

# Participative environmental management and social capital in Poland

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**Abstract.** Eastern European countries, such as Poland, often illustrate social capital studies. Upon entering the European Union, social capital in Poland was seen as a problem in implementing new regulations, particularly in the field of environmental policy. Equally important, environmental issues often present a high degree of complexity – and European legislation requires multi-stakeholder involvement in decision-making processes. Thus, the dilemma: on the one hand, there is a demand to engage and consult many actors; on the other hand, the actors function in administrative culture with a ubiquitous top-down approach taken by institutional decision makers.

This paper attempts to address the problem from the perspective of social capital theory. An overview of administrative culture and examples of decision-making processes shows the way decisions are currently made. We also propose a way to achieve more participative environmental management.

## 1 Introduction

The number of European Union Member States has nearly doubled in recent years: ten countries joined the EU in 2004, followed by another two in 2007. The majority of these countries were former communist-ruled “People’s Republics”, and the EU expansion eventually ended the division of Europe decided in 1945 at the Yalta Conference. All of the new Member States took time to prepare for the accession beforehand, e.g. by implementing EU-compliant legislation. Still, it seems that changes in the so-called “countries in transition” have been unexpectedly slow. Relatively scarce sources on the subject, for instance Paldam and Svendsen (2002), mention that since the amount of human and physical capital available is sufficient for much faster economic growth, the lack of social capital must explain the slow rate of change. Without contending that this is necessarily true, it may serve as an inspiration and an avenue for further research to have a deeper look at social capital in Poland, and its links to environmental conservation. In the next section, we discuss the concept of social capital and the potential role

it plays in environmental management. The current situation in Poland and the way it affects the environmental conservation sector is also discussed. We conclude with solutions tailored to the Polish conditions, and designed to increase bottom-up initiatives.

## 2 Social capital and the Polish case

Traditionally, social capital is defined and operationalised as the level of trust among people, and the density of informal networks (Coleman, 1988; Putnam et al., 1993). In this section we have a deeper look at social capital with the “trust and networks” approach in mind. This definition is often regarded as too vague (Arrow, 2000), and indeed it is if, for a start, we do not distinguish between private and collective social capital (de Groot and Tadepally, 2008). Private social capital, a concept grounded in the work of Bourdieu (1986), is “owned” by individual actors and may be equated to benefits that individuals receive by virtue of being a member of a network of (trusted) others (Portes, 1998). Collective social capital, according to Putnam (2000) and Putnam et al. (1993), is a system-level characteristic of a group, and is commonly defined as a level of trust in the group as a whole and the strength of social bonds (networks) within the group.



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This definition, however, implies a precise operationalisation of “trust”, an issue we address in the next section (Beugelsdijk and Van Schaik, 2005).

Social capital (still understood here as “networks of trusted others”) may be put to use in a way that is deemed negative for society. Private social capital, for instance, may be geared towards corruption and nepotism, and collective social capital may be employed to initiate a war. These, and similar examples, have given rise to the unfortunate term “negative social capital” (Paldam and Svendsen, 2002; Wacquant, 1998), as if the social capital itself is, in the above cases, somehow negative (i.e. a debt). But most often, social capital is seen as something benign. From the communitarian perspective, collective social capital is the quintessence of a society, and according to many mainstream authors (Woolcock, 1998; World Bank, 1998) is one of the keys to development. Socio-economic development relies, among other things, on collective action, and if people lack pre-existing trust and networks, any initiative to undertake collective action requires an enormous amount of effort in terms of time and energy (i.e. the “transaction cost”), often to a degree that any collective action becomes effectively impossible.

