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CLCINSIGHTS

IN THIS EDITION

Social ties and connections are embedded in our everyday lives, but we often only recognise their value in times of need. In an urbanising city like Singapore, social infrastructure and ties play a crucial role in helping us deal with impacts of climate change, extreme weather and other potential shocks. This edition of CLC Insights highlights the importance of social ties and connections in operationalising community resilience, and discusses ways to continue building such buoyancy through social infrastructure and policies.



Figure 1: Social ties at work as survivors help each other through the havoc wrecked by the 3/11 tsunami in Tohoku, Japan. Source: Warren Antiola/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

Building Community Resilience: Social ties and connections

As societies around the world grapple with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the battle against climate change has not waned. The pandemic has crippled economies and engulfed societies, exemplifying the magnitude and scale of unanticipated shocks on national systems. The silver lining has been the unity and strength of communities in cooperating to contain the spread of the virus. Likewise for the anticipated impacts of climate change on cities, such as periods of intense heat.

The role of communities in building resilience towards climate risks through citizen-initiated, community-scale projects has been examined previously in CLC Insights Issue #56. Of equal importance are ways to continually build

and strengthen social infrastructure and ties to actualise the potential of communities to effectively respond to shocks and stresses. This article examines the importance of building up social infrastructure and ties in operationalising community resilience in a highly dense and urbanised city like Singapore in order to deal with climate change as well as a wide range of risks and threats.

WHAT ARE SOCIAL TIES AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

All of us recognise the importance of social ties in our daily lives. If we move to a new community, we want to be able to receive prompt and accurate advice on the best medical providers nearby,

and local residents—not necessarily the internet—can do this well. Should we want to look for a new job, we would hope to have colleagues and friends who can help identify new positions. Many studies have shown that connections—and not resume depositories or online portals—do this best.

The value of connections—what social scientists call social infrastructure and social capital—is even more obvious during a crisis or shock. For example, when a resident has a kitchen fire, next-door neighbours are likely to be the first to hear the fire alarm, smell the smoke, and bang on the door to check if all is well. Our friends provide suggestions on how to improve our diet, encourage us to see a doctor for nagging

If decision makers see a new way to respond to threats—whether an economic crisis or rising sea levels—but residents lack trust in the system and their representatives, it will be a challenge to implement the response.

medical conditions and give us negative feedback about bad habits like smoking. In many ways, our mental and physical well-being depend on our connections to others. As a hurricane or other natural hazard approaches, our social contacts urge us to leave the area to avert danger.

The trio of social ties

Social scientists typically divide social ties into three categories: bonding, bridging and linking (see Figure 2). Bonding ties are the most common and connect similar people. The most obvious example would be ties to family and kin, but it would also include people with whom you went to school, share a language, religious practice, among others. People with bonding ties may speak in the same way, know the same cultural references and appreciate the same foods.

Bridging ties, in contrast, connect us with people who are different, and these often come through institutions such as workplaces, schools, apartment buildings and clubs. Such ties bring together people of different nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. In Singapore, for example, public housing is a place where people of different backgrounds, ethnicity, race and religion live next to and interact with each other.

The third type of connection is linking social capital. While bonding and bridging ties are horizontal—between people with similar levels of authority—linking social ties connect people to institutions and leaders with power.

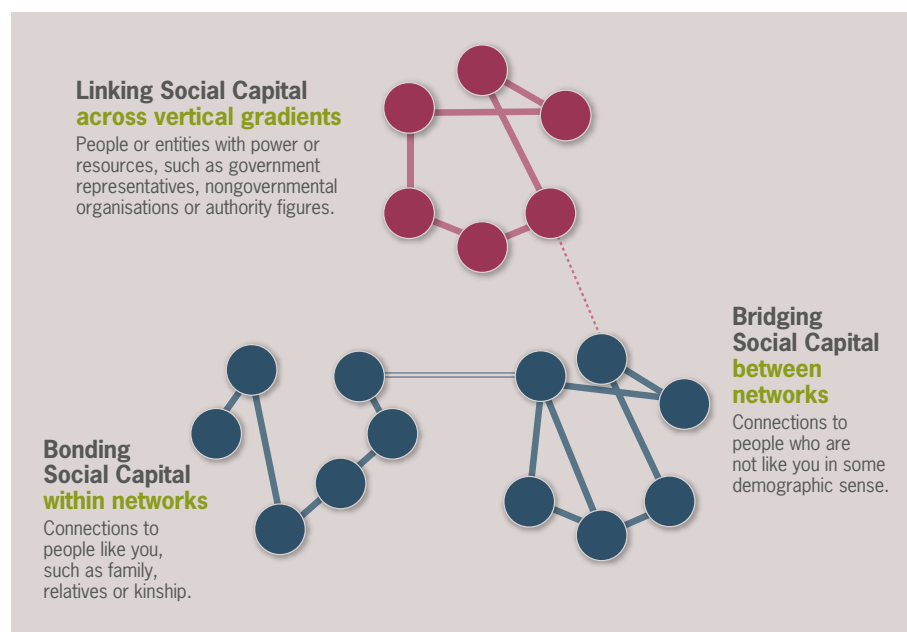


Figure 2: The interplay between bonding, bridging and linking ties illustrates different forms of social capital.
Source: Daniel Aldrich

This may involve having access to agency representatives if you have a question on a local municipal issue, or being familiar and be able to approach your local Member of Parliament for help.

