



**COMMUNITY ACTION: A FORCE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE?  
SOME CONCEPTUAL OBSERVATIONS**

by

**Michael Peters  
and  
Tim Jackson**

**RESOLVE Working Paper 01-08**



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**Abstract**

This paper provides a concise overview of how the term 'community' has been conceptualised in sociological literatures, noting that there remains considerable uncertainty with regard to the way in which communities could or should be defined.

The paper explores concepts relevant to the progression of community-based initiatives and other approaches to pursuing community action as a force for social change (e.g. individual and collective behavioural change towards a more sustainable future). It is suggested that these attempts need to capitalise on the special nature of communities, tapping into their innovative and receptive capacity. An understanding of some of the theoretical underpinnings can be useful in providing a framework from which to develop carefully planned action strategies.

**Key Words:** Community identity, social networks, social capital, community capacity.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of community has been an enduring and forceful theme in modern social science but nevertheless represents an elusive and somewhat intractable term with regard to its actual definition and meaning (Cohen, 1985; Crow and Allan, 1994). There are many compelling reasons for the difficulties associated with its definition, not least because communities are intrinsically linked with deep-seated emotions, sentiments and beliefs (Newby, 1994).

As a starting point, there are several dictionary definitions, of varying length and detail but which all point to the fact that community is a term with numerous sociological and non-sociological meanings. For example, the Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology (Johnson, 2000) offers the following, encompassing description:

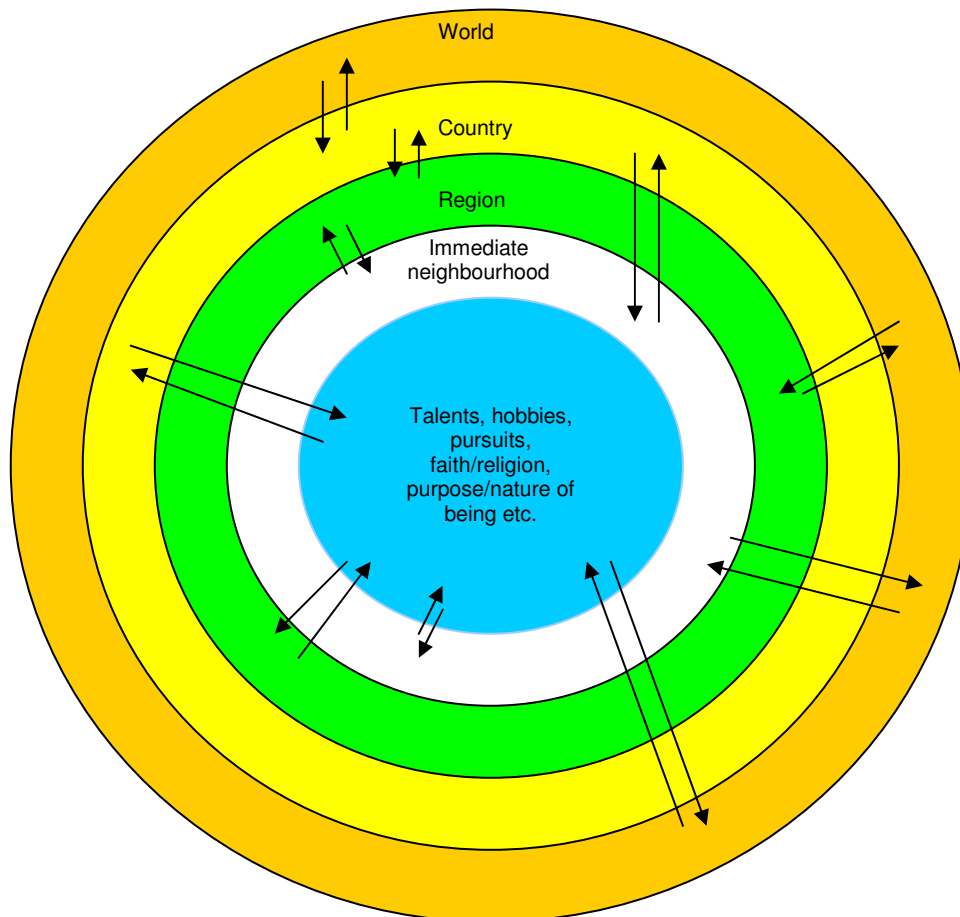
“A community can be a collection of people who share something in common - as in "the artistic community" - without necessarily living in a particular place. It can be a feeling of connection to others, of belonging and identification, as in "community spirit" or "sense of community." It can be a collection of people who do related kinds of work, as in "the health community" or "the academic community." And, in perhaps its most common and concrete sense, it can be a collection of people who share a geographical territory and some measure of interdependency that provides the reason for living in the same place. There are exceptions to this, such as hunter-gatherer bands that move from place to place in search of food. In general, however, geographically based communities involve living, working, and carrying out the basic activities of life within a territory defined by residents as having geographic identity, most notably reflected in the assigning of place names and the drawing of boundaries.” (Johnson, 2000).

Although there exists an entire discipline of social scientific interpretations, conceptualisations and applications of community (some of which is considered further on in this paper), it is also possible initially to focus on a ‘common sense’ understanding of what community means and represents (Studdert, 2005). This refers to readily accessible concepts such as nationality, location, knowledge of location, neighbourhood and language. It also refers to narrower communities such as the community of people that live in the immediate vicinity (e.g. on the same road, in the same block of flats etc.), and communities of people sharing particular talents, hobbies or purposes/natures of being that link people into a network of others who, for example, share similar interests (e.g. music, sport, art, faith/religion etc.).

This ‘common sense’ understanding - grounded in the practical realities of day-to-day life - has been synthesised into two broad categories, accepted and utilised by many theorists and practitioners alike: ‘communities of place’ and ‘communities of interest’ (Pelling and High, 2005). The former concentrates on people within a defined geographical area (e.g. a particular neighbourhood, or a housing estate) while the latter (also called ‘interest groups’) focus on people who share a particular

experience, demographic characteristic or interest (e.g. the working population, young people, disabled people, ethnic groups etc.).

These various levels and sizes of community are linked temporally, spatially, physically and psychologically in a wide range of ways from a world community scale down to very small groups of individuals (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Simplified conceptualisation of ‘common sense’ community types and interactions

Figure 1 points to the reality that the communities people belong to are multiple and overlapping. This communal multiplicity is not something that people have a great deal of control over, but is rather a product of social interaction and social ‘being-ness’ that each individual inhabits and is born into (Studdert, 2006). Similarly, from a theoretical perspective, approaches to conceptualising and understanding community tend to be overlapping and entwined. For example, community can be viewed both as a value and as a descriptive category or set of variables (Frazer, 1999). It should also be recognised that interactions between communities (and any ‘new’ communities that emerge as a consequence) will be constructed as a hybrid outcome of people’s previous socialities and histories. Studdert (2006) explains that the ongoing processes of multiplicity and hybridity are features of every community, contained in the “action of sociality as it constructs and reconstructs our communal being-ness” (p.12). Community relies on the presence of other people and on action and speech; in essence “having something in common” (Willmott, 1989).

