

Book Reviews

SILVERMAN, ROBERT (ed.). *Community Based Organizations: The Intersection of Social Capital and Local Context in Contemporary Urban Society*. (Detroit, Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 2004, 217pp.).

Reviewed by THERESIA WILLIAMS, St. Albert, Alberta

Silverman's edited book on community based organizations presents an eclectic and compelling overview of community based organizations and the social capital debate in our turbo capitalized world. While community engagement is hardly a unique phenomenon for governments and policy makers to become involved in, interest in social capital among scholars, policymakers and practitioners of community development is on the increase. Perhaps this increase is spurred more by cost savings and a demanding populace seeking response from the governments they elect and the organizations they support rather than by social concern. Irregardless, social capital and its application to a myriad of community concerns is a popular "mom, dad and apple pie" bandwagon to "get on board" for governments, policy makers and practitioners.

Comprehending the nature, implications, strengths and challenges of engaging with social capital requires a more committed understanding of what social capital and community based organizations can and cannot achieve within a social capital approach. It is in this respect that the book explores a number of issues and the ability of social capital and community to address these issues in a concrete and practical manner. In Chapter Two, Ivan Light defines forms of social capital and presents questions regarding the accessibility of some forms of capital for all individuals in a population; who has access to capital, why and in what forms. The interconnection between all forms of capital is detailed within Light's discussion.

Chapter Three critically questions the approach of providing micro credit or small loans for individual entrepreneurs to address issues of poverty but begs the question: Is poverty a collective issue or is individualism a contributing cause of poverty? This chapter looks at the approaches of providing credit to individuals looking for a way out of cyclical poverty and the failures resulting from this approach.

Chapters Four through Six, examine critically the concept of social capital - how it is and isn't being applied or used within existing structures in post-modern society. Chapter Four succeeds in raising a number of questions within the "Scooby Doo" mysteries and Chapter Five presents some concrete practical examples of what has and hasn't worked within community development corporations. In Chapter Six, an analysis of South Bronx community development corporations and their various approaches to addressing housing issues is very poignant and useful as it chronicles the successes and failures of the CDC approach over the past thirty years. While one can come across some successes in this approach, the chilling reality of the absence of resident empowerment within CDCs is a particularly distressing point.

Chapters Seven through Nine consider the development of community specific social capital and discuss the role of social capital as one element in the community development approach within race, gender and religion case examples. These chapters also highlight the role of community leaders in mobilizing ordinary citizens to become involved in

empowering themselves as well as their communities. These three chapters discuss in detail the need for more responsive structures and support to expand on social capital initiatives in the future. Expanding on social capital initiatives requires the awareness and necessity of recognizing structures that both support and deny empowerment based on race, gender and religion.

Silverman's concluding chapter weaves together the necessity for a "progressive model to mobilize social capital". He notes the importance of all forms of capital within communities but also emphasizes the necessity for paying heed to the structural influences of community development. Institutional structures can quickly become barriers to community empowerment when they lose touch with the grassroots groups they represent, as is noted in several chapters within this book. Silverman proposes a model that would: 1) combine all forms of capital to empower and develop communities; 2) recognize and create access for all members of community to policy making; and, most importantly, 3) ensure that a cross section of the community is democratically represented in decision making and empowerment within community.

This is an excellent book worthy of any community development practitioner, policymaker, academic or grassroots organizer who is seeking to better understand the mobilization and nature of social capital within communities.

SAUL, JASON. *Benchmarking for Nonprofits: How to Measure, Manage, and Improve Performance*. (Saint Paul, MN: Wilder Publishing, 2004, 96 pp.).

Reviewed by CHERYL BURKHART-KRIESEL, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Nonprofits today are focusing on results, now more than ever. Doing good works is not enough. Organizations are being forced to demonstrate to clients, stakeholders, and funders how they are going to improve their effectiveness.

Benchmarking, as defined, is the "process of measuring an organization's business process against leaders in any industry to gain insights to improve performance". As a recognized standard in the private sector business world, it is quickly becoming incorporated into the nonprofit environment as well. Saul makes a case that benchmarking can help any organization stimulate innovation, engage boards, focus on mission, inspire staff, and ultimately impress stakeholders and funders.

Why benchmark? According to the author, there are three reasons: 1) your organization is probably already doing it informally; 2) it allows for control over your destiny; and 3) it is about survival - nonprofits that are not effective in the future simple will not be in existence.

Although benchmarking sounds like a management tool for large organizations, the book makes a strong case for its use in small volunteer-based settings. One aspect that I found intriguing was the idea to substitute the process of benchmarking in place of a strategic plan. It seems reasonable that the process would similarly identify priorities but then take them to the next level of actually measuring and ultimately improving performance.

The book is organized as an easy-to-read 96 page workbook with a variety of hands-on worksheets that move you through the benchmarking process. The worksheets truly are meant to be used. In fact, the author provides a URL from the publisher where readers can download the forms, type in responses, reformat, and use as needed. This makes it very easy to get started - no excuses now.