Social capital's power is that it acts as a force multiplier, which can increase the impact of other programmes through its ties, trust and information sharing. For example, if a government wants to formulate a new social policy, it would be more readily accepted if residents know about it, give their inputs and support its goals. Further, if citizens trust government officials and civil servants to carry out their tasks efficiently and transparently, they are more likely

to participate in the creation of new policies. Communities that engage with their decision makers and each other more regularly can accelerate the adoption of best practices and build stronger support for new and innovative approaches to long-term problems like climate change and natural hazards.

In this sense, successful, transparent and efficient public policy needs a strong and interconnected society to be agile and effective in responding to challenges. If decision makers see a new way to respond to threats—whether an economic crisis or rising sea levels—but residents lack trust in the system and their representatives,

Living in more cohesive and connected communities can save lives.

it will be a challenge to implement the response. Additionally, many of the best approaches have been micro-level experiments where neighbourhoods or communities have tried out new ideas, and those bottom-up responses have spread elsewhere.

Social ties in play

The Aldrich Resilience Lab at Northeastern University has carried out research on natural hazards, disasters and crises around the world—including Japan, China, India, Israel and North America—and found very strong evidence that each type of social capital has a different role to play in building resilience.

Even before a disaster strikes, qualitative and quantitative investigations have shown that having broader and more diverse ties can save lives. Working with locational data and social capital data from the social media platform Facebook, it was found that individuals with broader and more diverse connections are more likely to leave vulnerable areas before the arrival of a natural hazard like a hurricane.

Then, when a shock is en route—such as Japan’s 20-metre high tsunami during the 3/11 disaster—living in more cohesive and connected communities can save lives. Individuals in coastal towns in the northeastern region of Tohoku were far more likely to survive if they lived in a low-crime, highly-connected community, as neighbours would go knocking on doors of the elderly and vulnerable and offer to help them relocate to higher ground.

During the recovery period following a shock—when communities need

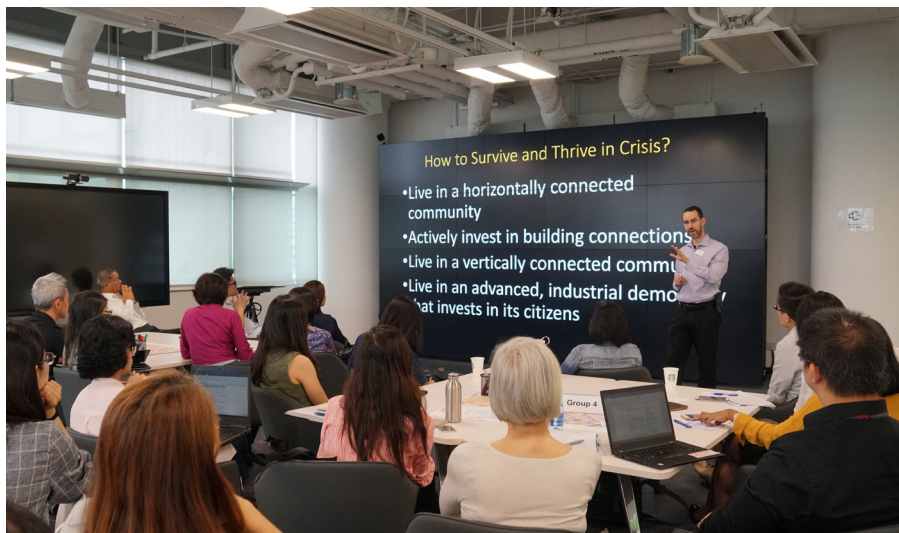


Figure 3: Prof Aldrich sharing insights on social ties among people and its effect on creating communities that are tight-knit and resilient during a CLC multi-agency workshop in January 2020. Source: CLC



Figure 4: As recovery efforts were ongoing in the Tohoku region, the community rallied to help students return to school by setting up temporary classrooms in evacuation centres. Source: Warren Antiola/Flickr, CC BY-NC-ND

resources—linking social ties come into play. Cities, towns, and villages with more ties to the central government were better able to rebuild infrastructure, medical systems, schools and

businesses. Finally, for the long term, individuals with more horizontal ties were better able to rebuild mental health and reduce anxiety.