## 2. The concept of community: defining contextual boundaries

A critical challenge for conducting research on communities and for implementing programmes of prevention and intervention within communities revolves around how to define the appropriate context. It has been argued that 'community' involves two related suggestions; firstly that the members of a group have something in common with each other; and secondly that the thing held in common distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other possible groups (Cohen, 1985). In this sense community is therefore a relational concept that implies both similarity and difference, and as Cohen (1985) argues, is generally used to establish what it is that distinguishes various social groups and entities. A key question related to this discrimination and distinction is that of boundary – how can, or should, communities be delineated?

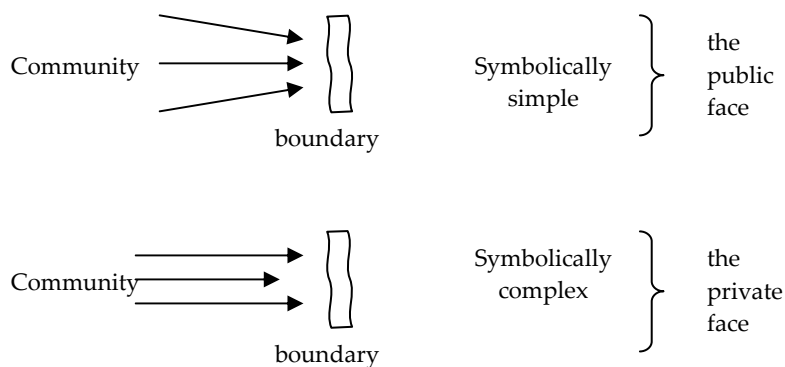
Defining clearly the scope and boundaries of the term community – relevant to the particular study in question – is very important because community as a context can easily become diffusive and elusive (Crow and Allan, 1994). Defining the parameters of community can thus help to give clarity.

As noted in the introduction the concepts of 'community of place' and 'community of interest' are well established starting points from which to delve deeper into the complexities and multifaceted interactivities inherent in the fabric of community make up (Willmott, 1986; Lee and Newby, 1983; Crow and Allan 1994). There are also other community labels that Cohen has argued play an important symbolic role in generating people's sense of belonging (Cohen, 1982, 1985). These include 'communion/attachment' referring to the presence of a community spirit in terms of a sense of attachment to a place, group or idea (Willmott, 1989) and 'practice' focusing on shared practices that stem from collective learning and common activities (Wenger, 1995). The likelihood is that in any given community we will find the theoretical boundaries overlapping – the different approaches to understanding community are not, in reality, standalone definitions, but more a pastiche of truisms representing multifarious in-roads towards a fuller understanding. These overlaps are likely to extend to the following four key boundary concepts pinpointed by Coulton (1995):

- Phenomenological – based on consensus among people
- Interactional – based on contact patterns
- Statistical – focusing on census-like information
- Political – concentrating on districts, towns and wards

The importance of symbolic aspects of community boundaries has also been highlighted by several authors as a means to define community. These features are less obvious than geographical or legislative demarcations, or physical features such as a road or a mountain range. For example, Chaskin et al (2001) explain that social interests and characteristics including language, customs, class or ethnicity can be used to define community and Cohen (1985) states that often these boundary types can be considered "...as existing in the minds of the beholders" (Cohen 1985: 12).

Cohen (1985: 73) suggests that in terms of symbolism community boundaries have two primary manifestations; the 'public face' and the 'private face'. A community's 'public face' refers to the features of the particular social group that it presents to the outside world, and from which the outside world defines a generic (and sometimes stereotypical) image and understanding of the group (or community) as one homogeneous unit, where "internal variety disappears or coalesces into a single symbolic statement". By contrast the 'private face' (i.e. how the people of that community see themselves) recognises the variety, differentiation and complexity within the group "and generates a complex symbolic statement" (Figure 2).



**Figure 2:** Conceptualisation and symbolisation of community boundary  
[Cohen, 1985: 74]

Cohen goes on to state that "...the boundary thus symbolises the community to its members in two quite different ways: it is the sense they have of its perception by people on the other side – the public face and typical mode – and it is their sense of the community as refracted through all the complexities of their lives and experience – the private face and idiosyncratic mode." (Cohen, 1985: 74).

Clearly, people's symbolizing of their community from an idiosyncratic perspective is an interesting and profound angle as it encompasses the notion of culture. It is however by the same token, a potential minefield of complication and for this reason it is often helpful to focus more precisely on local community structure and processes (i.e. proximate spatial settings) when attempting to define boundaries. These settings include physical infrastructure, demographic and social profile, institutional resources and networks of social support and social control (Furstenberg and Hughes, 1997).

However, even the issue of locality – and how to define it – can be problematic. The concept of defining a community in terms of its geographical boundaries has its attractions, not least of which is the embodiment of the idea that living in a particular area provides a potential basis for mutual participation and involvement with others also residing there (Crow and Allan, 1994). But there are dangers in analysing a locality as though it were structurally isolated and unaffected by social and economic processes occurring at a non-local level.



The opportunity structure and normative environment in local communities can be shaped by broader institutional contexts, including national and international government policies (Arum, 2000). Locally anchored, geographic definitions of community include the following three conceptualisations that adhere to the work of Furstenberg and Hughes (1997) and Sampson (2001):

- urban neighbourhoods;
- sub-urban sub-divisions, and
- single communities in rural areas.

When focused on geography, composite community conceptualisations tend to emerge, consisting of several elements from a range of descriptive information including natural boundaries, recognised history, demographic patterns and industries and organisations located in the community (Chaskin et al, 2001; Mancini et al, 2005). Local areas are situated in larger, more complex community settings and as such any local, geographic conceptualisation ideally also needs to account for these surrounding settings.

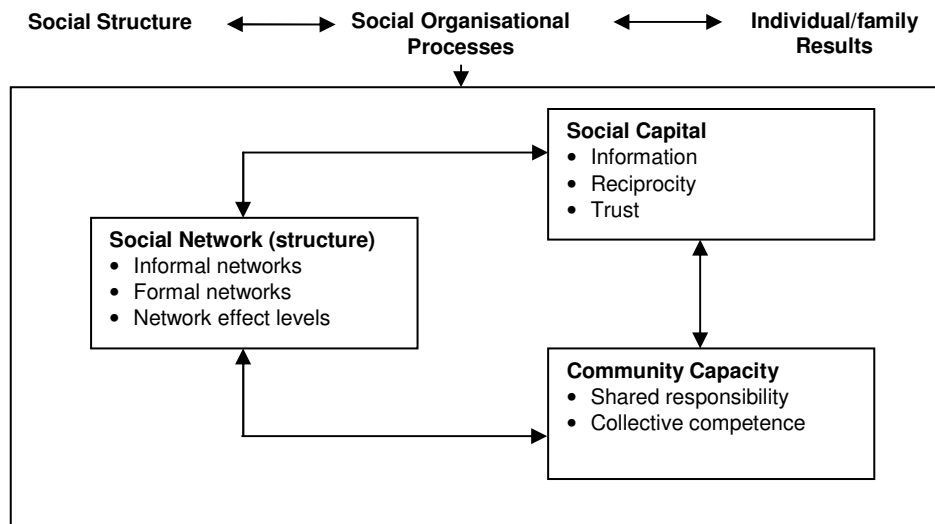
### **3. Social Organisation**

Social organisation refers to the “collection of values, norms, process and behaviour patterns within a community that organise, facilitate and constrain the interactions among community members” (Mancini et al, 2003; 319). In this respect the process by which communities achieve their desired results, collectively and individually includes the ability of individuals and families to demonstrate resilience in the face of adversity and positive challenge. This includes:

- Networks of people
- Exchange and reciprocity in relationships
- Accepted standards and norms of social support
- Social controls that regulate behaviour and interaction.