Studies on the subject highlight the low level of collective social capital in totalitarian regimes and centrally planned economies. The dictatorship theory of “missing social capital” (Paldam and Svendsen, 2002) points out two phenomena. The first one is that authoritarian regimes actively destroy social capital, such as voluntary associations, in order to pre-empt any popular uprising. As suggested by Putnam et al. (1993), there is a correlation between the level of social capital and the length of a period of dictatorship, viz. the differences between present-day southern Italy, which formed the authoritarian Kingdom of Sicily for seven centuries, and northern Italy, which has a long tradition of independent city states. The second element of the theory relates specifically to communist, centrally planned economies. In these regimes, total rationality is believed to reside in the state, controlled by the (single) Party that represents the people. Such an image of the state not only makes any feedback from the population unnecessary, but also justifies fine-grained, secret control of citizens, an approach that subsequently turns trust into an utterly scarce good, especially if being denounced by a fellow citizen means a (sometimes shortened) lifetime of trouble. Such conditions, combined with the economic scarcity that used to prevail in communist economies, led people to rely on solely private social capital that would allow them to work around the state structures, e.g. through corruption and favouritism (Rose, 2000). Another noteworthy feature of communist regimes, which seems to be directed at undermining both trust in authorities and active involvement in voluntary initiatives, is the attitude of the state (Party) towards voluntary, unpaid work. The idea exported, also to Poland, from the Soviet Union was grounded in the work of fathers of communism (Lenin, 1920; Kaplan, 1968), and required citizens to regularly join in un-

paid work for the benefit of a community. It was traditionally conducted during weekends, thus the name “subbotnik” (“subbota” means Saturday in Russian). In Poland, shortly after 1945, such actions meant rebuilding the country from war damage and were, at the beginning, embraced with true enthusiasm and participatory spirit. Unfortunately, already in the late 1940s, they were turned into state-organised propaganda actions with extensive media coverage. They were perceived, despite the name, as something obligatory, intrusive and utterly worthless (see Wszelaki, 1951, for an overview of central planning and labour in communist Poland).

What happens if such societies enter into a transitional period? Does the way of getting things done change? Is “negative social capital” replaced with trust and a cooperative spirit? Paldam and Svendsen (2002) argue that this is not the case: Old mechanisms are self-perpetuating, as the case of Italy shows (Bagnasco, 1977; Carrieri, 2008; Propato, 2010). Distrust between citizens and institutions has become widespread. Private dealings involving corruption and political patronage, which have a long history of proven efficacy, remain some of the most adaptive behaviours, blocking the way towards collective actions (and thereby retain their efficacy). Contemporary Poland seems to be a case in point of this pessimistic vision. A study by Chloupkova et al. (2003) reveals significant differences in the level of collective social capital between Poland and Denmark, measured by (1) a density of voluntary associations; (2) an assessment of trust in others, (3) an assessment of trust in formal institutions (legal system, police, administration and government), and (4) civic participation (e.g. in elections). The results show that in Denmark, a citizen is a member of twelve times more voluntary organisations on average, trusts other countrymen three and a half times more, trusts institutions up to ten times more, and participates in twice as many civic actions, comparing to Poland. According to historical data, the level of collective social capital (measured as membership in voluntary associations) was roughly similar in both countries before 1945.

### 3 Social capital: a cat in the sack?

So far we have focused on the most common approach to social capital, presented in the work of Putnam et al. (1993), Portes (1998) and World Bank studies (World Bank, 1998), and assumed that the lack of collective social capital explains the phenomenon of slow economic changes in post-totalitarian countries. However, there are many sources showing that social capital as a concept is too vague, difficult to measure in empirical research, and above all, unnecessarily simplifies the complex phenomena it tries to embrace. Many authors contest the notion, and focus on isolating the concepts social capital comprises (Shafft and Brown, 2003; Fulkerson and Thompson, 2008). In this section we try to have a closer look at its applicability in explaining socio-economic differences.