Strong social ties can often make up for shortcomings in other resources, such as information technology, transportation, or health infrastructure.



Figure 5: Just weeks after the 3/11 disaster, the community came together to rebuild homes and businesses in Ishinomaki, one of the worst hit areas. Source: Daniel Aldrich

Social ties play an important role in vulnerable communities, whether we define vulnerability in terms of demographics—such as age, income or race—or in terms of mental and physical health conditions. This is because strong social ties can often make up for shortcomings in other resources, such as information technology, transportation, or health infrastructure. Vulnerable communities

with deeper reservoirs of trust and interconnectivity can work collectively to handle problems, bypassing scarcity to create communal goods that benefit those who need them most. In the unfortunate cases where vulnerable communities lack strong ties and trust, they may end up lacking access to critical ideas, information and support precisely when they need it most.

An optimistic finding from these research projects is that social ties are not set in stone. No community, neighbourhood, or city has a fixed amount of cohesion or trust. Instead, like other forms of capital, social capital can be created, upgraded and deepened. We have looked closely at a wide variety of ways to do so—through neighbour-to-neighbour programmes, neighbourhood-level events, city planning and even community currencies.

Ibasho concept in post-disaster recovery

One programme that has proven effective at broadening networks, deepening a sense of belonging, and helping people feel more in control of their lives was developed in Massaki-cho, Japan. The Ibasho programme was set up after the 3/11 triple disaster in Japan in a community where most people had been forced to relocate to temporary shelters. Working with local elderly residents to create an organising board, Emi Kiyota and other founding members of the organisation raised funds to build a community centre.

In this community centre, residents decide what to do: cooking classes, yoga, reading clubs, or communal aerobics. They invite friends and neighbours to join them in whatever activities they believe will interest the community. And it works. In measuring the impact from participating in the programmes at Ibasho, it was found that the number of people with whom the elderly interacted increased (widening networks). Their sense of community



Figure 6: Run by the elderly, Ibasho cafe creates opportunities for them to interact with other community members. This improves social ties and empowers them to make their community a better place. Source: Ibasho

increased as well, together with deepened efficacy. In fact, the programme has been so successful that Ibasho has expanded to the Philippines and Nepal, and initial data analyses show similarly positive effects around the world.

Ibasho is a programme with relatively low physical infrastructure costs—the provision of a permanent meeting space within walking distance of potential members is most important—and it enhances the social infrastructure of the neighbourhood.

SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN SINGAPORE

In Singapore, careful urban planning and social efforts within a high-rise, high-density city has laid the foundation for social bonding, bridging and linking in our communities. Social ties provide us with the capacity to adapt to adversity and build a strong social compact with high levels of trust and cohesion to deal with challenges.

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic provides insights into how the foundation Singapore has laid enables us to deal

with the situation and adapt to external stressors that are volatile, unpredictable, large-scale and beyond Singapore's sphere of control and influence. Working with community residents and guided by public health experts, we can build on the existing layers of social resilience and achieve new levels of normalcy and resilience. While it may take time for official resources to get distributed to people, residents have stepped up to self-mobilise responses through sharing of resources like hand sanitisers and surgical masks in lifts in their neighbourhood. This reflected a

strong sense of community spirit and togetherness that allowed residents to assist one another, while complementing planned government responses.

In a way, this kind of response parallels what CLC is trying to achieve through its Building Community Resilience project. Climate change, like the public health pandemic, is a complex issue and requires a whole-of-nation effort where everyone works together and plays a part. Initial research on Japanese communities by members of the Aldrich Resilience Lab, for example,

Social capital and social cohesion are more important in an era of uncertain threats.

has shown that areas with more diverse networks—more bridging and linking ties—have fewer deaths from COVID-19. In contrast, in areas ruled by bonding ties connecting primarily family, kin and similar people, deaths seem to be higher.

LOOKING AHEAD TO BUILD SOCIAL RESILIENCE IN AN URBANISED CITY

In a post COVID-19 world, Singapore faces the challenges of reopening the society safely while preparing for unanticipated shocks and stresses. Social capital and social cohesion are more important in an era of uncertain threats, some being natural hazards such as extreme weather events, periods of high heat, and flooding, and others may include man-made crises. Social ties and social infrastructure will also help Singapore coordinate bottom-up and top-down responses to challenges and make the society better able to shift policies with active and enthusiastic support from citizens.

As landscapes change and populations evolve, concerted investment is needed to continue building social ties and to supplement long-term, physical infrastructure-focused city planning. The deliberate design of HDB public housing in Singapore has promoted the building of neighbour-to-neighbour ties through features such as void decks, common corridors and precinct amenities. As the current public health pandemic has shown, there is a need to rethink the provision of such spaces and how they can continue to function as places where people can come together, even during tough times.



