

SOCIAL CAPITAL FORMATION IN ROMANIAN AGRICULTURE

Ioana Liane GEORGESCU

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine Bucharest, 59 Marasti Blvd.,
District 1, 011464, Bucharest, Romania, Phone: +40213182564, Fax:+40213182888,
Mobile:+40726 722673, Email: ioana.georgescu@sciencespo.fr

Corresponding author: ioana.georgescu@sciencespo.fr

Abstract

Social capital is crucial for farmers' financial viability and market integration. However, stocks of structural social capital have been historically low in Romania. This paper explores the recently-initiated process of social capital formation in Romanian agriculture, in an attempt to identify factors favouring it. Three key elements were found to facilitate structural social capital formation: clarity of common interests, the success of collective actions and local farmers as leaders of associational structures.

Key words: cooperatives, livestock farmers' associations, Romania, social capital

INTRODUCTION

Social capital was defined by French sociologist Bourdieu as an individual's aggregate resources linked to the possession of a durable network ... of relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition [3]. Robert Putnam redefines the concept as features of social organization such as networks, norms and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit [9]. Edwards and Foley criticizes Putnam's definition, arguing that capital is a social-relational rather than a socio-psychological concept [6], but they are contradicted by Uphoff and Wijayaratna, who argue that there are two forms of capital, the structural one (roles, rules, procedures and social networks) and the cognitive one (norms, values, attitudes and beliefs –social-psychological connotation) [11].

Ostrom and Ahn insist that social capital is an attribute of individuals, which improves their ability to solve collective action problems through one of its products, trust. They also underline the decisive influence the state has on the formation of social capital [8]. Narayan and Cassidy argue that a determinant of structural social capital is the presence of strong leaders [7].

The debate regarding trust as input, form or result of capital has not yet been resolved.

Romanian literature on this topic focuses on

cognitive social capital in urban areas, concluding that it is, along with trust and participation in formal associations, very weak, just like in the other ex-communist countries [5]. Badescu et al find that Romania's democratic institutions are weak and unresponsive, complicating civil society's task to articulate its interests and strategies [1].

Regarding rural areas, some research has been conducted in 2006 on values related to cognitive social capital, stating that generalized trust is low, similarly to urban areas [2], which also implies limited participation in local governance [4]. Sandu notes, however, that between 2002 and 2005 the number of community development optimists increased [10].

This paper describes the formation of structural social capital in Romanian rural areas, by analyzing two agricultural cooperatives, in the counties of Giurgiu and Ilfov, two independent associations of livestock farmers in the counties of Gorj and Neamt, and two NGO-sponsored livestock farmers' associations in Vaslui county.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper takes a comparative approach in order to study social capital formation, and analyse differences between groups that have successfully built social capital (structures

that still function, and complete their activities), and groups that have failed to do so (structures that do not function anymore, or do not complete activities as planned). The group that was successful in social capital formation includes the livestock farmers' associations from Buda-Oșești (Vaslui) and Borca (Neamț) and the Vlașca cooperative (Giurgiu); the unsuccessful group includes the Negrești-Căzănești (Vaslui) and Tismana (Gorj) associations as well as the AgriSud cooperative (Ilfov).

The research method is based on semi-structured interviews, enabling farmers to express freely their thoughts about the social structures they belong to. Thus, important elements in building social capital, so far ignored by quantitative studies conducted in Romania, can emerge.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The group of functional associative structures and the group of dysfunctional ones were compared on the basis of three aspects identified as relevant to social capital: clarity of common interests, success of the first collective actions and whether or not the leaders of the associations are successful farmers.

1. Clarity of common interests

The clarity of common interests transcribed in the NGO's objectives is the first element that differentiates successful associational structures from unsuccessful ones. For agricultural associations, clarity of objectives is a result of several factors, such as: the number of members and their level of acquaintance with each other, the admission procedure, geographical position, members' homogeneity, frequency of meetings, internal communication channels, joint resource management, members' reliability and the relationship with local authorities and the national regulatory environment.