The main problem seems to be the lack of consensus on how to measure social capital, which casts doubt upon the usefulness of the concept. The number of definitions of collective social capital results in a similar number of its operationalisations in empirical research. Can social capital be generalised, when different authors seem to employ different social capitals? Social capital can be measured by determining the level of “trust and networks”, a feature of its mainstream definition. People are questioned, for example, on the degree to which they trust each other combined with applying the so-called Putnam’s Instrument to ascertain their involvement in (or density of) voluntary organisations. Yet, as we have already shown in the previous section, Chloupkova et al. (2003) employed additional variables in their study. Similarly, a recent and probably one of the most extensive studies (Beugelsdijk and Van Schaik, 2005), examining social capital (defined by “trust and networks”) in 54 European regions failed to provide a clear relationship between social capital and economic growth. The authors show that an additional variable, active involvement in voluntary networks, is a much better predictor of economic growth than two proxies of social capital – trust in others and network membership. Moreover, a map of social capital in 54 regions does not provide any visible demarcation line between the North and the South of Italy (Beugelsdijk and Van Schaik, 2005), as suggested by Putnam et al. (1993), although the lowest levels of both trust and network involvement were indeed measured in Southern Italy (Sardegna). Italian sources showing economic and social differences between the North and the South, for instance in health care (Carrieri, 2008) and educational services (Propato, 2010), indeed exist, but in these two examples do not employ social capital as an explaining factor.

Glaeser et al. (2000) address another important issue in social capital research: measuring “trust”. They argue that the survey questions borrowed from the (American) General Social Survey, which are routinely used to measure trust in social capital studies, are too abstract. It is actually hard to determine whether such questions attempt to measure trust in others, trustworthiness of others, or respondents’ own trusting behaviour. For measuring trust, the authors propose experiments with monetary rewards. Their results show that standard survey questions used in social capital studies do not measure trust, but trustworthiness. Moreover, trusting behaviour is best predicted by past trusting behaviour, reported in the experiment (Glaeser et al., 2000). The authors conclude that “social capital is a meaningful, individual-level variable that can be studied with the tools of price theory. Our evidence supports the view that human capital includes (...) also social capital, e.g., interpersonal skills, status, and access to social networks” (Glaeser et al., 2000, p. 841), providing yet another definition of social capital.

Can social capital be used directly as an explanatory variable? Ending that debate is beyond the scope of our paper. Yet, taking into account the number of different approaches to the concept, it seems that focusing solely on conditions of

successful environmental management, and not necessarily on social capital, can provide us with a better answer to our main problem – the slow rate of change in Polish community-based management of natural resources. All in all, as Ballet et al. (2007) and Shafft and Brown (2003) point out, “social capital” should be treated more as an umbrella term for relations of power, influence and cultural variations, and not as a universal cure for every community-based action.

#### 4 Social capital and environmental management

Sustainable use and management of natural resources, be it surface water, arable land, or natural areas, have been on political agenda for many years. Moreover, one of the priorities in environmental management is to take local communities and resources on board. Western et al. (1994) provide an accurate definition of “community-based conservation”: “Community-based conservation reverses top-down, center-driven conservation by focusing on the people who bear the costs of conservation. (...) community-based conservation includes natural resources or biodiversity protection by, for, and with the local community.” (p. 7). As bottom-up initiatives become more popular, and public participation has already earned worldwide recognition, we traced examples of social capital approach in successful environmental management stories, only to find contradicting results. The fact that natural resources (or natural capital) are often common goods (Ostrom, 1990), which can be utilised by a number of group members at the same time, is key. Natural capital might also be difficult to assess in monetary values, attracting free-riders and overuse (Pretty and Ward, 2001). Investing in community-based actions under such circumstances can prove either a miraculous cure or the final nail in the coffin.

Pretty and Ward (2001) provide examples of turning natural resource management on the local community level into a success story. They distinguish four components of social capital in their approach: (1) relations of trust, as in Putnam et al.’s (1993) definition, (2) reciprocity which stands for mutual or continuous exchange of goods and services between people, creating obligations within a group, (3) rules, norms, and sanctions which regulate group activities, and ensure that punishment follows breaking of the rules, and (4) connectedness, networks and groups. The last component seems to be really important for natural resource management (Pretty and Ward, 2001), as it defines relations of local groups with the outside world: other communities, governmental and non-governmental agencies, and alike. Many authors argue that investing in local resources does pay, and there are examples of successful stories in different areas (watershed, agricultural land and irrigation, pest control) on a community level (Pretty and Hine, 2000; Malla, 1997; Pretty and Ward, 2001).

