

Mechanisms of creating social capital – analysis on the basis of Polish empirical examples

The main research objective is to analyse microeconomic mechanisms of social capital formation. The study will cover different factors determining joining social networks and activity in them, inclination to trust others, reciprocity, and creation of collaborative attitudes. There is a focus on explaining how participation in social networks (including both active membership in organisations and taking part in more informal social networks) transfers into trust, norms of reciprocity and collaborative attitudes.

Researchers of social capital, in order to explain its origins, often rely on the presumption, that participation in voluntary associations has positive external effects. They assume that by acting in organizations, people learn to cooperate and communicate, not only within one group, but in general. However this rule is not generally applicable, because there are numerous empirical studies questioning it. If we are interested in social capital at the level of the whole community or country, and at the same time, we assume that it arises as a result of bottom-up interactions, we must try to understand the conditions under which investment in social capital at the micro level translates into its aggregation.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are going to be used. There will be performed an analysis of data from Social Diagnosis, in order to investigate determinants of general trust and collaborative attitudes. Particular attention will be paid to participation in organisations and informal networks. However, in order to investigate the grassroots mechanisms associated with the formation of social capital, the analysis of secondary data is not sufficient. For this reason, it will be complemented by an in-depth case study of Polish and non-commercial, local exchange system and trading (LETS), based on social currency. As shown in the international literature, the creation of such a system may have beneficial socio-economic effects and contribute to building social capital in the local community. LETS allows, through the use of the internet platform, to extend the traditional neighbourly help to a wider group of people, and also contributes to the formation of social ties, especially if transactions include direct interpersonal interactions, and if they are accompanied by additional events strengthening the existence of the community. This system allows users to access social resources existing in the neighbourhood and enables the development of entrepreneurship, and the use of own abilities and following own interests.

This study will examine socio-economic mechanisms operating in the system and its impact on social capital. The main focus is to determine how interpersonal interactions within LETS may influence social norms and attitudes. It will utilise data obtained from the web-based platform, supporting the transactions and enabling to give recommendations. This data will be supplemented by information acquired from in-depth interviews and on-line survey.

Researchers of social capital agree that it constitutes an important factor for economic development. Its insufficient level may hinder further development and some scholars claim that this may be a case of Poland. The question is if it is a long-term barrier, embedded in cultural background and practically irremovable, or if we can hope to supplement the amount of social capital by some way of creating it. It is in nature of social capital that it originates from grassroots movements, however little is known about mechanisms causing this formation. Learning and understanding those mechanisms is crucial if we want to consider a possibility to stimulate or even create social capital, by developing proper institutions, including providing proper incentives within programs directly aiming to build social capital.