Figure 7: A group of residents from Teck Ghee Parkview came together and volunteered to make hand sanitisers for residents of their neighbourhood during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: TODAY

While technology has been an enabler in bridging distances, the focus should not just be on our computer and phone screens, but with those around us. Beyond one's immediate neighbours, we should work to build neighbourhood-level connections. Do we know people who live a block or two away? How engaged are we with local civic, religious and social initiatives, whether picking up trash together or helping school children raise funds for trips? Programmes like NParks' Community in Bloom gardens, HDB's Build-A-Playground and PA's residents' events are important initiatives that help build solidarity at the block and neighbourhood level.

More broadly, we need to build cities and physical infrastructure that encourage the creation of social ties. On hot days, for example, we need shade and spots—whether indoors or outdoors—where

children, the elderly and residents can congregate to relax and chat. These areas help create third spaces where social ties form organically. Small pocket parks, playgrounds, and even small gestures like placing benches at drop-off points are the third spaces where face-to-face familiarity through daily routines are fostered and where spontaneous interaction may ignite.

Supported by CLC, resident champions of Cambridge Road have recently led and concluded a Live Sketching Virtual Workshop with the community. Residents shared invaluable information on where the community congregates, which are the most frequently used paths, and the history of the neighbourhood (see Figure 8). This provided tacit knowledge on the environmental enhancement works that will benefit and respond to the needs of the community for building social ties.

A strong sense of belonging and identity to everyday spaces could bridge local communities and make them feel part of a larger, overarching national effort.

Importantly, we can seek to deepen the connections between residents, decision makers and civil servants. Can we name our representatives? Do we know who to speak to if we have an idea for enhancing flood resilience in our block? By making time and spaces for regular meetings between residents and decision makers, we can enhance vertical ties. Singapore's Meet-The-People sessions provide a platform for regular, accessible face-to-face interaction between citizens and representatives, establishing an invaluable bridge between policymaking, implementation and actual ground-sensing.

Another programme that has often built connections and trust involves community currency, or time banking, where volunteers are rewarded by a local scrip, or “banked time”, that they can use later. If I spend an hour helping paint the walls of a local NGO, I can either convert that effort into currency for use at local mom-and-pop stores, restaurants and farmers' markets, or bank it to get an hour of assistance later (perhaps when writing a grant proposal). The Aldrich Resilience lab has found that all of these approaches—whether at the neighbour or neighbourhood level, whether time banking or physical infrastructure enhancement—can measurably increase trust and cohesion.

As seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, residents have come



Figure 8: Sketches of possible environmental enhancement features by residents of Cambridge Road during a virtual workshop. Source: CLC

forward to help the elderly with grocery runs, or volunteer for mask distribution. There is potential to encourage more volunteers to step forward through time-banking programmes and to pay it forward with kindness.

Alongside social ties, it is also valuable to reaffirm society's connection to place and familiarity to their neighbourhood amid Singapore's ongoing efforts to build our future city. A strong sense of belonging and identity



Figure 9: Community gardens provide spaces within neighbourhoods for like-minded residents to interact and get to know one another better. Source: CLC

to everyday spaces could bridge local communities and make them feel part of a larger, overarching national effort.

Hence, a multi-pronged strategy aimed at improving the urban environment while leveraging on social networks and ties to drive the project to completion could provide early opportunities for social resilience. For effective partnerships to flourish, considering

the ways social infrastructure and ties are fostered and sustained can go a long way to build trust between people and with government agencies. This will help support effective and efficient community engagement to strengthen social resilience.

Today, the Singapore Together initiative can do more for our social resilience by actively strengthening social ties among citizens and diverse stakeholders to be ready to bounce back in a

post COVID-19 world. This presents an opportunity to look forward and anticipate upcoming challenges and long-term stressors. Co-creating local solutions and policies that enhance our readiness and social ties places Singapore in a psychologically and socially better place to respond. Creating diverse and connected societies will provide Singapore and other societies around the world with tools for building resilience and success.

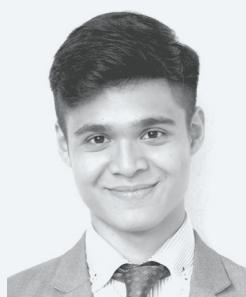
CLC Visiting Fellow



Prof Daniel P. Aldrich

Prof Aldrich is full professor of Political Science, Public Policy and Urban Affairs and Director of the Security and Resilience Studies Program at Northeastern University. He researches post-disaster recovery, countering violent extremism, the siting of controversial facilities and the interaction between civil society and the state. An award-winning author of five books and more than 60 peer-reviewed articles, he contributes to a variety of news outlets including The New York Times, The Atlantic, NPR, and MSNBC and speaks regularly to NGOs and governments around the world on the importance of social ties in crises.

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