At the same time, even the most optimistic authors agree that many conditions have to be fulfilled to make community-based management work. Pretty and Ward (2001) for

instance, stress that rules and obligations within a group, which are, according to them, part of that group's social capital, can lead to unfavourable arrangements. While, on the one hand, strong local organisations may work to secure sustainable use of natural resources, on the other hand, the same organisations are also able to act very efficiently against sustainability, using the same trust, rules and reciprocity as leverage. According to Ballet et al. (2007), cultural differences play the most important role in using social capital in natural capital management. There are many examples where, in certain cultural conditions, the four factors outlined by Pretty and Ward (2001) undermined local initiatives, rather than geared them up. For instance, in some communities gift-giving activities (reciprocity) led to the establishment of patron-client relations, which turned out to intensify unsustainable behaviours in managing water resources and fisheries (Danieri and Takahashi, 1999; Ballet et al., 2007).

Most studies outlined in previous paragraphs to illustrate the positive and the negative role, or the very existence of collective social capital, have been conducted outside of Europe. We wonder whether the studies from Asia or America would also shed light on conditions in Poland. Danchev (2005) provides at least a partial answer, describing the situation in Bulgaria, which is also a former communist-ruled country. He identified two components of social capital: confidence (i.e. trust) and integration, defining the latter as the way fundamental goals are embedded and realised by the society as a whole (justified by the legal system, valued by individuals and institutions alike). Danchev (2005) found that, while private social capital and trust on micro scale was present and sound in Bulgarian society, at the same time there was a missing link between the local groups and those who govern them. Unfortunately, Danchev (2005) does not provide any insights into connections between social capital and environmental management.

## 5 Participation and environmental management in Poland

To sum up many definitions of social capital presented in previous sections trust, or, as Glaeser et al. (2000) rightly point out, trustworthiness seems to be among the most important factors. Relations of trust between the government and the public have a strong influence on the efficacy of policy making and policy implementation. If the government is not trustworthy, people will tend to refuse to participate in policy making (if any invitation would be forthcoming), and rather resort to passive resistance, radical activism, or working behind the scenes. In addition, if the authorities do not take into account the intentions or knowledge of the public, why would they ever encourage any form of public involvement? Here we can observe the so-called vicious circle at work (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000). According to Pretty and Ward's (2001) account, a vicious circle is trig-

gered when local-external connections are broken two-way; meaning that the vertical links between locals and external agencies cease to exist, do not work as intended, or have never been fully formed. In the following section, we try to determine whether such a situation is currently present in Poland. We illustrate our findings with examples of both local and nation-wide processes.

Public participation in environmental decision making is a widely recognised standard nowadays, although the participative approach is also criticised, and quite rightfully, for being "enforced" upon local communities without actually empowering them (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). But the tenth principle of the Rio Declaration grants participation in environmental issues "*of all concerned citizens at the relevant level*" (p. 2). With the ratification of the Århus Convention, one of the state-of-the-art documents regarding access to information and participation in environmental matters, participatory principles became implemented in the European Community legislation. The Water Framework Directive (2000/60/EC) is a notable example. Concerned citizens or stakeholders are defined as all interested and/or affected parties. Stakeholder involvement "at the relevant level", however, can be interpreted in many different ways. Moreover, public participation (to its full extent of empowering local community) is, in our opinion, a good proxy of trusting behaviour and trustworthiness combined with active involvement in voluntary actions, since it requires: (1) voluntary and unpaid work on the side of community members; (2) belief that any involvement and efforts are worthwhile and meaningful for the other side of the participative process; (3) transparency and feedback, especially on the external agent's side. It can be also measured in several ways, for example through the number of comments received, people and organisations actively involved, and feedback exchanged.

