Social Capital and Participatory Action Research: How to Build Cooperation?

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The focus of the research.

Theoretical background: social capital (SC) and participatory action research (PAR).

Case study: the formation and erosion of social capital in Borsodi Mezőség (Hungary).

Analysis: social capital as a prerequisite for cooperation.

Discussion: PAR as a tool for building social capital.
Research Focus

- Cooperatives in Hungary.
- Social capital and cooperation.

Research questions:
- How was SC formed in the research area?
- How do existing forms and types of SC influence agricultural cooperation?
- How is it possible to encourage cooperation through improving SC?

Methodology:
- Micro-level qualitative research – case study based on data from an ongoing PAR process.
Theoretical Background 1.

- **Social capital:**
  - Structural and cultural features (Van Deth, 2003).
  - Bonding, bridging and linking SC (Woolcock, 2001).
  - Negative SC and social traps (Svendsen, 2006).

- **Participatory action research:**
  - Knowledge production and empowerment (Reason, 1994).
  - Research is a process of mutual learning as well as co-construction (Greenwood&Levin, 1998).
  - Communicative space for democratic change (Reason, 2007).
Theoretical Background 2.

PAR in social capital research:

• PAR itself can contribute to the improvement of SC (Schafft & Brown, 2003; Gustavsen, 2003).
• PAR provides direct data on different manifestations of SC.
• PAR is able to grasp SC as a collective phenomenon from a community perspective instead of aggregating individual data.
• PAR approaches the various aspects of SC from the local context.
• PAR is able to handle asymmetric power relations.
Social Capital in Borsodi Mezőség
Social Capital in Borsodi Mezőség

A Historical Perspective:

• Before WW1: rich agricultural area, credit banks, agricultural cooperatives.
• WW1: huge losses but quick recovering thanks to Jewish merchants.
• After WW2: short democratization period.
• Socialist regime: heavy agricultural collectivisation, newly established regional centre.
• After 1990: social and economic depression, conflicts around restitution, minority problems, unemployment.

After the 1940s the rich bonding and bridging SC of the area was transformed into strong informal face-to-face relations, which has served as negative SC.
Recent Attempts for Cooperation

- **Cötkény Alliance for Regional Development:**
  - Borsodi Mezőség ESA.
  - Farmer’s Association.
  - “The manager is an energetic person but he says the same things too many times. This is quibbling.”

- **Purchasing and Marketing Cooperative:**
  - Aiming at marketing collectively the arable crops produced by the members.
  - Continuous failures caused by management and organization problems together with social and cultural constraints.
  - “Common horse has scars on his back.”
Experiences with PAR

Phases of the PAR process:
- Appreciative enquiry interviewing, structured interviewing, agricultural survey.
- Decision-aid report compiled by students.
- Community fora.

Working together:
- Facilitated group work to elaborate future directions of the cooperative.
- Few participants, groups of 2-3.
- Outcome: detailed outline, responsible person, project proposal for funding.

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Is There Really a Lack of SC?

- „We need strict formal rules in the cooperative to avoid abuse and injustice.”
- „The government wants to brush aside small farmers…”
- „Smallest farmers have no supporter.”
- „Everybody is a dog in the manger.”
- „Everybody works for himself.”

There are groups of 3-6 farmers sharing work, changing machines or even pieces of land.
Is There Really a Lack of SC?

- Social trap: strong bonding SC and weak bridging capital as limiting factors for cooperation.
- Need for exogenous "intervention": mainly outsiders recognize this social trap and invest in building bridging/linking capital.
- PAR process: one possible way for generating collective investment into local SC.
- Results: recently some local initiatives are being formed.
Questions to Be Discussed

- In order to avoid the dominance of existing power asymmetry the research team generated new power relations.
- How is it possible to reach and involve the poorest, marginal groups?
- To what extent is it ethical to intervene in local social processes?
- How long should the research team stay in the area and support the first steps of the initiative?