There are several components to community social organisation including formal and informal social networks, social capital and community capacity (which are described in the following sections). In terms of the study of communities social organisation is thus a unifying concept. Furstenburg and Hughes (1997) assert that social organisation includes how individuals and families in the community inter-relate, co-operate and provide mutual support. The concept of social organisation has also been connected with a community’s ability to implement effective social controls (Sampson, 1991), defined by Janowitz (1991) as the “capacity of a society to regulate itself according to desired principles and values” (p. 73). Social control can accrue from effective socialisation, from scrutiny, from supervision that may result in penalties and from rewarding social relationships and network experiences (Mancini et al, 2005; Kornhauser, 1978).

Mancini *et al* (2005) develop concepts expounded by Sampson (2002) and Chaskin *et al* (2001) to pinpoint and understand the dynamic and reciprocal inter-relations between social networks, social capital and community capacity (Figure 3). Although Mancini *et al* (2005) are primarily concerned with utilising this conceptualisation to inform a framework for understanding families in the context of communities, it is nevertheless a very useful approach with which to consider the make-up and development of communities and the dissemination and sharing of information across communities in a broader sense.



**Figure 3:** Key elements of social organisational processes (Mancini et al., 2005: 574)

The three areas presented in Figure 3 are considered individually below; although the interactivity between them - as indicated in the diagram - means that there is not really a clear distinction between the three elements.

### 3.1 Social Networks

Social networks extend far beyond the closely delineated boundaries of local, geographically defined communities. The social, psychological, physical and spiritual well-being of a community are all enhanced by formal and informal networks – primary community structures through which much of community life is enacted (Mancini et al., 2005). Formal network relationships are normally characterised by having an element of obligation built in, such as those associated with agencies and organisations. Informal network relationships refer to mutual exchanges and reciprocal responsibility and include voluntary relationships such as those with friends, neighbours and work colleagues.

Interaction occurs within networks, whether between community members and service providers or between friends and neighbours, and in many respects formal and informal networks are inter-related with the potential for each strengthening the other (Mancini, et al., 2005).

Although living close to one another does not necessarily imply relationship or interaction (Lee and Newby, 1983), it is the nature of the relationships that do exist between people and the social networks of which they are a part that constitute some of the key aspects of 'community'. Putnam (2000: 274) states that: "For most of us, our deepest sense of belonging is to our most intimate social networks, especially family and friends. Beyond that perimeter lie work, church, neighbourhood, civic life, and [an] assortment of other 'weak ties'". It has been argued that close personal ties are not a necessity for productive community, rather that shared norms have a more important position (Sampson et al., 2002). Cohen (1985) goes further, stating that: "whether or not its structural boundaries remain intact, the reality of community lies in its members' perception of the vitality of its culture. People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (Cohen, 1985:118).

What is an undeniable feature of society is that both loose ties and close alliances contribute significantly to community life. Wuthnow (2002) highlights the importance and functionality of less intense forms of interaction ("loose connections") and the "strength of weak ties" are discussed by Granovetter (1973) who suggests that weak ties were an important resource in making possible mobility opportunities. There will inevitably exist a range of both intense and more remote networks, relationships and community processes within a given residential setting and all these influences should be accounted for in an informed analysis in order to incorporate both immediate influences from close associations and general influences arising from shared values and beliefs (Mancini et al., 2005). Important features of social networks are 'connectedness' and interaction, both of which can be useful in clarifying essential aspects of the experiences of community members.

Social network interaction has been described in terms of three 'effect levels' that contribute to building community capacity through the generation of social capital:

- First-level effects: take place in a homogeneous network, such as a particular neighbourhood;
- Second-level effects: occur between similar networks, for example between multiple community organisations that concentrate on similar issues;
- Third-level effects: those occurring between dissimilar networks, such as in partnerships between neighbourhoods and community agencies.

(Small and Supple, 2001)

### *3.1.1 Social Norms*

The concept of social norms has been developed through the discipline of social psychology in an attempt to inform our understanding of the social nature of human behaviour. Cialdini et al (1991) distinguish between the continual influences of 'descriptive' and 'injunctive' social norms. Descriptive social norms provide us with information about what people around us normally do; i.e. enabling individuals to fit in with regular patterns of observed behaviour, such as when to put out the household waste bin for example (Jackson, 2005). By contrast injunctive social norms imbue the individual with a sense of how others around them think that they ought to behave; reflecting the moral rules and guidelines of the social group. Jackson

(2004) cites examples of drink-driving, extra-marital affairs and smoking near children as examples of behaviour where strong injunctive norms exist against taking that action.

Jackson (2004) explains the importance of institutional rules in constraining the behaviour of individuals, largely because of the way in which social norms are often embedded in institutions. So, for example, the decision to adopt certain pro-environmental behaviours like recycling is as likely to depend upon the existence of appropriate local facilities for engaging in this action as it is on positive attitudes. Similarly, the availability or unavailability of reliable public transport places constraints on travel choices. Referring to Sanne (2002), Jackson (2004) emphasises the inherent limitation of choice that social norms and institutional constraints in fact place on individuals as consumers:

“...some of these social institutional arrangements are the result of long-term cultural trends and deeply embedded social expectations...consumers are a long way from being willing actors in the consumption process, capable of exercising either rational or irrational choice in the satisfaction of their own needs and desires. More often they find themselves ‘locked in’ to unsustainable patterns of consumption, either by social norms which lie beyond individual control, or else by the constraints of the institutional context within which individual choice is negotiated.” (Jackson, 2004: 1039)

Personal norms refer to the things people feel obliged to do without considering what others are doing or what others might expect. These, together with personality and situation, all have a part to play in determining an individual’s response to the broader, extant social norms. Community based initiatives that aim to engage individuals in the adoption of more sustainable lifestyle choices therefore operate within the context of social norms. The existence and salience of descriptive and injunctive social norms will inevitably influence the degree to which this engagement (and participation) is likely to be successful (Jackson, 2005).

### **3.2 Social capital**

Social capital, generally considered an attribute of communities, refers to features of social organisation such as networks, norms, and trust that augment a society’s productive potential (Putnam et al., 1993; Roseland, 2000). It is a concept with many definitions attached to it; some examples include the following (cited by Halpern et al, 2002: 10):

Putnam (1995): “...features of social life - networks, norms, and trust - that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives... Social capital, in short, refers to social connections and the attendant norms and trust”.

The World Bank (2001): “... the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society’s social interactions”

Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2001): “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups”

Kawachi et al (1997): “... features of social organisation, such as civic participation, norms of reciprocity and trust in others that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit”.

MacGillivray (2002): “... the networks, norms and relationships that help communities and organisations work more effectively”

Halpern et al (2002): “the networks, norms, relationships, values and informal sanctions that shape the quantity and co-operative quality of a society’s social interactions”.

