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COMMUNITY STRUCTURE AND ELEMENTS AFFECTING ITS ACTIVITY: CASE OF JAUNPILS COUNTY

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Abstract. A single person, a group of persons or a social class forms a background for social structure of each society – needs, values, interests, social norms, lifestyle and agreed behaviour form its identity. Communities unite individuals and different groups performing a certain social role and maintaining their common core values, interests or locality and contributes its enhancement. Socio-economic environment is mainly determined by society's ability to cooperate – important precondition for it is a social trust which is determined by social structure, a sufficient presence of active individuals and existence of closely linked communities.

Territories in modern Latvia differ immensely when compared on the grounds of social capital. Last ten to twenty years have introduced negative socio-economic development, population decline and other factors that mostly affect rural areas. In order to better understand the qualities of social capital the study was focused on Jaunpils county (*novads*) with an appropriate population size for in-depth analysis.

The aim of this study is to discover the factors that influence and determine society's social activity by analysing the social structure from the standpoint of social activity and its geographical dispersion. Analysis of data collected from Jaunpils municipality and statistical information as well as qualitative methods - interviews and observations were used.

Research results indicate that active society and its social interactions is a precondition for liveliness of the place and maintenance of positive social environment where the portion of active individuals (leaders) and well organised and structured social activity are a key factors.
Key words: social structure, community, social activity, civic engagement, participation.
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Introduction

The role of social aspects gradually increases within planning theory, practice and related fields. There is a diversity of views on the human potential and potential of social activity –

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human resources, human capital, social capital (Becker, 2002). There are several approaches to describe individual's or group's activities. Social capital is a potential resource belonging to both a single being and a group.

Modern planning theories and studies increasingly stress social capital's importance as it unites the society, strengthens the trust within the social groups, outlines the benefits of collective effort and mutual benefit (Helliwell, Putnam 2004). It seems that traditional capitalistic understanding of "capital" is shifting towards more humanistic meaning that facilitates free will, equality, participation, and interconnectivity among people, families and groups (Putnam, Goss 2000). Capitalistic society slowly prefers to liberal values – a society that more often places moral values in front of material. Such trend increases the importance of individual trust, interaction, networking and bonding.

Among the most obvious forms of social interaction is formation and development of community which is influenced by many factors. Communities form when group of people have common goals, views, interests, tradition and relationship based on relational interconnectivity and networks (Chaskin, 1997). Community's activities are usually closely linked to a geographic location and attachment to it (Peterman, 2000), however, other examples indicate communities where networks and connections are based on social, cultural and functional relations.

Lively and active community groups refers to important elements of presence of social capital within society. Different forms of public activity can be categorised on a scale according to the level of formality that describes them – starting from informal activities, such as group leisure activities, attendance of culture and sports events, joint communal work etc., up till semi-formal and formal activities like NGO, participation in municipal planning documents, election etc. Common form of community leisure activities in Latvia, which is largely supported and often even funded from a municipality budget is amateur-arts groups like choir singing, folk-dancing and amateur theatre (Daugavietis, 2015).

The paper aims to identify the elements that affect community's activity and structure in Jaunpils county (*novads*). In order to achieve the above mentioned goal, main tasks were defined: 1) identifying factors of social activity; 2) analysis of socially active groups; 3) identifying forms of social activity and territorial dispersion.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used for implementation of the tasks defined. An in-depth analysis was performed on the social structure, social activities, and its geographic dispersion. The source data were collected from Jaunpils municipality, local face-to-face interviews with the most active inhabitants in the county as well as multitude of statistic data sources such as population registry, property registry, municipal databases, NGO activity reports, reports on public involvement, data from social services and other sources.

A closer look reveals that neither geographic location, nor comparison to other counties on the grounds of quantifiable development indicators indicate Jaunpils county's superiority thus their success might be attributed to significant social capital. In the midst of Latvia's rural

counties Jaunpils was picked to study local community and the factors that influence and determine its social activities that at the first glance seemed well developed, deeply rooted in the community and their practices.

The paper contains chapters on factors that determine community's activity, analysis of socially active population, overall social structure, forms of social activity and its geographic dispersion, community emergence and territorial layout. The main conclusions and proposals for further research are included in final chapter.