The associations' initial number of members was not pre-defined, all those willing to join being accepted. In the case of the AgriSud cooperative, the president advertised the structure among farmers of the area; thus the number of founding members was high. The

same happened in the case of the Borca and Tismana associations. In the Vlașca cooperative and the two associations from Vaslui county, the number of founding members was much lower. It is therefore not surprising that in the case of the Ilfov cooperative and the Tismana association conflicts of interest arose. A large number of members is equivalent to a large number of individual interests and greater potential for divergence among them.

With 120 members originally, the AgriSud cooperative proved too large to be managed correctly and to foster frequent interaction among members. Among its members there were also people who, although not fully understanding the functioning of a cooperative, joined out of curiosity, later hindering activities. Admission criteria were vague, cooperative leaders believing that a large number of members will ensure success, as it would provide greater representativeness. However, this led to a low level of acquaintance among members, and the inability to identify which farmers were reliable and which were not. Although the negative impact of this policy was seen subsequently, and some farmers were expelled while others withdrew voluntarily, the cooperative was already weakened.

The Vlașca cooperative had a relatively limited number of members in the beginning (24). It continued to expand - it is now twice its initial size - but with caution. Before admitting a new member, references were taken from neighbour farmers about the applicants' reliability. Thanks to cooperative's reasonable size, internal interactions allowed older members to test novices' reliability and pressure them to respect their commitments. Thus, there has been only one case where a farmer hasn't paid all his dues to input suppliers. The Buda-Oșești association has developed in a similar manner, with a small number of founding members; subsequently membership was extended, but newcomers had to submit to the original group's priorities.

The Tismana association encountered difficulties regarding the large number of members. Following the accession of 40

novices, the activities started unfolding with difficulty and reaching consensus on priority objectives became a challenge. Leaders tried to solve problems by sanctioning those who were blocking progress, but the violent conflicts that followed destabilized the internal climate even further. The Borca association, despite the large number of members, did not encounter operational difficulties, probably due to social cohesion in the area, which ensured convergence of interests. Surprisingly, despite the small number of members, the association of Negrești-Căzănești encountered great difficulties in its development process. However, these difficulties were not related to the number of members but to other aspects.

Clarity of common interests is also determined by geographical factors, the most important ones being proximity to an urban centre and the distances between farms. In areas further away from urban centres agriculture plays an important economic role and is seen as the main source of income, while proximity to a city opens up other perspectives, the members of the associations no longer focusing solely on their farms. For some AgriSud members agriculture is not the only business, and thus they do not face the same types of constraints as their peers. By associating themselves, farmers obtain better purchase and sale conditions, which are important for future investments, especially given that obtaining credit is difficult in this economic sector. However there are farmers who can easily obtain credit thanks to their additional sources of income, which significantly lowers their interest in the cooperative's efforts. Within the Vlașca cooperative there are no such cases because, although they are situated relatively close to the city, Giurgiu does not provide development opportunities as diverse as the city of Bucharest.

These differences are also observed between the two associations of livestock farmers in Vaslui county. Farmers in the Oșești village work mainly in agriculture, as they are relatively far from the urban area. They are very eager to process their milk and market cheese in urban areas. In Negrești, some

farmers have other activities in addition to farming; their area being declared urban, they disregard somewhat farm work, aspiring to 'urban' occupations. Borca is further away from an urban centre than Oșești, thus livestock breeding is a very important activity in the area. The town of Tismana, although not offering major economic opportunities, is near the city of Târgu-Jiu, determining a relatively low interest in agricultural activities, especially in young people.

Regarding geographical proximity of farms, it is an element of differentiation only among cooperatives. Farmers from the Vlașca cooperative are relatively close to each other, within a radius of 25 km around the city of Giurgiu, while in the AgriSud cooperative farmers are dispersed, as the Ilfov county forms a ring around Bucharest. Although geographical proximity leads to strong competition on agricultural land, which may strain relations between members, its main effect is closer collaboration between neighbours (who assist each other with materials and equipment). The Vlașca cooperative has therefore another advantage over the AgriSud cooperative, where farmers keep in touch mostly by phone and can only count on the help of close neighbours.

Common objectives can be defined with greater ease in homogeneous groups, heterogeneity hindering social capital creation.