In addition to these types of definitional statement, there are a range of words and phrases that have been used to refer to social capital including social energy, community spirit, social bonds, civic virtue, social ozone, extended friendships, community life, social resources, informal and formal networks, good neighbourliness and social glue (ONS, 2001). Halpern et al (2002) point out that although policymakers often use the term ‘social capital’ as another way of describing “community”, traditional communities are in fact just one of many forms of social capital; other forms include diffuse friendships, shared or mutually acknowledged social values and work-based networks.

The main, broad areas for consensus within the social sciences regarding the definition of social capital centre on three core components: social networks, social norms and sanctions (the processes that help to ensure that network members keep to the rules) (Halpern et al, 2002 – see Table 1; Healy, 2001).

**Table 1:** The three components of social capital (from Halpern et al, 2002: 11)

	<b>Networks</b>	<b>Norms</b>	<b>Sanctions</b>
<b>Function</b>	Network members (access to information, benefits and support)	Rules and understandings (reciprocity, expectation of cooperation, trust, codified behaviour)	Rewards and punishments for complying/breaking norms
<b>Examples:</b>			
<i>Traditional communities</i>	Neighbours (lending, caring and protection)	Reciprocity, due care of property, challenging strangers	Recognition and respect vs. gossip, social exclusion
<i>New York diamond wholesale market</i>	Diamond merchants	Trustworthy exchange, without payment, of bags of uncut diamonds for examination	Approval, disapproval and exclusion
<i>The Highway code?</i>	Other road users (faster travel and information)	Language of signs and cooperation; when to go, stop etc.	Anger of strangers (road rage?) informal thank-you, police action

There are three main, distinguishable 'types' of social capital (Halpern et al, 2002):

- 'bonding' social capital (e.g. among family members or ethnic groups) characterised by strong bonds;
- 'bridging' social capital (e.g. across ethnic groups) characterised by weaker, less dense but more cross-cutting ties; and
- 'linking' social capital (e.g. between different social classes) characterised by connections between those with differing levels of power or social status.

Because social capital is developed independently of the state or large corporations (e.g. in terms of the organisations, structures and social relations that people build up themselves), Putnam (2000) argues that it provides an important function in terms of strengthening community fabric. The benefits of social capital cannot be restricted and are therefore available to all members of a community indiscriminately (Woolcock, 2001). Because of this non-exclusivity feature, social capital has been described as an archetypal public good. However, as Halpern et al (2002: 12) point out "...to the extent that groups of individuals can control access [to social capital] by other individuals, it may correspond more to a club good...this distinction has important consequences for whether and when the impacts of social capital are likely to be economically and socially beneficial and for the role of government in promoting and shaping social capital".

The measurement and application of social capital in a policy context would be greatly helped if consensus could be reached concerning its definition (ONS, 2001). However, debates regarding its conceptualisation continue precisely because it is seemingly impossible to distil down into a concise definition and because its measurement continues to defy simple quantification (ONS, 2001). Linked to this is the problem of over-versatility and it has been suggested that the concept "...risks trying to explain too much with too little [and] is being adopted indiscriminately, adapted uncritically, and applied imprecisely..." (Lynch *et al.* 2000: 404 – quoting from Woolcock, 2001).

High social capital, in the form of social trust and associational networks, is associated in the literature with a wide range of desirable policy outcomes (Halpern, 2001). For example, Putnam (2000) points to the powerful and quantifiable effects of social capital on many different aspects of our lives, asserting that the concept is more than "warm, cuddly feelings or frissons of community pride" (p. 279). Various authors have identified a range of such quantifiable effects (ONS, 2001) including the following:

- lower crime rates (Halpern 1999, Putnam 2000),
- better health (Wilkinson, 1996),
- improved longevity (Putnam, 2000)
- better educational achievement (Coleman, 1988),
- greater levels of income equality (Wilkinson 1996, Kawachi *et al.* 1997),
- improved child welfare and lower rates of child abuse (Cote and Healy, 2001),
- less corrupt and more effective government (Putnam, 1995) and

- enhanced economic achievement through increased trust and lower transaction costs (Fukuyama, 1999).

The implication of these positive effects of a strong stock of social capital is potentially very important when considering the role that communities might play in moving society forward along the path to sustainability. One unifying hypothesis stemming from this evidence appears to be receptivity – i.e. the higher the level of social capital the more likely a community is to respond positively to influences that attempt to encourage change for the better (which might include, for example, the promotion of more energy conscious lifestyles).

Social capital, like other forms of capital, is productive but if it is not renewed can be depleted (Coleman, 1988); more will be produced the more people work together and conversely community stocks of social capital will deplete the less people work together (Putnam, 2000; Cooper *et al.* 1999). It is important therefore to devise and enable strategies for its maintenance and renewal, thus protecting the ‘social ozone’ (Healy, 2001).

### 3.3 Community Capacity

Definitions of community capacity in the literature focus on a range of dimensions and issues and there have been few attempts to conceptualise the term systematically (Chaskin et al, 2001). With regard to the range of definitions Chaskin et al (2001: 11) explain that “some focus largely on organisations and some on individuals; others focus on affective connections and shared values; and still others are concerned primarily with processes of participation and engagement” and provide a summary of definition types:

- definitions that focus on local reserves of commitment, skills, resources and problem-solving abilities, often connected to a particular programme or institution;
- definitions that stress the participation of individual community members in a process of relationship building, community planning, decision making and action;
- definitions that apply the concept of capacity more narrowly in particular fields. Examples include public health, and the productive and organisational capacities of community development organisations;
- definitions that link with related constructs (such as empowerment and community competence). These definitions attempt to shed light on a community’s ability to pursue particular purposes and the extent to which individual and community level ‘endowments’ interact with conditions in the environment that impede or promote success;
- definitions that construct capacity as a set of specified assets that exist within and among a community’s individual members, local associations and institutions.

[Chaskin, et al, 2001: 10]

In an attempt to draw together some generic themes and points of agreement from this range of definitions, Chaskin et al (2001: 11) identify four common factors, namely:

1. the existence of resources (ranging from skills of individuals to the strengths of organisations access to financial capital);
2. networks of relationships (sometimes conveyed in affective terms, sometimes in instrumental terms);
3. leadership (although this is not always defined precisely);
4. support for mechanisms through which community members participate in collective action and problem solving.

The ability of a community to make sound decisions and informed choices – particularly with regard to any form of progression towards more sustainable patterns of living – has been incorporated into the concept of capacity building (Barker, 2005). It has been argued by several authors that the benefits available from capacity building are most evident at the community level, and Fletcher (2003) argues that building community capacity can enhance a moral sense of duty.

A key question for strategies that intend to encourage good decision making and enable more informed choices by utilising communities as a force for social change, is how best to engage with and capitalise upon the existing networks, relationships and interactions?

Research in the area of Integrated Coastal Zone Management (ICZM) in Scotland shows that stakeholder involvement in the process is critical but that partnership approaches (with a steering group or ‘forum’ of key decision making organisations involved the management of the resource in question) run the risk of engendering a ‘top-down’ dimension that can destabilise progress by failing to empower the community itself in the process of designing and enacting change (Barker, 2005).

