

Interactive comment on “Participative environmental management and social capital in Poland” by A. Hunka and W. T. de Groot

Anonymous Referee #2

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This article poses an interesting question regarding the terms of European Union accession for Eastern European countries. How can countries emerging from years of authoritarian governance successfully implement participatory management approaches in line with EU legislation and requirements? The authors argue that collective social capital, as defined by group-level trust and strong social bonds, is a critical element for participatory management approaches to work effectively as it reduces the transaction costs of collective action. They further argue that in Eastern Europe collective social capital for a number of reasons was destroyed or weakened by years of centrally-planned economies and top-down management styles. They then turn to the case of Poland and note that low collective social capital has in a variety of ways undermined the effective implementation of participatory environmental management approaches. They suggest that in the light of this situation development agencies would perhaps

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be well advised to attempt participatory approaches only in communities/areas where levels of collective social capital are relatively high and therefore the chances of successful outcomes are enhanced. Attempting participatory approaches in low social capital contexts risks producing failed outcomes, thereby further eroding collective social capital. They do suggest though that by producing examples of successful collective management in some (higher social capital) communities, the chances of similar success in lower social capital communities will be increased because of the (successful) precedents that have been set.

This discussion is reminiscent of social capital debates from 15 years ago or more, with references to measurement and operationalization, debates around conceptual issues such as the distinctions between individual-level social capital, collective social capital and even national-level social capital, the possibility of “negative” social capital, and how social capital is created and destroyed. What is missing from the discussion is any critical stance towards the concept and its ultimate utility. Instead the authors make a number of large and, I think, unwarranted conceptual and theoretical assumptions. These include: 1) “collective social capital” exists, can be measured, and to the extent that it varies, varies by degree and not by content; 2) collective social capital is a principal component of collective action and therefore “explains” developmental outcomes, and; 3) collective social capital can be destroyed as well as created.

The problem inherent in assumptions like these is that the kind of “social capital” approach the authors take to understanding complex and historically contingent social processes becomes curiously de-historicized, de-politicized and de-contextualized, that is, a kind of uni-dimensional conceptual shorthand. In the approach taken in this paper, social capital is a “stock” of resources (rather than long-term processes connected to the ways in which power, privileges and resources are distributed) in which more is better. Those who don’t have it should get some; perhaps those who don’t have it should follow the example of those who do have it, especially once they see how much better off the “haves” are! It’s my strong suspicion that this kind of thinking

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leads not only to flawed understandings of highly complex, historicized and contingent social processes, but also to flawed development and policy prescriptions.

The authors also make, I believe a number of unwarranted empirical assumptions. For example, is it in fact the case that Poland (and other Eastern European countries) lack “social capital”? (If so, how, why and in what respects?) Is it in fact the case that participatory environmental management approaches have failed or fallen short because of deficient collective social capital? The authors also seem to conflate “collective social capital” (as group-level trust and strong social bonds) with “trust in government.” On the face of it, these seem like two quite distinct issues. If they are not, the authors have not convincingly made the case that this is so.

The authors may want to stick to their guns on their use of social capital. If this is true, then I encourage them to do so, but I also strongly encourage them to move their discussion forward and acknowledge the many critiques leveled against social capital (and in particular its use at the collective level as a causal mechanism in explaining developmental outcomes), and attempt to answer those critiques and justify their conceptual use of social capital in the case of Poland. As places to start I might suggest Fine (2001), Schafft & Brown (2003) and Fulkerson & Thompson (2008). I would also similarly suggest that the authors cast a more critical eye towards the notion of “participation.” Again a useful reference is Cooke & Kothari (2002).

References

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