



Social Network Analysis

Description

Social Network Analysis, by drawing on sociology, mathematics and computer studies, allows the social structures and interrelationships to be presented and understood virtually. In developing these visual network maps, the focus of the analysis is the relations between individuals or groups rather than on the characteristics of the individuals or groups themselves. Social reality is seen in terms of networks of social relationships in a wider social context. The analysis can be used to explain the outcomes of patterns of social interactions or to make generalisations about the features of personal or organisational networks that are a feature of communities. These networks provide the basis for the exchange of information, experience and support. Social Network Analysis is aligned to the concept of social capital, which can be measured in part by the level of connectedness in a community.

How and when the tool is used

SNA can be used by those planning consultation processes, visioning exercises and other public participation processes. It helps them understand the dynamics of the communities or groups they plan to engage with. Social Network Analysis is used to understand how community networks function, interact and engage people in community life. The tool is used to produce visual models of the types of networks that exist, and the types of information and support that is exchanged within and between the groups in the network. Understanding the networks helps key agencies (for instance, community leaders) engage with community members to both increase community capacity to respond to change and initiate collective action to address social issues. Agencies might engage with communities by participating in community events or collective action.

Because social groupings and relationships are dynamic, any understanding of them needs to be constantly monitored and updated. Any changes also need to be understood within the changing political context. Such monitoring and evaluation can feed into an evolving process of improving the SNA.

Application

Social Network Analysis, as the title implies, is used to understand social groupings. These may be at sub-community level (for instance, amongst interest groups or stakeholders); community, regional and national levels.

Aligned concepts such as organisational network analysis have been used by management consultants working with the business community. Applications of social network analysis have included research into labour market participation capacity, improving leadership in sports teams, discovering the network of innovators in a regional economy, understanding markets for product distribution, and revealing key players in a news story.

Our evaluation

Social network analysis could be a useful tool for encouraging collaborative tourism development at a community level, for instance through identifying and enhancing community leadership.