In other words, steering group members should be selected on the basis of their representative interest in the community rather than purely on the basis of their management expertise, and it is suggested that in terms of studies of ICZM in Scotland, this has often not been the case to date. Many of the problems that the Scottish coastal community face are strongly connected with process-related changes, but the top-down partnership approach to coastal management has tended to place an emphasis on outputs rather than addressing the more salient challenges of socio-economic process development. Barker (2005) argues that this is probably the cause of the general perception that as partnerships become more established they in fact become less effective – and possibly more disenfranchised from the communities that they set out to engage with.

Interestingly there is a parallel between this debate on community development in coastal Scotland and attempts to promote the adoption of more sustainable patterns of domestic resource management (in terms of waste, energy and so on) through investment in environmental mass media campaigns. The use of advertising



campaigns and 'awareness raising' has been one of two central approaches favoured by policy makers to date in promoting such behaviour change (Jackson, 2005). The other main approach has involved the use of taxes and incentive schemes in attempts to influence the private economic costs and benefits associated with individual behaviours (Jackson, 2005).

The advertising approach carries with it the assumption that provision of appropriate information will lead to positive changes in attitude and behaviour (or to put it another way, changing attitudes through the widest possible dissemination of information in the hope that behaviour change will follow). However, this course of action has persistently failed to engage with people and a substantial body of evidence serves to demonstrate that such media campaigns on their own do not often bring about significant changes in behaviour (Darnton, 2004; Jackson, 2005; GAP 2006).

In the UK the Government's recognition of the apparent inadequacies of advertising approaches was noted officially in the 2005 Sustainable Development Strategy (HM Government, 2005):

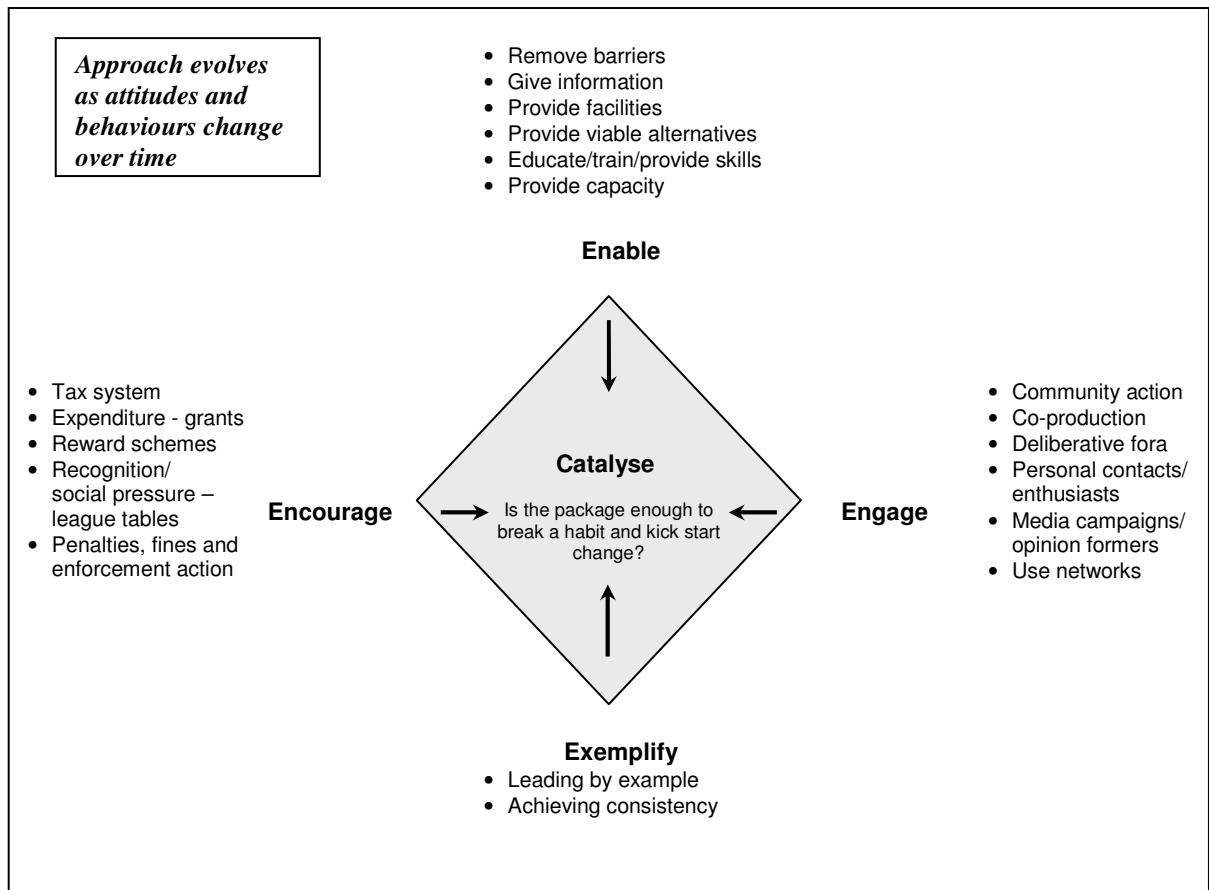
Evaluation of past awareness raising campaigns suggests that they have raised awareness but not translated into action. The new approach to climate change communications, launched in February 2005, is designed to address some of the past inadequacies. It will contribute to Community Action 2020 – Together We Can and help engage wider community action at the local level.

The toolkit for climate change communications is designed to provide a model for future behaviour change campaigns on other issues. Key components of the initiative are:

- using positive and inspirational messages rather than fear or concern
- avoiding 'above the line' advertising e.g. TV or billboard
- galvanising local and regional communicators for climate change through financial support and guidance
- high-profile national communications to support the local and regional initiatives, and
- developing a new inspirational goal and a branded statement are recommended to link the communications of different organisations.

[HM Government, 2005: 32]

The 2005 strategy incorporates the potential significance of behaviour change (in contributing to lower carbon emissions, for example) into a framework that analyses the problem of engagement in pursuit of changing behaviour (Figure 3). The framework reflects a strategy that (in principle) recognises the fact that regulation and enforcement on their own will be insufficient to induce lasting positive behavioural change; rather there needs to be a focus on enabling, encouraging and engaging people and communities in the move towards sustainability; recognising that Government needs to lead by example (HM Government, 2005: 26).



**Figure 4:** The UK Government’s ‘Framework for Behaviour Change’ (HM Government, 2005: 26)

The Government’s ‘Community Action 2020 – Together We Can’ that was announced in the Sustainable Development Strategy has the stated aim of re-energising action in communities across England “to achieve a step change in the delivery of sustainable development...by promoting new and existing opportunities to enable, encourage, engage and exemplify community action to increase sustainability” (HM Government, 2005: 29). This approach highlights community engagement in governance as a central facet of a sustainable society (Seyfang and Smith, 2006) and pinpoints several areas where learning and behavioural change are considered most likely to be effective through the agency of community groups. These include tackling climate change, development of energy and transport projects, waste minimisation, improvement of the quality of the local environment, and the promotion of fair trade and sustainable consumption and production.