1. Determining factors of activity within the community

How it is possible to distinguish between communities ready to move on with their strategic vision from those that are not? Community's ability to cope with the future in an orderly, well planned and long-term consistent manner is an object of both academic and purely practical interest – identifying communities equipped with required social toolset to embrace change from those that are not yet ready is a key task for planners before moving on with implementation of any plan e.g. community's social capital or its capacity.

Planning professionals, community workers and municipality officials would benefit immensely from ability to assess community social capacity, thus, being able to better plan and allocate required staff resources for particular task. Communities possessing a strong social capital are better prepared to tackle long-term challenges and accomplish more refined and ambitious goals, whilst communities lacking proper social capacities require extensive preliminary work and conditioning (capacity building) before the community is ready for a long-term challenges (Chazdon, Lott, 2010).

The study seeks to identify the key factors that determine rural community's level of social activity and diagnose community's social capital as well as its capacity for cooperation and sustention of long-term development initiatives that require substantial financial and professional investment. The study also takes into consideration and adjusts for inadequacy and unavailability of proper statistic data to measure community's social capital and social capacity. Above listed limitations require for creative and unconventional data collection as well as some alternative community evaluation factors to be introduced and discussed within this study.

Formal civic engagement – immediate yet superficial factor indicating community's capacity for activity and engagement is described by participation in European (EU), national and regional election on both sides including the running candidates and portion of community taking part in voting. Nevertheless the formal civic engagement can be extended to participation in local and regional planning process, council meetings, opinion groups and other activities that contribute to healthy self-governing society.

Economic and Business figures – a close look at the health of locally based small and medium entrepreneurship (SME) reveals the quality of local business-minded community

activists. Business orientated leadership (indicated by the number of local SME's) is a quality of minute portion of community (approx. 3% of population) these individuals affect the rest of the community the most. General statistics such as number of SME's, employment rate, salary rate etc., explain some understanding of overall economic situation within the community, it rarely gives in-depth understanding of factors that drive activity within the community which can be better described by such unconventional figures as number of visitors per month at local businesses and services, rate of informal economy etc.

NGO activity – significant narrative of the state of community's social capital and capacity is being told by the number of active NGO within the area. Such factors as NGO directions of activity, the number of active members, portion of the community involved and the area NGO impacts as well as number of project activities accomplished and financial investment attracted also should be taken into account. NGO managing certain self-help groups is a sign of mature community ready to solve its own problems and take care of its long-term needs, thus, being an important aspect to be considered when evaluating the community.

Informal civic activity – while NGO represent formal side of communities capacity to engage the local challenges, significant part of activities are outside of formal and legal framework defined by NGO activity. There is a multitude of self-initiated activities a community may engage such as local tradition of joint communal work, adult education, lifelong-learning activities and other vocational activities like folk dancing and choir singing in particular. Quite often a substantial municipality budget resources are allocated to support this type of activities providing certain base for comparison and evaluation of this factor (Daugavietis, 2015).

Media analysis & Communication - the health of social capital and social capacity as well as general diagnosis of community are indicated by the presence and manner of overall communication. The healthy bi-directional communication among institutions, businesses and community indicates presence of advanced and ready-to-engage inhabitants as well as matured governance while content analysis of local media, notice boards and public meetings indicate the depth and capacity of the community's civic engagement.

General public activity – most unconventional and extra effort-intensive are factors that determine and illustrate community's general activities that can be easily overlooked and underestimated such as load (number of visitors) of local library, municipality, culture centres, social services, employment agency, use of children playgrounds and other public spaces such as parks and squares.

Local patriotism and general happiness – most likely the most elusive and difficult factor to determine and measure is a level of local patriotism and general happiness. Due to its intangibility and extensive social study this factor is often ignored or taken as granted with little or no data to back up the opinion. While it is last in our list the factor should not be overlooked and undermined as it is a crucial precondition for healthy attitude to all of above mentioned factors. Lacking local patriotism people will not care to invest any effort to improve either the physical space surrounding them or the social atmosphere within the community.

Lack of trust and general happiness will cause much the same. Thus, communities short of local patriotism, trust and life satisfaction require extensive capacity building before the community is ready to tackle any long-term challenge (Chazdon & Lott, 2010).

