serve.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 160

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.* p. 172

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson, Stephney, *Appropriate Librarianship for Rural Communities* [in] *Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres: Proceedings of the COMLA Workshop on Rural Libraries and Community Resource Centres, Sydney, Australia, 5 – 7 September 1988 and the COMLA Workshop on Libraries in Rural Areas and Small Island Communities, Valletta, Malta, 4 – 6 April 1990*. Edited by

It is obvious to me that we need to work low to the ground, tap into all the community networks there are, listen before we speak, plan and develop.

As librarians we need to:

- meaningfully engage with the community and its representatives;
- be alert to signs and portents which signal changes to community needs and wants;
- be alert to our communities' desire to hold back on some things, or to take them over thus creating opportunities for our libraries/RCRCs to get on with new things.

This does not mean that libraries cannot be proactive. They should always be proactive, but they will test new notions with the community before they implement them. And library management systems will be flexible enough to allow individual units working with different communities to be light on their feet and develop individual programmes and services, as I am pleased to say happens within the Dunedin Public Libraries system.

### Social Capital

Social capital has been interpreted differently at different times. Probably the most useful definition which links both 'social' and 'capital' has appeared in *Building Social Capital*<sup>25</sup> papers presented at seminars held by the Institute of Policy Studies at VUW, and edited by David Robinson.

David Robinson, in his *Introduction* to that volume states:

"Social capital is a fluid concept that cannot be solidified and isolated in one activity...

"Social capital resides in relationships ...

"Social capital refers to the collection of resources that an individual or a group has access to through their membership of an ongoing network of mutual acquaintance. Features of this social structure, such as relationships, norms and social trust, help develop co-ordination and co-operation for common benefit."<sup>26</sup>

Within the term social capital, the word 'social' brings together two interconnected meanings. In the first, 'social' refers to association; that the capital belongs to a collective, a group based on culture, locality, interest, ethnicity, religion, or some other factor. The capital is owned by the community; it is 'shared' and does not belong to individuals. ...

"Use of the term 'capital' indicates that social capital is not something that is produced and consumed without trace; it is not just a transitory process. Social capital is *capital* in that it can be built up over time and can be drawn upon in the future. There must be some meaningful accumulated stocks of social capital resources in a community or system to justify the use of the word 'capital'. Social capital is considered to be capital because it:

- has accumulated;
- can be drawn upon; and
- has stocks or a portfolio of assets."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *Building Social Capital: papers presented at seminars held by the Institute of Policy Studies at Victoria University of Wellington, October and November 2000*. Edited by David Robinson. Wellington, Institute of Policy Studies, 2002. 85 pp.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.* p. 3

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 6