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# Bridging social capital and the resource potential of second homes: The case of Stintino, Sardinia



Nick Gallent

UCL Bartlett School of Planning, Central House, 14 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0NN, UK

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## ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with social capital, and in particular the bridging social capital that the owners of second homes bring to rural communities. Using a study of second home owners in Stintino, northern Sardinia, it examines how seasonal residents use the resources of their extended social networks to shape and influence local agendas (around planning, housing, services etc.) and to assist community development. The paper builds on a framework for examining the social value of second homes (Gallent, 2014), which proposed that the distended socio-professional networks of some rural communities can be extended, by non-permanent residents, to embrace new resource potentials, and that second homes therefore have a clear social value for communities which would otherwise have a more limited store of social capital. That framework also cautioned, however, that non-permanent residents may use that capital in pursuit of interests that do not align with those of the host community, therefore causing conflict as newcomers/seasonal residents seek to shape their local environment according to their particular tastes and values, sometimes in opposition to local need. The research for this paper was undertaken in August 2013. It involved nine detailed interviews with second home owners in Stintino and a series of focus group discussions. Stintino is located on the Sardinian mainland opposite the Asinara archipelago. It is 50 km by road from the city of Sassari, which is principal home to many seasonal residents.

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## 1. Introduction

The purchasing of second homes in the countryside, or in coastal areas, is often viewed negatively. External demand for local housing – expressed by relatively wealthy non-local buyers – brings disruptions to the property market, causing a social transformation (as those on lower incomes are 'priced out') that may have a negative impact on schools and other local services. Second homes are generally viewed as a bad thing, even though investment in and the renovation of property (alongside new tax receipts) may bring new money to struggling rural or coastal economies. There has been great deal of interest in second home purchasing in recent years, amongst rural geographers (e.g. Halfacree, 2012), planners (e.g. Gallent and Tewdwr-Jones, 2001), sociologists (e.g. Blekesaune et al., 2010; Huijbens, 2012) and those working in the tourism field (e.g. Hall and Müller, 2004). In the UK, a long-running shortage of housing in rural areas (see Satsangi et al., 2010) is seen to be

compounded by a number of generally unwelcome demand pressures, of which second homes are just one. There have been periodic political campaigns against second home buying, locally and in the UK Parliament. Attempts have been made curb the number of existing homes that can be 'converted'; to second home use (Gallent et al., 2005); the wanton destruction of rural communities by urban investors, who show little empathy with the needs of those communities, has become a core part of the urban-rural discourse, especially in England and Wales.

However, there is a broader cultural perspective on second home purchase and use that does not adhere to this typically Anglophone narrative. In the Nordic countries, for example, second homes are viewed not only as important domiciles for vacation and recreation, but also part of a broader 'folklore' (Müller, 2007: 193) with many second homes being 'inherited and passed on through generations' (ibid, 194) making them more permanent than many first homes, which may be sold and exchanged more readily during an owners working life. There is a sense in many places of second homes being part of a cultural heritage (Lagerqvist, 2014). In some instances, they may even be viewed as 'social compensation for a

E-mail address: [n.gallent@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:n.gallent@ucl.ac.uk).

reduced full-time population' (Farstad, 2013: 330). In both the Nordic countries and in parts of southern Europe, second homes often exist within 'sub-regional markets' in which many second home owners acquire, often through inheritance, or retain property in nearby communities where they have strong family connections (Gallent et al., 2005: 129). Petersson (1999: 9) has suggested that second homes may either occupy a distant 'vacation space' (as they often do in England, with buyers acquiring investment property in far-away locations where they have no prior connection) or a daily/weekend 'leisure space' (close to the 'permanent' family home, often in locations with which they have some family link). A common feature of the latter scenario is that the economy in that 'leisure space' has changed (often restructuring away from primary industry to tourism); families may have moved away some decades ago to a new 'production' space, but have retained property and cultural ties. People have a closer relationship to a leisure space than a vacation space; they are closer to being part of the community, but because they have access to the resources of their working world (but an interest in the wellbeing of their leisure space), they may develop a key role in drawing extra-local resources into rural or coastal communities, by acting as 'bridges' and expanding the social capital of communities in a way that allows them to help tackle important social and economic challenges. In this paper, I investigate the extent to which second home owners introduce beneficial bridging social capital to the community of Stintino in northern Sardinia.

