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Measuring Capability of Rural Communities: Conceptual and Empirical Challenges

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Abstract – The paper is based on the results of the PhD research focusing on capability of rural communities. A theoretical model of capability analysis was developed and empirically tested in three rural municipalities in Latvia. One of the research questions focused on practical limitations and advantages of the model. It was approved that: (1) the model is useful to characterise dynamics of community capability, therefore it is appropriate for the longitudinal studies; (2) if the model is used for the purpose to compare different communities, the uniqueness of each community should be respected as well as the fact that the model is rather descriptive. Lack of respective quantitative data at municipal or community level sets limitations for capability analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The paper is based on the results of the PhD thesis which aimed to develop a theoretical model for the analysis of the community capability and to characterise capability of communities as well as their involvement in rural development in Latvia by using the theory of communities of practice and the case study methodology. In this study, the capability of a community is defined as interaction between the community's human capital, organizational resources and social capital which becomes apparent as the community's ability and capacity to recognize opportunities, mobilize its resources and skills, and to act purposefully according to the targets set by the community in order to carry out activities promoting and maintaining well-being of the community and its organizational elements (individuals, groups, organizations). A theoretical model of analysis was developed and empirically tested in three rural municipalities in Latvia. The model is based on theoretical considerations about communities as significant social agents in rural development in relation to their social, cultural, economic, environmental and political capability. It employs the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 2003) in order to explain how rural communities perform in terms of their capability. During the case

study the author analysed how formal and informal community sub-structures (non-governmental organizations, initiative groups) perform as communities of practice (CoP).

One of the research questions focused on practical limitations and advantages of the theoretical model.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The case study research methodology was chosen for the research (Yin, 2003). Three municipalities (Riebiņi municipality, Strenči municipality, and Rundāle municipality) having both similar and specific characteristics were selected as three cases for the research representing different regions of the country. Within these cases other smaller cases - communities of practice (formal and informal community initiatives) were selected for the investigation. To ensure data validity and reliability, the author used a triangulation (Denzin, 1978). The author used document analysis, semi-structured interviews, expert interviews, direct and participatory observations, available statistics characterising aspects of community capability. The author used available statistics, research and report materials, the development strategies of the municipalities and other official sources. The advantage of the case study is that a phenomenon can be investigated deeply as a united and integrated entity. This approach is appropriate for developing new theories (Gagnon, 2010) therefore it is relevant to reach the aim of the thesis – to develop the theoretical model for the analysis of community capability and its approbation in particular communities. Alongside the case study research, the author conducted two expert interviews with experts who have significant experience in community work in Latvia. The author conducted also observations using the *windshield survey* method, which is widely accepted in the community studies.

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RESEARCH RESULTS

Several limitations and advantages of the model were identified during the fieldwork and the data analysis. When the model was intended to employ, the issue was raised about where the community boundaries should be set. Is it correctly to focus on the entire municipality instead of analysing smaller units such as villages, towns or *pagasts* (territorial units of rural municipalities)? The research approved initial concerns that in some cases a municipality is a unit which is too large for the analysis; however, this problem can be tackled if a municipality is treated as the case within which smaller cases (like communities of practice in this study) are investigated. Nevertheless, the model is appropriate to characterise the capability of a particular administrative unit and to study the extent to which social agents in rural areas are able and ready to seize opportunities offered by municipalities, regional and national policies. The model also helps to explain how external resources are accessed, how bridging and bonding relationships are developed, how mutually integrated are internal territorial units of the municipality, etc. The model requires obtaining both quantitative and qualitative data in order to ensure the methodological triangulation in the analysis of all capability dimensions. For this purpose many information sources are useful, e.g. national statistics, document analysis, community surveys, and experts' opinion. However, the lack of particular quantitative data is a challenge for getting the whole picture right. For example, there is no data about labour force migration within a municipality and between neighbouring administrative units. These data obtained in the surveys would be very useful in the analysis of the economic capability dimension. Similarly, there is a lack of quantitative data about participation in local activities, events, etc.

It was approved that the model is useful to characterise dynamics of community capability, therefore it is appropriate for the longitudinal studies. If the model is used for the purpose to compare different communities, the uniqueness of each community should be respected as well as the fact that the model is rather descriptive. Several limitations and advantages of the model were identified during the fieldwork and the data analysis. The model also helps to explain how external resources are accessed, how bridging and bonding relationships are developed, how mutually integrated are internal territorial units of the municipality, etc.

A significant factor influencing capability is external links of local development agents and performance outside a community which in turn ensures contribution, knowledge and experience in the local

development and operation of communities of practice. From the methodological point of view, difficulties can arise with identifying communities of practice as they tend to be informal either by organizational structure or the nature being embedded in formal institutions. This challenge can be resolved by interviewing key people or "snowballing".

CONCLUSIONS

The model for the analysis of the community capability is useful in order to compare community development and to analyse capability in long term. First of all, it is useful for the community itself to see the changes and improvements in the long run. Secondly, the model can be used in order to compare different communities. However, the author of the thesis notes that the model is descriptive; the specificity of each community, its unique history and experience should be considered. Administrative units (villages, towns, *pagasts*) within the same municipality also differ therefore qualitative aspects of the analysis as well as quantitative ones are significant. Before employing the model, the boundaries of a community should be defined even though in a rural context sometimes they might be blurred. The model requires obtaining both quantitative and qualitative data in order to ensure the methodological triangulation in the analysis of all capability dimensions. For this purpose many information sources are useful; however, the lack of useful locally obtained data is a challenge.

The theory of communities of practice is useful to explain how local people cooperate, share knowledge, use resources, involve in rural development processes. Capability analysis is useful for different social agents and stakeholders as all parties can contribute to local needs assessment and investigation in order to develop more clear strategies of local development.

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