Heterogeneity in education generates different capacities to understand the functioning of associations and to get involved. In livestock farmers' associations, few members are able to understand and engage in managing common resources, not having the ability to analyse legislation. Members who are dissatisfied with associations' actions, but do not have the capacity to make constructive comments, resort to gossip, thus inhibiting the involvement of capable and well-intentioned peers. In Tismana, due to rumours that members in charge of organizing auctions for infrastructure works receive money from competing firms, the committee had to be renewed each time, former members not wanting to participate again in order to avoid peers' comments. In the Oșești and Negrești

associations the impact of gossip is not felt, as members who chose to adhere to these structures have a similar level of education. In the Borca association, the work performed relies on the traditional approach to animal husbandry, well-known to all members; thus differences in education levels brought no conflicts within the structure.

In cooperatives, discrepancies in education manifest either as shyness of those with less formal training to get involved in discussions or through an attempt to impose themselves by force, becoming a disturbing factor in the association. These discrepancies are felt more strongly in the AgriSud cooperative, although they are present in the Vlaşca cooperative as well.

Another potential difficulty in the way of clarifying common objectives is the difference in interests between old and young members, as well as the different ways of perceiving the role of associative structures in the two age groups. In the Tismana area, the lack of intergenerational confidence has affected the construction of structural capital. It is customary that successions takes place only upon parents' death, as they fear that young people will not take proper care of them in old age if wealth transfer occurs during their lifetime. A consequence is that, without ownership of family farms, young people behave irresponsibly in society, as well as in the association.

In Borca, the initiative to create the association came from younger farmers, who knew how to harmonize their interests with those of the elderly. This was facilitated by the flexibility of national legislation concerning associations, which conciliated elderly's' subsistence concerns, with the young generation's development orientation. In the Vaslui area, tensions between generations were mitigated by the existence of two associative structures, one dealing with the management of the EU's Single Area Payment Scheme funds and another one, supported by the NGO, oriented towards marketing of products and drafting project proposals; young people eager to develop their holdings got involved in the second one.

In agricultural cooperatives, age differences

determine even larger disparities between farmers. The older ones possess, in general, larger areas of land than younger cooperative members, which make it easier for them to face market requirements by themselves, and therefore they tend to cooperate less. In the Vlaşca cooperative, for example, one of the farmers who cultivate larger land areas chose not to sale his production through the cooperative. In Ilfov county, many farmers choose not to sell through the cooperative, and thus this activity could not take place. Those who wanted joint sales chose to leave the cooperative and create smaller groups of producers, with greater financial bonuses from the Ministry of Agriculture and simpler accounting.

Issues related to farmers' heterogeneity can be mitigated by frequent meetings and choosing a suitable internal consultation method. In the Giurgiu county, proposals for joint investments with the money collected by the cooperative existed for several years but were not materialized. However, since market pressure on farmers increased, so did their desire to build common infrastructure that will help them face it; thus it was decided to hold a General Assembly meeting every month, in order to discuss the objectives that need to crystallize. In AgriSud, General Assemblies were held, from the outset, less frequently than those in Vlaşca, which made it difficult to find a common direction. In livestock farmer's associations, although meetings weren't frequent, geographical proximity allowed continuous communication between members.

New activity proposals arouse fear among farmers, and they need time to debate them and get used to the new ideas in order to gain confidence. Misunderstandings and suspicion about new proposals existed in the Vlaşca cooperative, but were sporadic and short-lived, thanks to transparent consultations carried out at the central level. In the Ilfov County disagreements persisted, as consultations were not always held at group level; the cooperative leaders' approach has been to negotiate new ideas with farmers individually, before discussing them in the plenary, somewhat reducing transparency.

Regarding livestock farmers' associations, consultations were always held in the General Assembly, and were transparent.

Resource management and choices about the type of investments made are a key element in terms of building social capital, fears of financial nature dividing, most often, the members of the associations in several camps. In livestock farmers' associations, when investments are not made in the commons or in inalienable goods (ex: infrastructure on pastures), they are a double-edged sword, which can lead to the construction as well as the destruction of capital. They have a positive impact in areas with high social cohesion and negative impacts in the other areas. Thus, buying a car for guarding pastures has become a matter of contention in Tismana, while the purchase of cars for transporting construction material to alpine meadows in Borca did not create animosity. The purchase of automatic milking machines was appreciated in both associations in the county of Vaslui, but when they broke in Negrești, farmers began to accuse each other of damaging them and refused to contribute for repairs. The Vlașca cooperative leaders refused to purchase common agricultural equipment, in order to avoid conflicts.

