

# One Thing We Can't Build Alone in Iraq

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When Columbia University sociologist Peter Bearman dived into the world of the white-gloved workers who open the front doors of expensive New York apartment buildings, he found that most people who applied for jobs as doormen never got one. Most doormen, however, had not applied for their jobs.

The explanation for the puzzle, laid out in Bearman's 2005 book, "Doormen," lies in the social networks that pass along word about a job opening. If you are part of that network, you hear about jobs even if you don't need one. If you are outside the network, you're out of luck.

"Most people in America get their jobs because of who they know, not what they know," said Robert Putnam, a political scientist at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. "It's not nepotism -- one person knows me and another person finds out and someone says, 'Did you hear there is a new job at the bank?' or they say, 'Do you know a good lawyer?'"

The example of the doormen highlights the importance of something that Putnam calls social capital: a measure of how closely people in the community are interconnected. Levels of social capital predict everything from the quality of schools and local government, to the risk a country will go down in corruption or blow up in civil war.

Ideas related to social capital have many applications to U.S. domestic challenges but are especially instructive to the situation in Iraq, because they suggest that the model of reconstruction the United States has pursued there is fundamentally flawed.

The problem with an external agent handing down largesse -- building bridges, roads and schools, for instance -- is that it runs counter to everything known about how social capital grows, Putnam said. And without social capital, societies fall apart, even if the roads are smooth and the trains run on time.

So what exactly is social capital? Putnam, the author of the 2005 book "Bowling Alone," said it describes how much people in a community feel responsible for each other.

"People tend to obey the rules not because they are worried about cops but because they have obligations to other people," Putnam said. "In the U.S., tax compliance is powerfully predicted by the level of social capital in a community."

While the concept feels vague, a new study in the Journal of Politics shows social capital can be measured and tracked. Duke University political scientist Anirudh Krishna followed a number of indexes of social capital in villages in India and showed social interconnectedness growing in some places and fraying in others. Krishna asked villagers, for example, whether they would prefer to own 15 acres of land on their own, or 40 acres of land with another person. Villagers in areas with high social capital were happy to trust partners.

Villages with high social capital made better use of their resources, because people cooperated with each other instead of wasting money guarding against each other.

But Krishna also found that government aid and nongovernmental organizations could do virtually nothing to build social capital -- contractors and aid agencies can build bridges, but they cannot build connections between people.

"You cannot build social capital from above," he said. "It can only be built by the people involved."

Putnam found in a study of Italy that places with high social capital a thousand years ago have high social capital today, an outcome that he said ought to be deeply worrisome for U.S. planners in Iraq.

It is social capital, he added, that seems to create the right soil for democracy, not the other way around.

This is why Putnam predicted many years ago that democracy was unlikely to flourish in Russia: Social capital levels were extremely low.

Michael Woolcock, a sociologist at the University of Manchester in England who worked for years at the World Bank, said one development project in Indonesia suggested that external agents might be able to help build social capital.

The trick, he said, was to make no centralized decisions at all, whether in Jakarta or, even worse, Washington. The Kecamatan Development Project has aimed more than \$1.3 billion at more than 40,000 villages, but every decision about how to use the money has come from democratic decisions at the village level, where funds are released only if diverse groups can show they are willing to work together. It has sometimes been described as a democracy project disguised as a development project.

Sadly for the situation in Iraq, numerous studies show that even if external agents have a tough time helping social capital grow, they can -- and regularly do -- cause social capital to decline. Both Saddam Hussein's divisive rule and the chaos following the U.S. invasion have increased the distrust ordinary Iraqis have for one another, said Joseph Kopser, a U.S. Army major now serving in Iraq who is interested in social capital ideas.

With the security situation grim and both Iraqis and Americans impatient for results, Kopser said, development decisions have become centralized, even though social capital theory suggests that ordinary Iraqis need to feel not only that they are the ones making decisions but that they are the ones who actually carry them out, even if projects take much longer to complete.

"We usually are only able to point to schools opened, or clinics refurbished, or businesses started," Kopser mused in an e-mail. "But is that really building social capital or just moving boxes?"