Poland incorporated the most up-to-date EC legislation into national regulations well in advance of the EU accession. Participation "at the relevant level" is therefore required by law. We collected several examples of this principle on both a national and a local level. For instance, a study of the implementation of the EU Water Framework Directive (WFD) in Poland and Romania (Hunka and Palarie, 2008) showed that water management institutions did put participation into practice, but at the same time interpreted the notion in the narrowest possible sense of a one-way information flow. Invitations to participate, even in this sense, usually stop just after one round of formal consultations. Interviews conducted with representatives of water management bodies (Hunka and Palarie, 2008) can illustrate the case:

*"There must be participation of the public, according to the law, and it must be also proven. I think there are no investors who don't know (...) that they must reserve 3 or 4 weeks for public consultations. It would be suicidal, if they didn't do that."* (p. 18)

The only role left for the concerned locals after consultations is the role of a protester, and that is how they are

perceived by the authorities a priori. Respondents complained, for instance, that:

*[These] "calls from citizens, that the river stinks, that they observe dead fish floating, etc. (...) The majority of these do not stem from any care for the environment, but from a desire to sting neighbours, so, (...) next door squabbles are being transferred to the institutional levels."*

(Hunka and Palarie, 2008, p. 18)

*"It is common that the local community leaders who should solve local problems do not work as they should, so the cases are delegated to us. The competence is in locals but they want us to react; if you go to the site (...) what you see is a bunch of huffy people on either side of a fence. It is a confusion of competences or rather indolence and negligence."*

(Hunka and Palarie, 2008, p. 18)

Whether these allegations are true or not, they do not show much of an involvement or interest on the side of the public. If they are true, they imply that the people lack functioning conflict resolution structures. If they are untrue, they illustrate how authorities can construct reasons to avoid handing the decisive power to locals. At the same time, the lack of participation cannot be attributed to the lack of interest in environmental issues, since the Poles are not less environmentally concerned than their Western neighbours (Hunka et al., 2009).

Again, Legutko-Kobus (2007) in her study of Local Agenda 21 in 106 Polish districts discussed the model of participation in Poland. The majority (96 out of 106) of the districts implemented some sort of participation for development of their LA 21 strategies. In all cases participation was carried out by means of surveys and meetings with the public and local leaders. Interested parties were encouraged to give their feedback, and share their opinions in all 96 cases. Nevertheless, the study showed that local authorities expected one-way information flow only, as no feedback had ever been given to those interested in the LA 21 development and its final results, in any case. A similar strategy was employed for a regional development strategy for the Lubelski Province. After an exemplary execution of the round-table meetings with the majority of the key and minor parties, local authorities withdrew from any further information exchange (Legutko-Kobus, 2007). The same author also observed the development of different management plans (e.g. a local strategy for waste management) where participation of interested parties is required as well. It turned out that in most cases government officials consulted only their co-workers and aldermen in order to fulfil the formal requirement.

A nation-wide case in point, widely discussed in Poland, is the history of the Augustów town bypass. As early as 1995, plans were made to create the bypass cutting in half the Rospuda River valley. The valley was also a planned nature reserve and a NATURA 2000 site to be – a place of very high ecological value. For years to come, the plans had met with heated opposition from a number of NGOs and

some environmentally concerned public, and later resulted in a negative reaction from the EU authorities (Adamowski, 1999; Szymczuk, 2007). After a number of petitions submitted by the Polish NGOs and other concerned parties, the European Commission started legal proceedings against Poland at the Court of Justice of the European Communities in March 2007. The legal actions triggered not only an attempt at conflict resolution, but also a high rising participatory spirit, which resulted in series of round-table meetings involving government officials from the Ministries of Environment and Infrastructure, NGO representatives, concerned citizens, and independent experts, at the beginning of 2008. Together, everybody agreed on three alternative scenarios for the motorway and the bypass, and decided that construction works should await the decision of the European court. A new open tender for an environmental impact assessment of the investment was officially announced in May 2008. In July 2008, however, construction works at the Rospuda Valley were started (with the local officials' consent), according to the first plans from 1995.<sup>1</sup>

The case of the Augustów bypass illustrates both the strength and the weakness of theories which emphasise the lack of social capital in post-communist countries. The fact that appeals were made directly to the EU indeed shows a deep distrust of the Poles in their own government, and the fact that only the EU court could move the government to action support the findings of Danchev (2005) or Pretty and Ward (2001) too. Moreover, the shocking final result shows that mechanisms described by the theory of Paldam and Svendsen (2002) were at work. Yet, it must be concluded that this theory can be refuted at the same time, since after the government's response, the whole society enthusiastically joined in the participatory process, not only at the planning table but also in the streets, gathering to express their support or to protest, signing petitions and wearing a green ribbon of solidarity with the NGOs. People decided to invest in their society and their government. In the end, they might feel cheated. Will they invest again?