Reliability of cooperative members contributes to the maintenance of common objectives. By conforming to the rules and decisions of the group, farmers contribute to achieving common interests, preventing the emergence of divergent individual interests which can destabilize the structure. In Giurgiu, the first reason the president cited for the strength of relations between farmers was their reliability: "all paid subscription; everyone was serious and transparent ". This is another difference between the Vlașca cooperative and AgriSud. In Ilfov county, from the very first attempt to purchase inputs through the cooperatives, one of the farmers refused to take and pay his order, creating a precedent, after which each farmer felt free to buy inputs separately from their peers, becoming unreliable.

A similarly unpleasant episode occurred in the Vlașca cooperative: farmers once signed a common contract to sell sunflower, but some

farmers refused to honour it, as the price at harvest was better than the one determined by the contract. Farmers who have not provided the products were executed in court, having to pay penalties. However, previous positive experiences with the sale through the cooperative prevented this negative experience from becoming a reason not to trust other cooperative members on following occasions. In addition, since all farmers pay suppliers on time, more companies are present each time at the auctions organized by the cooperative, thus ensuring the competition necessary to obtain better prices on inputs. Conversely, since AgriSud cooperative farmers withdraw their input orders after auctions, companies who participated in auctions retracted, preferring to negotiate with individual farmers, like their competitors.

Members' reliability is the main issue of the Negrești-Căzănești livestock farmers' association. Members prefer to work with few external commitments, as this allows them to avoid paying taxes, even though their income diminishes consequently. For example, for a long time they did not want to declare the number of animals they had, in order not to renew ear tags annually. Regarding joint marketing, it would require permanent control of milk quality. As farmers do not comply with hygiene rules imposed by law, not seeing their usefulness, they prefer to sell their products individually, in the informal sector. In these circumstances, trust and collaboration cannot evolve in the association.

Associations' relationship with local authorities is not always smooth, political interventions being a factor that opposes the process of common objectives clarification. Although political influence is exerted on cooperatives, their financial viability and the fact that they do not depend on funding from the state, makes them less vulnerable to this risk than livestock associations.

Political intervention is the main cause for the Tismana association's dysfunction, as her work was hampered by the mayor through various strategies, culminating with the commissioning of grasslands to another association, controlled by his relatives. Vulnerable people are easy to manipulate

(even by means of small gifts), and if the local government is captured by interests that compete with those of associations, the fragile balance created within them can be easily destroyed. In the Tismana association, when conflicts with the local administration escalated, a minority of people tried to impose by force their opinion (even through physical violence). The holding of General Assemblies and the decision-making process were destabilized, undermining trust among members.

The Borca and Vaslui associations enjoyed the appreciation and support of local authorities. In Borca the mayor supported directly one of the presidents of the association to go to Bucharest and discuss with national authorities the mismatch between proposed legislation (transforming not-for-profit associations in for-profit cooperatives) with the work done by his association locally. The Buda-Oșești association's president participated in local management meetings chaired by the Oșești mayor, thus being able to harmonize the goals of the association with village development plan. As a result they received financial support from the mayor to purchase a cooling tank for a milk processing centre the association was building with the assistance obtained from an NGO.

Clarity of common interests, a result of many factors' interplay, is thus a major determinant of success in social capital formation.

2.Success of joint actions

Success of joint actions, especially of the first ones, plays an important role in consolidating social capital. Both associations and cooperatives are created for a precise economic purpose. As long as they are progressing towards meeting that goal, members are motivated to make efforts in strengthening relationships with others and their affiliation to the associative structure. But if no progress is noted, or if most actions fail, trust in the associative structure and its usefulness will decrease, alongside with individuals' efforts to consolidate it.

Success of joint actions depends on the effort put in their preparation, but also on chance; therefore it is important to organize less risky

activities, at least initially, and to plan them carefully, so as to avoid obstacles. In its attempt to obtain better input prices, the Vlașca cooperative opted for organizing auctions, followed by the signing of individual contracts between farmers and suppliers. The responsibility to respect the contract lied with each individual and involved no risk for their peers in case one of them broke the agreement. All farmers honoured contractual clauses, in order to avoid problems with suppliers, thus making transactions successful every year; both farmers and companies consolidated their confidence in the cooperative's auctions.