It has been argued that Community Action 2020 – in the context of the broader Sustainable Development Strategy - represents an increasing policy focus on the social economy as a source of sustainability transformation, active citizenship and public service delivery that incorporates social enterprise as well as community and voluntary organisations (Seyfang and Smith, 2006). Seyfang and Smith state that this was the first attempt in UK policy to address social structures by emphasising a need to understand the cultural and social influences that shape consumption choices,

habits and impacts, which “clearly recognises the role of ‘socio-technical regimes’ which influence behaviour, constrain individual choice sets and limit the transformative potential of the market” (Seyfang and Smith, 2006: 3, reviewing Levett et al, 2003; Maniates, 2002, and Jackson and Michaelis, 2003).

### **3.4 Processes of change in communities**

Several writers and studies have attempted to reveal the extent to which communities as social groups are able to be conduits for adopting better (in terms of social justice and environmental sustainability) patterns of thought and behaviour. Consideration of some of the theoretical arguments underlying the role of communities in enabling change and sharing best practice can be useful in informing community based behavioural change programmes and initiatives.

At its simplest level the premise for wanting to enact change in a community away from unnecessary wastefulness of resources and towards more sustainable patterns of living is because un-sustainability is likely to threaten the well-being of both the environment and the social group itself. In terms of governance then, the problem is one of providing individuals within a group with the right mix of incentives and disincentives so as to coordinate individual behaviour for the common good (Jackson, 2004). Gardner and Stern (1996) highlight the work of Ophuls (1973) in which four basic ‘solution types’ are articulated, namely:

- government laws, regulations and incentives;
- programmes of education to change people’s attitudes;
- small group/community management; and
- moral, religious and/or ethical appeals

(Gardner and Stern, 1996: 27).

Ophuls argues that these four approaches basically summarise the response of societies throughout history to the problem of societal governance. In a detailed exploration of community management of resources, Gardner and Stern (1996) point out that community management is more likely to be effective in groups where there are widely shared norms before the resource management problem comes to the fore.

Taking advantage of existing networks of communication can be one of the most effective means for disseminating information. Using the example of Californian homeowners’ propensity to purchase solar panels if they knew other people who had invested in the technology, Gardner and Stern (1996) assert that this demonstrates the broader principle of innovations diffusing through a population along the extant channels of social influence. The spread of new and improved farming practices in farm communities is also cited as an example of this principle, where agricultural extension programmes have identified well known and respected individuals as catalysts for change. Attention is focused on a few such ‘opinion leaders’ who are encouraged to adopt the new technology with the result that once they have benefited from it the technology tends to spread with little additional effort.

The ways in which such 'information' or social signals are processed by and become influential upon individuals has been scrutinised in the fields of persuasion theory and social learning. During the 1940s and 1950s the Hovland-Yale Communication and Persuasion Group developed a somewhat linear model of persuasion incorporating three key elements (Hovland et al, 1953, Hovland, 1957 described in Jackson, 2005):

- the credibility of the speaker (the source);
- the persuasiveness of the argument (the message); and
- the responsiveness of the audience (the recipient)

Jackson (2005) highlights the limitations that this model has attracted from critics including Petty et al (2002) and Greenwald (1968); especially regarding the implicit assumption that attitude change occurs through the assimilation and comprehension of persuasive information and that this automatically leads on to shifts in behaviour. In reality "empirical evidence indicates that learning can occur without any change in attitudes, and that attitude (and behaviour) change can occur without any assimilation of the persuasion message" (Jackson, 2005: 96).

In terms of developing strategies designed to engage individuals and their communities in processes of attitudinal and behavioural change, levels of existing – or latent – motivation are critical; as is the ability of individuals to make those changes. Petty and Cacioppo have incorporated this recognition into a more recent model of persuasion (the 'elaboration likelihood' model) that distinguishes between central and peripheral processing; two distinct types of psychological processes involved in attitudinal change (Petty, 1977; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981, 1986). The principle distinction lies in the degree of motivation and ability for change that already exists within the target group.

Where individuals are highly motivated and able to engage with the message the model suggests that a central processing route occurs, where attitude change is brought about as a result of mindful attention being paid to the content of a persuasive message, elaboration of its implications and integration into an individual's own set of attitudes (Jackson, 2005). Peripheral processing occurs when the individual's motivation and/or ability to engage with the issue is low. In order to increase the attractiveness of adopting a change in attitude and behaviour ('source attractiveness') peripheral 'persuasion cues' can be used to functional effect. These include celebrity endorsement (e.g. of a particular pro-environmental behaviour, such as opting for an energy efficient appliance), where the main motivation to engage stems from the peripheral suggestion that there are potential rewards associated with the target behaviour (often quite separate from the intended purpose of the target behaviour *per se*); in this example aligning one's behaviour to that of a famous person who they respect or desire to be like (Jackson, 2005).

It is suggested that while central processing is most likely to result in long term attitude change, there are ways in which peripheral processing can also bring about enduring attitude and behaviour change and sometimes lead directly to behaviour

change, with altered attitudes following later.<sup>1</sup> The complimentary elements of trust and knowledge are of course critical in the diffusion of information and social signals in promotion of modified patterns of behaviour; a point that has been repeatedly validated by programmes of community energy conservation, where sending information through existing social networks is a basic principle upon which their success relies (Darley and Beniger, 1981; Stern et al., 1986; Gardner and Stern, 1996).

Social learning theory (Bandura, 1973, 1977, reviewed by Jackson, 2005: 99) emphasises the ways in which behaviour is influenced through the observation of a variety of social models (including the behaviour of parents, friends and those portrayed in the media). In addition to modelling behaviour on (what a person perceives to be) the desirable behaviour of others, the *behavioural responses* of social models are also particularly important elements of social learning. Positive signals (e.g. observing the pleasure that someone experiences from certain behaviours) are likely to have a persuasive impact on the observer's behavioural choice. Additionally it is suggested that observing the behaviours of 'anti-role models' (i.e. the negative consequences from other people's behaviour and those from whom we want to be disassociated) represents a process of learning how not to behave (Jackson, 2005).