## 2. Social capital as framing concept

The detailed development of this framework is contained in Gallent (2014). It begins by using Agnitsch and colleagues' (2006: 36) basic definition of social capital as the 'resource potential of social relationships' before drawing a distinction between social capital produced through the direct 'bonding' of near-neighbours, which delivers trust, reciprocity and solidarity within a community (Putnam, 2000: 22) and that produced through 'bridging' across extra-local ties. Agnitsch et al. (2006) claim that how much a 'closed' community can achieve (in terms of shaping agendas or services, or delivering self-help) is limited by the extent of local skills and knowledge. Social capital is accumulated slowly and incrementally. On the other hand, big gains can come from connecting or 'bridging' to external resources and networks. Using Granovetter's theory of 'weak ties' (1973), Gallent's (2014) basic assertion is that second home owners, who perhaps bond only weakly with others in a host community (unless they have family connections therein), may occupy powerful positions in an extendable social network because of their wider professional connections. They have the potential to become 'bridges', acting as 'autonomous' social ties, able to contribute something distinctly different from the 'embedded' social capital that is accumulated through everyday bonding between permanent residents (Woolcock, 1998: 164). This distinction has been used in other areas of rural research to gauge the extent to which communities, or certain types of individual therein, are able to access external knowledge, ideas, skills and resources. Magnani and Struffi (2009), for example, have analysed the extent to which farmers in the *Val di Sole* (in the Italian province of Trento) benefit from their '[...] ties with institutions and organisations external to the farmers' professional world' (p. 233); with that immediate professional world comprising local community groups or farming associations that act as hubs for interaction between neighbours. That study suggested a predominance of bonding over bridging ties.

Yet other studies have hinted at a more important role for bridging ties in certain arenas of community life, highlighting a particular role for second home owners in breaking down the

isolation that some communities experience and in adding to the store of 'productive' social capital (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). Rye (2011: 265) for example, argues that:

The presence of 'urbanites' in [rural] communities, who invest not only money but also their identities, loyalties and spare time in the hosting region, offers important resources that may be activated by the local population. The urbanites often provide access to important social networks that extend outside the municipality, perform roles as advocates and ambassadors for the locality in their urban environments, and introduce new knowledge and practices in the rural community.

The arrival of 'urbanites' can be viewed as part of a 'reconfiguration process' that challenges the conventional 'decline narrative' often attached to rural communities (Amit, 2002; quoted in Carmo and Santos, 2014: 188) and sees them instead as dynamic and non-exclusive. Carmo and Santos (2014: 189) follow Putnam (2000) and others in arguing that although 'bonding is an essential condition for the creation and reproduction of social capital', the transformation processes that have taken root in contemporary societies have challenged static concepts of community and focused attention on a new 'dynamics in the production of social capital' (Carmo and Santos, 2014: 189). They note that spatial mobility, along with the 'intensification of connections with more urban areas', mean that rural communities have become places in which the close trust and interpersonal knowledge produced through bonding 'coexists with other forms of relationship' generated by the social transformation of rural communities. Their hypothesis, therefore, is that bonding and other variant forms of social capital produce an altogether different type of community: one characterised by diverse levels of trust and the co-existence of 'new groups and different social categories' (ibid, 190). Their research, in two Portuguese municipalities in the Algarve region, highlights how different levels of mobility and connectivity – displayed by different sections of communities (notably older residents versus younger or intermediate age groups) – may generate 'privileged knowledge networks' in which the young become more easily embedded. These knowledge networks produce communities with more diversified forms of social capital. However, this analysis is mainly concerned with the degree of closure produced by geographical isolation rather than the productive value of diversified social capital. There is no focus on urbanites, or non-locals, as explicit bridges to external resources in the sense introduced by Rye (2011).

This perceived 'bridging' role for non-locals has seldom been studied directly, but some indications of how bridges are built, and benefits delivered, are provided by Huijbens (2012) and by Gallent and Robinson (2012). Huijbens' study of second home areas in North Iceland identified the presence of a 'creative' class with an 'urge to use their knowledge and skills to the benefit of their [adopted] 'home town'' (Huijbens, 2012: 15). They did so in order to 'prove their worth' and develop a sense of 'belonging'. In Gallent and Robinson's (2012) study of villages around Ashford in southern England, local opposition to a proposed housing development was strengthened by the presence of 'prize winning architects' (ibid. 92) in the area – who commuted to their practices in London – and by the retired editors of broad-sheet newspapers. With these extra-local resources at their disposal, the 'community council was able to embark on a successful technical and PR campaign against the development proposal, which was eventually withdrawn' (Gallent, 2014: 12).

The non-local households in Gallent and Robinson's study were not second home owners. Rather, they comprised commuters and retired professionals. In the example of 'strengthened' local opposition cited, it just so happened that the conservative and

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