AgriSud opted, first year, for a centralized purchase of inputs through the cooperative, each farmer subsequently taking the products he ordered from the headquarters and repaying the cooperative. Those accountable for compliance with contract clauses were the cooperative leaders and not the farmers. With no compulsion to meet the commitments made to suppliers, one of the farmers chose to no longer take his rapeseed command, as it was announced that a dry autumn will follow, with unfavourable conditions for this crop. The non-observance of this farmer had a destabilizing impact on the whole cooperative, as it generated a negative example, which was followed by other farmers in the coming years. It occurred due to misfortune (drought year), but also due to leaders' unwise approach of granting for a large number of individuals, whose reliability had not yet been proven.

A similar comparison can also be made between the two livestock farmers' associations of Vaslui. Both have submitted projects to finance milk cooling tanks. The Buda-Oșești association projected to use the tank to collect milk and process it into cheese. Their project has failed to obtain financing through European funds. Nevertheless, the association had shared their plan with the mayor; since the project was going to benefit the entire village, the mayor extended his material support and the cooling tank was purchased. The Negrești-Căzănești association planned to use the cooling tank to collect milk locally and sell it to a company in

Piatra Neamț, which would process and market it. The project failed because the intermediary company, although initially promised a good price per litre, then decreased it by 60%, and the members of the association decided to abandon the partnership as well as the purchase of the tank. Thus, besides the chance of some to be supported by the mayor and the misfortune of others to be deceived by a potential partner, the approach taken by the two associations played an important role in the outcome, as the one who was more ambitious and able to better calibrate its target was successful, while the other, lacking enthusiasm and strategic thinking, failed.

Counselling plays an important role in the success of associations' collective actions. The Tismana association lacked legal advice on its rights and responsibilities, leading to the accumulation of mistakes that undermined certain members' confidence in the president. The president, due to lack of clear information in this respect, did not mention at the outset that the association will not grant dividends to members. Some members, looking at another association present in the village, Obșteștea Moșnenilor, which granted dividends, thought it would be the same for the livestock farmers' group. Later on, the president clarified that legal dispositions did not allow the association to grant dividends, but this created discontent among members. Another issue was that, in the first year maintenance of common grassland was carried out by all members (who were paid); the following year the president found out that this was a risky procedure from the legal point of view, and stopped it (hiring only five members to do the work). This led to the accumulation of additional complaints. The association's misfortune was that, despite the achievements of its first years, the mayor's interference in internal conflicts led to the total halt of activities.

Misunderstandings in the application of legislation happened also in the case of the Borca association. However, disputes caused by lack of information did not take place between the presidents and members of the association, but between one of the presidents

and people from another village, who wanted to receive part of the association's meadows. Thus, although the conflict was serious, it had no impact on the association and activities were carried out successfully.

3. Successful farmers as leaders

Traditionally, Romanian peasants accepted more easily to implement innovations in agriculture when these were recommended by successful peers. This recommendation meant that people, who were successful in their farming activities in the specific conditions of the local environment, found out that these innovations can work locally. Even if they did not have the opportunity to test them, their discernment was enough to determine whether they were profitable or not. The strategy of copying the successful farmer is still adopted in Romanian villages today. Thus, associative structures are more likely to succeed if they are led by such people, who constitute an example for the rest.

In Vlașca, although the initiative of funding the cooperative came from younger farmers and not from the current president, the fact that he is a successful farmer with considerable work experience enabled him to strengthen the associative structure. Some members complain about his cautiousness, yet they all admire him for his technical knowledge and ability to draft crop plans. This allowed him to impose a rule requiring members to use an identical crop technique on 70% of the area they cultivate, a provision which facilitated common auctions and obtaining considerable price reduction for agricultural inputs. Despite her experience in crop protection, the AgriSud cooperative's president, an agricultural engineer, did not enjoy the same kind of trust from farmers. They requested her advice when they dealt with pests or diseases, but never accepted to follow the crop plans she suggested to them. The president of the Vlașca cooperative, having the same aversion for risk as the rest of the farmers, imposed a slower pace of growth in complexity of cooperative projects, wanting to test first the reliability of members, and cautiously observe market developments. AgriSud leaders, due to their training and network, proposed, ever since the

establishment of the cooperative, development plans that were too complex and ambitious in relation to the level of confidence farmers had in their peers, leading often to failure.