Community planning and community work is a smallest part of planning activities nevertheless it is a long-term action that lasts over years and requires substantial determination and investment. The studies indicate that community work is capable to seed and nurture the required factors and characteristics to create social capital, build trust, bridge differences, and engage community to take part in their activities (Chazdon & Lott, 2010; Mandell, 2010). Therefore, regardless of the obstacles and data elusiveness, there is a growing need to formulate a common framework for evaluating community's social activity, identify factors that stimulate it and discover the main points where proper stimulation can produce most effective changes.

2. Jaunpils county and its society

Jaunpils county is a small and a rather remote rural county with relatively high development index when compared to similar areas. Jaunpils social and economic situation, state of development, population structure, level of public participation indicate high level of social activity. Nevertheless there is a lack of available data that could link social activity to the overall territorial development and provide an objective baseline for comparison and the assessment of the effectiveness of the investment.

Jaunpils is located within Riga planning region and the county was formed as a result of the administrative-territorial reform in 2009 by merging Jaunpils and Viesatas parishes (*pagasts*). The county is relatively small (209 km^2) and its administrative centre is located 92 km from the national capital Riga and 23 km away from neighbouring Dobele which provides significant public, economic, social and culture services to the county.

At the beginning of 2014 Jaunpils county population was 2665 inhabitants – 84% of population living in historic Jaunpils area and 16% in historic Viesatas area (RDIM, 2014). The county consists of several villages such as Jaunpils (954 inhab.), Leveste (370 inhab.), Viesatas (161 inhab.) and Jurgi (146 inhab.) (OCMA, 2014). The county provides home for 1050 homesteads, more than half of them being a single farmsteads or single family estates with local gardens attached (Jaunpils County Development Program, 2012).

The main occupation in the county is farming and farming related supporting services – crop farming, diary and meet production as well as supporting agricultural branches such as organic farming, eco-tourism, fish-farming and bee-keeping.

The county maintains relatively rich social life. In-depth interviews with municipality and other services indicate a large proportion of socially active persons within the society. The study found extraordinary busy NGO activity and high level of civic engagement in municipal and governance issues.

The inhabitants believe their strong suites are ethnic homogeneity, national patriotism and strong tradition, the presence of many educated and active people (leaders), large proportion of young families and enthusiastic and socially active youth. The interviewees point out the absence of abandoned estate and almost all of the farmland is in active use.

The inhabitants are highly patriotic and youngsters, even those who have emigrated for education or employment purposes, maintain high level of motivation to return to the home-area and take part in its development. Even municipal development strategy postulate a socially active inhabitant as one of the priorities (Jaunpils county development program, 2012), which is expected to become the main source of county's "energy" and fresh ideas in order to maintain the county's longevity and continuous existence. The main factors that support the high level of social activity in Jaunpils county are strong traditions, ethnic homogeneity, strong horizontal ties, active youth, tradition of adaptive municipal administration and effective planning.

3. The form and geographical dispersion of social activity

Formal civic engagement

Jaunpils county is slightly below (2-3 percentage points) national average level of formal civic engagement when measured by participation in election both on political level and the individual voters level. An important role in local politics is played by individual reputation and fame, direct personal relations to the electorate. Nevertheless there is a high level of predictability in municipal elections caused by both a trust in politicians and inert nature of voters that borderlines a chronic apathy not trusting any change to happen whoever gets elected. In other words, local elections play a minor role in local social agenda.

Economic and business figures

The county's business environment is described by three significant qualities: 1) larger proportion of entrepreneurs per 1000 inhabitants; 2) 3-5 leading companies play an extensive social role by providing employment and maintaining the environment. The companies include one of the biggest farms in Latvia, food processing plant, and pre-fabricated module house construction plant; 3) businesses occupy a diverse business areas thus, preventing the risk of specialisation. Meanwhile Jaunpils municipality employs small portion of society in comparison to similar rural areas making healthy economic environment.

NGO activity

In Jaunpils county are operating 28 NGO which on average make for 2 NGO more per 1000 inhabitants than national average (10.5 vs. 8.5 NGO per 1000 inhab.). The NGO's mainly focus on youth and senior citizens issues, participation in county's development, popularisation of healthy and active lifestyle, communal real-estate management, many of NGO's function also as leisure interest groups.

Informal civic activity

There is a wide spectrum of social, culture related, sports and other activity in Jaunpils county that have resulted in strong tradition of amateur arts and sports. While NGO and interest groups provide the opportunities there is a small portion of population (7 %) that regularly and actively use the services.

