

Engaged Communities: Creating Social Capital at Neighbourhood Level

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ABSTRACT

Active citizenship is seen as an antidote to the decline of community, an indication that despite some evidence to the contrary, people still engage with others in their neighbourhoods, providing friendship and social support, and when necessary acting collectively on behalf of the neighbourhood as a whole. The research which is documented in this paper, explores the nature of residents' and community associations as examples of the way in which groups of individuals organize at a local level, interact collectively with the State on environmental and planning issues, while also providing a forum for community development and neighbourhood identification. This research has been carried out on a sample of residents' associations and community groups in the Greater Dublin area. The paper situates this research within the wider academic debate regarding social capital in neighbourhoods, by exploring the nature of the social capital that residents' associations help to create in their neighbourhoods, both positive and negative.

The research documented in the paper demonstrates that residents' groups can often utilize social capital in exclusionary ways. In order to understand the manner in which these more negative elements of social capital are utilised, the paper argues that it is not enough to focus on residents' associations and their actions alone. What is required is an exploration of the manner in which social capital is shaped by the socio-economic context of the neighbourhood and by the wider political context. This wider context includes Government policy which espouses the development of greater active citizenship and the development of civil society, yet stymies this in other ways.

The paper highlights the lack of congruence between attempts at national level to foster active citizenship and the reality at neighbourhood level, where the most active citizens often feel that much of their activity is prompted by failures in the actions of State institutions and local authorities.

Key Words: social capital, active citizenship