The president of the Negrești association encountered the same difficulties. Although she possesses a farm, her main occupation is teaching. She tried to make her colleagues identify with her, by stressing the fact that she lived in the same environment as them, and that her farm was as small as theirs. However, she was not considered 'one of them' by the rest of the farmers, and they did not follow her advice. The Tismana association president was more successful in his relation to farmers, although he was a professor as well. However, not all villagers accepted him as a leader, and some of them preferred to ally with the mayor.

The president of the Borca association, a farmer who lived in the farms on alpine meadows in his childhood, was able to design necessary improvements in animals' and shepherds' living conditions. Thus he was accepted as a leader not only by members of the association in his village, but also by the other presidents of the Borca association, who were quick to adopt the same model of development for the areas under their responsibility. The president of the Buda-Oșești association was designated as leader by the other members after they noticed her degree of involvement in the activities proposed by the partner NGO. Thanks to her management skill she earned the respect and confidence of peer farmers.

The general development direction of the association is defined by the president, many members lacking the capacity to propose solutions to complex problems. Yet there are always suspicions against the president (in both cooperatives and associations), because of his capacity to propose solutions that others cannot foresee; some members believe that the president has hidden interests when he comes with development suggestions. This is why trust in and acceptance of the president as leader by the rest of the members is crucial. This is more easily achievable by farmers than by leaders coming from the external environment. Strong leaders make a great

contribution to the clarification of common goals and the success of collective actions, being cornerstones on which social capital is built.

CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to constitute an analysis of the process of social capital formation in Romanian agriculture, in order to identify factors favouring it. A first finding is that the sources of inspiration in creating Romanian associative structures were predominantly foreign, confirming the lack of local models and the assumption that the level of domestic social capital is low. Only one exception was identified, the Borca association. It is thus important to facilitate exchanges with successful associations from other areas to encourage the formation of associative structures.

The reasons that pushed farmers in recent years to adopt the associative solution were mainly financial: lower production costs and increased selling prices for cooperatives, and gaining access to European funds for livestock farmers' associations. Encouraging associative structures financially is therefore a useful tool in social capital formation.

The main elements that differentiated successful associations from those who failed were clear common interests, success of collective actions and having successful farmers as leaders (having strong leaders is not sufficient, it is also necessary that members identify with their leader). It is important to note that the development of associative structures is difficult in a corrupt environment in which political interventions create a non-transparent climate and do not encourage public consultations. In this case an institutional disjunction [7] occurs between associations and the local administration, engendering suspicion and destroying the regime of cooperation and consultation.

This study seems to indicate that trust is a necessary input, but also a result of social capital. Thus, it is initially necessary to grant at least a little trust to colleagues, in order to start collective activities. It is not only the ability to generate trust that is a component of

social capital, but also the one to grant trust to others. For example, among farmers in the Tismana association, those who did not place any confidence in others, criticizing all action taken, having a suspicious attitude towards the association's president and refusing to get involved in activities, have not acquired subsequently any trust in their peers, nor in the associative structure, despite its achievements. Those who were more involved in activities from the beginning (investing trust, time and effort), are those who were more satisfied in the end, gaining more confidence in the president and their colleagues.

However, trust, when obtained through repeated interactions, cements social capital, becoming a determinant and not only a result of it. Thus, for example, the trust built between farmers in Giurgiu through collective, smaller-scale successes, led to the start of negotiations to build more complex common goals, evidence of increased trust and strengthened social capital. This preparation of a collective action, will, if successful, increase trust even further, therefore strengthening social capital. Conversely, the lack of confidence led, in AgriSud, to a standstill and even withdrawal from certain activities which, in turn, reduced trust in the associative structure and rendered it fragile: it could no longer develop and protect common goals against individual ones. Thus came the destruction of social capital and gradual disintegration of the cooperative.

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