## 6 Conclusions: Out of the vicious circle?

Many authors have drafted lists of conditions for successful public participation (Arnstein, 1969; Webler et al., 2001). Factors receiving much attention in the literature, besides the basic conditions we have already mentioned, are: legitimacy, which implies a focus on evidence and transparency; fairness and equality; equal distribution of power, and a willingness to work towards a consensus, even among old adversaries. For Poland, the missing parts are not only strong relations between the public authorities and the local communities (Pretty and Ward, 2001), but also the lack of interest

<sup>1</sup>Gazeta Wyborcza 12.07.2008, Raport: Drogowcy idą chyłkiem do Rospudy, [http://wyborcza.pl/1,79163,5449150,Drogowcy\\_ida\\_chykiem\\_do\\_Rospudy.html](http://wyborcza.pl/1,79163,5449150,Drogowcy_ida_chykiem_do_Rospudy.html)

in active, voluntary involvement on the side of citizens. Important factors for the public authorities are legitimacy, and a readiness to shed and share their power with the public. The same principles appear to be vital for the other side. A sense of ownership, and responsibility combined with a willingness to become involved in local actions, and to help build local-external connections (Pretty and Ward, 2001) from the public side.

Woolcock and Narayan (2000) and other authors project the non-fulfilment of the above mentioned basic conditions as a vicious circle. A low level of trust and weak connections generate a low level of participation, which then acts to further undermine already existing group connections.

de Groot and Tadepally (2008) in a sense echo this basic idea, but they end their study with a prescription to avoid the vicious circle. Their conclusion is that if a development agency approaches communities with a proposal for some kind of a collective action (e.g. an irrigation system restoration, a community forest protection), only those communities should be selected that have enough networks and willingness to work together to be successful in the proposed action. Communities with no or broken local-external connections can be supported by actions geared towards the development of these basic networks first of all. One of the ways to build such an active involvement is to invite the community into any collective action that they are able to carry out irrespective of the action's character (cleaning the school yard? revive the savings fund?). Success enables people to see other actors as trustworthy, and provides a tangible evidence that collective actions actually work.

A tendency to adopt and implement not only legislation, but also Western European ready-made solutions for participation seems tempting, but it might be better to avoid copying others: in case an initiative fails, it might destroy the little trust accumulated, if people start searching for those to blame. Still, small scale actions and grassroots initiatives within a community encouraged by the local government officials are the steps to rebuild the connections between the authorities and the public. NGOs, which are more trusted than the government, can act as a necessary bridge between both parties. "Green", non-governmental organisations have a long and established tradition in Poland, and they are generally perceived as trustworthy, yet, as the case of the Rospuda Valley illustrates, their role is too often limited to watchdog activities. A method illustrated by Olson and Folke (2001), of employing local expertise and ecological knowledge seems promising as well. It would have to be tailored to the conditions in Poland, for instance, by giving the local NGOs a role of a middleman. Employing independent experts can also help in making the decision-making process more transparent. External mediators, if they are able to communicate with the local stakeholders and at the same time avoid being perceived as taking sides, can facilitate the dialogue between the governing and the governed. Open access to environmental information, which is

for many years now a common standard in Poland seems also promising, providing necessary transparency of state environmental monitoring agencies.

It is also important to highlight and multiply any success in participatory action with good media coverage. In a way, the Augustów bypass is a case in point. Since every concerned party participated, many networks of actors may have been built and reinforced, despite the uncertain ending which destroyed much of the initial positive effect. Targeted actions can be also boosted by structural measures that would tilt the playing field of participation in the right general direction. Involvement of authorities in combatting corruption is yet another way to rebuild trust between the public and the government. The EC regulations can also normalise and facilitate communication between all parties, even if by enforcement at first. Jointly, different targeted actions and structural policies will, in our opinion, slowly but deeply change the participation scene in Poland and other Eastern European countries.

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