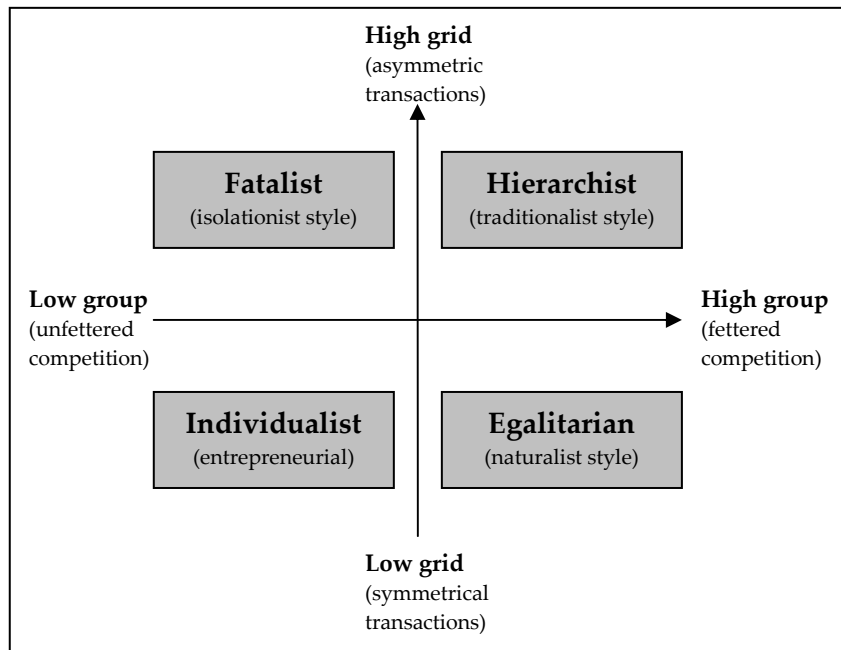
Modelling of behaviour is particularly important in the establishment and maintenance of social norms (Jackson, 2005), and thus has clear implications for the effective deployment of community-based action programmes, because of the fact that one person's behaviour can have such a profound influencing effect on another's. Connecting with a broad spectrum of community members in the adoption of a pro-environmental behaviour (e.g. participation in kerb-side recycling or choosing to purchase energy efficient appliances) is likely to increase the number of 'role models' that resonate with a range of people and lifestyles and thus enhance the desirability of adoption among larger numbers of community members. The important role of government leadership in advancing social behavioural change is a message highlighted by social learning theory (i.e. including a need to be seen to 'practice what they preach' and to exemplify the possibilities enabled by adoption of the behavioural change that they are promoting – Jackson, 2005). This message is certainly relevant at the local government level where increasing levels of responsibility for the development of community focused carbon reduction strategies has been emphasised in many recent policy documents, legislation and government guidelines (Peters and Fudge, 2008). For these to be successful local authorities will have to address their perception in the local community which historically has often been characterised by limited trust and minimal confidence (Byrne, 2000).

Community management has its advantages, opportunities and its limitations together with a range of potential application possibilities. Gardner and Stern (1996) present a useful summary of these, which are outlined in Table 2. From a cultural

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<sup>1</sup> Jackson (2005: 97) gives the example of an individual deciding to use public transport following the use of celebrity endorsement as a peripheral cue. The individual makes this change in behaviour without having deliberated over the choice – the cue and source attractiveness provide sufficient incentive. Having changed their behaviour the individual then starts to consider the benefits of public transport, thus initiating a process of follow up attitudinal change. Jackson states that this sits well with Bem's (1972) perception theory which suggests that we sometimes infer what our attitudes are by observing our own behaviour.

theory perspective community initiatives have been positioned within a broader framework of cultural types that categorises social organisation into four distinct forms, defined along the two separate axes of group and grid (Figure 4).



**Figure 4:** Typology of social organisation and cultural type from cultural theory (Jackson, 2005: 76)

This framework reflects an argument that there are only a limited number of forms of social organisation (Douglas, 1966, 1970; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982; Thompson et al, 1990). The position of a given society along the group axis denotes the relative importance of the group as opposed to the individual, and its position along the grid axis refers to how free and unconstrained individual relationships are in that society.

The key characteristics that prevail in societies at the extremes of the axes are summarised by Jackson (2005) as follows:

A 'high-group' society:

- prevalence of group values over individual values;
- constraining and curtailing of individual action by group norms;
- society is organised extensively around group relationships;
- individual identity relatively weak;
- individual competition subordinated to the best interests of the group.

A 'low group' society:

- the individual dominates over the group;
- unfettered competition in pursuit of individual interest;
- subordination of group values and norms.

A 'high grid' society:

- existence of 'insulations' between individuals (including physical separation and self made rules) preventing free transactions;
- barring of certain kinds of transactions;
- asymmetries in relationships between people.

A 'low grid society:

- absence of any 'insulations';
- free and unconstrained transactions between people;
- symmetric relationships between individuals.

(Jackson, 2005: 76)

Community management is located predominantly in the lower right-hand quadrant of Figure 4 in sharp contrast to modern societies in general, which are positioned mainly in the lower left quadrant. The reality is that 'low group, low grid' societies – characterised by the precedence given to individual rights over group rights, the importance attached to social mobility, light governance and an emphasis on open access to markets, competition and equality of opportunity – paints a picture of an entrepreneurial and individualistic culture that pervades and characterises much of modern society (Jackson, 2004). In terms of the four basic solution types to promote individual behaviour for the common good (outlined earlier) the first two (government laws and programmes of education) are most likely to be conformed to by the models of governance adopted by the 'low group, low grid' society.

Delivering pro-environmental behaviour change will inevitably require a mix of policies that imaginatively utilises elements of all four solution types, rather than any one in isolation (Gardner and Stern, 1996). And as Jackson (2004) emphasises, this will require an exploration of the "untapped potential for governance within each perspective" (p. 1045). This, importantly, must include a much fuller recognition of the potential for sustainability progress through innovative and engaging community-based strategies – the third of Ophuls' solution types which Gardner and Stern call the 'forgotten strategy' (Gardner and Stern, 1996: 150. See also Table 2).

#### **4. Concluding comments**

In an attempt to provide a concise overview of how the term 'community' has been conceptualised in sociological literatures we note that there remains considerable uncertainty with regard to the way in which communities could or should be defined. Three of the key recurring and highly inter-related themes associated with the study of community include social networks, social capital and community capacity. Attempts to pursue community action as a force for social change (e.g. progressing behavioural change towards a more sustainable future) need to capitalise on the special nature of communities, and utilise their innovative and receptive capacity. An understanding of some of the theoretical underpinnings – in terms of 'community' itself and the processes by which personal and social norms develop and 'information' is collectively and individually processed - can be useful in providing a framework from which to develop carefully planned action strategies.

The UK Government's Department for Communities and Local Government has formulated a set of characteristics to define the critical facets of a 'sustainable community' (full details are provided in Appendix 1). Eight key components are identified, signifying that sustainable communities are i) active, inclusive and safe, ii) well run, iii) environmentally sensitive, iv) well designed and built, v) well connected, vi) thriving, vii) well served and viii) fair for everyone. The definition of sustainable communities given is as follows:

*"Sustainable communities are places where people want to live and work, now and in the future. They meet the diverse needs of existing and future residents, are sensitive to their environment, and contribute to a high quality of life. They are safe and inclusive, well planned, built and run, and offer equality of opportunity and good services for all."*

(Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006: 1)

To return to the question posed in the title of this paper it is apparent that community focused action certainly has the potential to be a potent force for social change. Of crucial importance is the nature of *how* that prospective change is to be encouraged and facilitated. Approaches to engaging communities need practical and pragmatic elements to be built in from the outset; information intensive interventions alone are unlikely to be effective as experience has demonstrated. Coordination of individual and collective behaviour change towards more sustainable patterns of living inevitably requires a policy mix that incorporates appropriate incentives and disincentives. Trust and knowledge are critical in the diffusion of social signals in promotion of changed behaviour patterns. Experience shows that disseminating such signals through existing social networks has proven expeditious in the past; a key contributory factor in the success of community based energy conservation projects, for example.

Communities are not homogeneous masses, but rather intricate and widely differing webs with varying degrees of interactivity, shared norms and communication. Policies and strategies need to be tailored taking into account the unique character of any given community and existence of overlapping boundaries.