Communication

The main role in municipality communication is played by direct spoken messaging which is typical for rural areas. There are little-to-none other means of effective communication tools within the county.

General public activity

Jaunpils is known for its medieval castle which serves as an activity centre and tourism attraction at the regional scale. Regional and international tourism fills substantial part of local identity, strengthen community's self-esteem and provide a possibility for external income flow encouraging diversity of local services and businesses.

Local patriotism and general happiness

Tight horizontal ties are the most inherent characteristic of Jaunpils county's social structure. The quality of horizontal ties is distinguished by individual or group level of trust, cooperation, self-organisation practices, and civic engagement. It is important to side-track here for a moment explaining the low overall national self-organisation and social trust. People don't trust each other and they don't believe it is possible to change anything in existing situation, thus, it is safe to conclude that horizontal ties in Latvia are weak and undeveloped. There is a heavy impact of the Soviet regime in destroying social trust, breaking horizontal ties in a systematic manner, and demolishing any civic participation in governance processes. Jaunpils case of strong horizontal bondage can be explained by ethnic homogeneity and the deep historic role of family within the local processes. A new tradition of Local Community Forums (a systemic public involvement in municipal, self-governance and planning processes) runs successfully since 2004. Almost 5% of county's inhabitants (115 persons) participated in the Community forum in 2013. Voluntary communal work is a Latvian tradition that brought 150 persons to 15 locations during the largest communal work day in 2014.

4. Community emergence and territorial layout

The study shows the critical importance of municipal support and funding for maintaining level of social participation and NGO activity. The municipal practice is deemed as an enlightening example of fostering local social capital and should be shared among other regions as a good-practice case. Jaunpils inhabitants are more closely involved in all levels of decision-making and thus, are more convinced that their contribution is important and relevant to common well-being.

One of the research questions was addressing the issue of determining if social activities have a territorial signature. Do different regions correspond to different social activities in Latvia? It is of the upmost importance to understand historic administrative division and how the late territorial-administrative reform of 2009 has changed the organisational practices of the social habitation. The majority of social activities and NGO focus are concentrated to small number of large villages like Jaunpils, Leveste and Viesatas that coherently were the administrative centres of the Soviet farming cooperatives and, therefore, have inherited some infrastructure for maintaining the proper social life. In addition to that the old Soviet housing units, historically located along with main employment centres tag along the cohabitation and communication habits, similar interests and values of the previous workers villages. Quite many of these rather closely linked groups have reconfigured themselves as current housing management cooperatives.

From the standpoint of community emergence Jaunpils is characterised by 1) despite the short time elapsed since last territorial reform the community has managed to embrace the change and developed a new identity; 2) two previous administrative areas Jaunpils and Viesatas have socially bonded and merged; 3) villages as larger nuclei and farmsteads that take up their aerials. Jaunpils village stands out among others consisting of 3-4 separate historic communities.

Conclusions

1. Jaunpils county (*novads*) features high level of social, commercial and culture activity when compared to other municipal regions in Latvia. Despite its small size and low density of inhabitants Jaunpils demonstrates qualities of a high level of self-sufficiency and independence among territories of similar rural characteristics. The general trend of population decline is a causal factor for multitude of municipal challenges one of them being dwindling municipal budget. That being said it is even more important to efficiently invest public funds tackling issues which have the greatest potential of bringing the return on the investment. It is a conviction of authors that strengthening of social capital stands at the top of that investment list.
2. The social capital of research territory is the main stimulating factor of social activity, therefore, it is important to have the right tools to assess and analyse it in order to pick the most fitting actions for deciding the regional policy as well as strengthening the coordination of the local community life. Communities and their structure play the key role in determining local social capital.
3. Jaunpils county is characterised not only by strong social capital and high communal activity but also by different levels of territorial and regional community structure. The strong ties among two phenomena point towards diversity of community structure being a useful qualitative indicator in assessing the territories.

4. Horizontal ties and governance pay highly important role in the case at hand – each of the individual factors constituting a social capital are intentionally maintained, freshly interconnected and fortified. Therefore, it is important to take into consideration the praxis of local governance when assessing social capital otherwise significant part of the evaluation is lost.

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