**Table 2:** Community management: advantages, limitations and applications (adapted from Gardner and Stern, 1996: 149-150)

<b>Advantages of community management</b>	
Development of long-standing social traditions	Community management systems have been with humanity for thousands of years. The fact that these systems can work and are compatible with human social organisation is well known.
Internalisation of externalities	The resource and all consequences of using it are kept within the same group of people. This eliminates the problems associated with some people benefiting from the use of resources while creating pollution for others or robbing them of their own resources.
Long-term effectiveness	The social systems that manage the resources tend to be self-maintaining. They contain educational and incentive components that are integral to the community rather than being imposed upon them by outside entities such as governments. These internal controls can evolve to meet community needs and can last as long as the community itself.
Encourages people to move beyond selfishness	The 'social character' of community management shapes people to think and act for interests beyond themselves. This stems from the participatory process, the creation of a sense of community and the internalisation of group norms.
Low enforcement costs	With regard to policing internalised norm-following is very cost effective, with community members policing themselves and others.
The forgotten strategy	The community approach to resource management has been widely ignored, with traditional management approaches tending to be imposed upon communities rather than capitalising on the innovation and capacity of social groups to enable their own positive progress. There is great potential therefore to make improvements by remaking interventions that are more closely aligned to the principles of community management.
<b>Limitations of community management</b>	
Works best with a limited range of resource types	<p>Many of the world's most pressing environmental problems are not contained within a close geographical area, and some such as climate change and ozone depletion are global issues where every community's contribution to the problem is mixed with every other community's. Other issues present incentives for communities to export their environmental problems to other communities (e.g. shifting water pollution downstream and cutting mountain trees that provide flood protection in the valleys). Key resources are difficult to control locally in these cases because community management fails to internalise externalities.</p> <p>When a resource affects people outside a community, the community management strategy is therefore unlikely to be sufficient by itself. Although it may be possible to address these problems with nested arrangements among communities or systems of co-management between communities and larger governmental units, thus retaining some of the advantages of community management, such strategies remain largely untested.</p>
Conditions for community management being destroyed by social trends	The conditions necessary for community management are continually eroding. Increasingly people are dependent on resources that are traded in global markets which are locally uncontrollable. Small, stable communities are becoming less and less common in the world due to modernisation and migration. As these trends continue there are fewer locally manageable resources and fewer groups with the social capital and knowledge to make community management work.
<b>Applications of community management</b>	
Management of locally controllable resources	Community management remains a highly effective strategy for solving problems of land use, waste supply and coastal fisheries. Governments can do much more to provide the conditions necessary for effective community management. More could be done to apply community-based approaches to locally controllable problems including waste management and water supply.
Combining elements of community management with incentives and education	Incentives and education (e.g. for energy conservation and recycling programmes) can be made more successful when they incorporate elements of the community approach such as word-of-mouth communication and utilisation of resources available to existing community groups (e.g. access to audiences and credibility). In this way use of community institutions and informal social networks can be very effective means for spreading information and advertising incentives. Participation, involvement, creation of norms, and built-in monitoring have proved their value in small communities but also have value for larger and more complex social units.

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## Appendix 1

### The UK Government's position on the components of a sustainable community (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2006):

#### The components of a sustainable community: in full

Sustainable communities embody the principles of sustainable development.

They:

- balance and integrate the social, economic and environmental components of their community
- meet the needs of existing and future generations
- respect the needs of other communities in the wider region or internationally also to make their communities sustainable.

Sustainable communities are diverse, reflecting their local circumstances. There is no standard template to fit them all. But they should be:

**(1) ACTIVE, INCLUSIVE AND SAFE** - *Fair, tolerant and cohesive with a strong local culture and other shared community activities*

Sustainable communities offer:

- a sense of community identity and belonging
- tolerance, respect and engagement with people from different cultures, background and beliefs
- friendly, co-operative and helpful behaviour in neighbourhoods
- opportunities for cultural, leisure, community, sport and other activities, including for children and young people
- low levels of crime, drugs and antisocial behaviour with visible, effective and community-friendly policing
- social inclusion and good life chances for all.

**(2) WELL RUN** - *with effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership*

Sustainable communities enjoy:

- representative, accountable governance systems which both facilitate strategic, visionary leadership and enable inclusive, active and effective participation by individuals and organisations
- effective engagement with the community at neighbourhood level, including capacity building to develop the community's skills, knowledge and confidence
- strong, informed and effective partnerships that lead by example (e.g. government, business, community)
- strong, inclusive, community and voluntary sector
- sense of civic values, responsibility and pride.

**(3) ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE** - *providing places for people to live that are considerate of the environment*

Sustainable communities:

- actively seek to minimise climate change, including through energy efficiency and the use of renewables
- protect the environment, by minimising pollution on land, in water and in the air
- minimise waste and dispose of it in accordance with current good practice
- make efficient use of natural resources, encouraging sustainable production and consumption
- protect and improve bio-diversity (e.g. wildlife habitats)
- enable a lifestyle that minimises negative environmental impact and enhances positive impacts (e.g. by creating opportunities for walking and cycling, and reducing noise pollution and dependence on cars)
- create cleaner, safer and greener neighbourhoods (e.g. by reducing litter and graffiti, and maintaining pleasant public spaces).

**(4) WELL DESIGNED AND BUILT** - *featuring quality built and natural environment*

Sustainable communities offer:

- sense of place - a place with a positive 'feeling' for people and local distinctiveness
- user-friendly public and green spaces with facilities for everyone including children and older people
- sufficient range, diversity, affordability and accessibility of housing within a balanced housing market
- appropriate size, scale, density, design and layout, including mixed-use development, that complement the distinctive local character of the community
- high quality, mixed-use, durable, flexible and adaptable buildings, using materials which minimise negative environmental impacts
- buildings and public spaces which promote health and are designed to reduce crime and make people feel safe
- accessibility of jobs, key services and facilities by public transport, walking and cycling.

**(5) WELL CONNECTED** - *with good transport services and communication linking people to jobs, schools, health and other services*

Sustainable communities offer:

- transport facilities, including public transport, that help people travel within and between communities and reduce dependence on cars
- facilities to encourage safe local walking and cycling
- an appropriate level of local parking facilities in line with local plans to manage road traffic demand
- widely available and effective telecommunications and Internet access
- good access to regional, national and international communications networks.

**(6) THRIVING** - *with a flourishing and diverse local economy*

Sustainable communities feature:

- a wide range of jobs and training opportunities



- sufficient suitable land and buildings to support economic prosperity and change
- dynamic job and business creation, with benefits for the local community
- a strong business community with links into the wider economy
- economically viable and attractive town centres.

**(7) WELL SERVED** - *with public, private, community and voluntary services that are appropriate to people's needs and accessible to all*

Sustainable communities have:

- Well-performing local schools, further and higher education institutions, and other opportunities for lifelong learning
- high quality local health care and social services, integrated where possible with other services
- high quality services for families and children (including early years child care)
- good range of affordable public, community, voluntary and private services (e.g. retail, fresh food, commercial, utilities, information and advice) which are accessible to the whole community
- service providers who think and act long-term and beyond their own immediate geographical and interest boundaries, and who involve users and local residents in shaping their policy and practice.

**(8) FAIR FOR EVERYONE** - *including those in other communities, now and in the future*

Sustainable communities:

- recognise individuals' rights and responsibilities
- respect the rights and aspirations of others (both neighbouring communities, and across the wider world) also to be sustainable
- have due regard for the needs of future generations in current decisions and actions.