

CAPABILITY OF COMMUNITIES AS PRECONDITION FOR SUSTAINABILITY OF RURAL AREAS

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Abstract. This paper represents a part of the results derived from the main findings of the PhD research focusing on community capability and community involvement in rural development in Latvia. Contemporary endogenous and neo-endogenous approaches to rural development emphasize greater involvement of local communities in development processes providing both opportunities of involvement in decision making and support instruments. However, communities lack capability to recognize and seize the opportunities in many cases. It is not conceivable that rural development policy objectives would be achieved without viable rural communities. Therefore, the aim of the paper is to characterize capability of rural communities as precondition for sustainability of rural areas, and to analyse factors affecting community's capability. Case study approach was chosen for the research, which was carried out in 2014 and 2015. Empirical data were obtained in three rural municipalities (novadi) representing three regions of Latvia: Riebini municipality (Latgale region), Rundale municipality (Zemgale region), and Strenci municipality (Vidzeme region). The research findings reveal that rural communities have strong cultural and social capability, whereas economic capability is very weak. Both internal and external factors affect capability, for example, migration and population mobility, availability of financial and human resources. These factors have positive as well as negative impact on capability of rural communities.

Key words: community capability, sustainability, rural areas.

JEL code: Q01, R58, Z13

Introduction

The concept of sustainability of rural areas and sustainability in rural contexts has gained popularity among scholars, researchers and policy makers all across Europe in the last decades. Along with other issues, quality of life, sustainability (economic, environmental and social), and balanced territorial development have been emphasized in the new Common Agricultural Policy 2014-2020 (European Commission, 2013). Current adverse socio-economic and demographic tendencies in many rural areas require complex solutions and greater

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coordination between different social agents (ministries, municipalities and local governments, non-governmental sector, and local communities) in defining policies and activities related to rural development. It is not conceivable that rural development policy objectives would be achieved without viable rural communities, thus, the question is, how communities can be resilient and improve their capability when they are challenged by both external and internal factors. Community resilience, capacity building and participation in development processes have been emphasized in many studies and discussed in a number of conferences, for example, organized by the European Society for Rural Sociology (ESRS, 2013). Involvement of rural communities in local development processes is emphasized in the endogenous and neo-endogenous approaches to rural development (Galdeano-Gómez E., Aznar-Sánchez J.A., Pérez-Mesa J.C., 2011). However, this approach is also criticized (see, for example, Margarian A., 2013). Nevertheless, current rural development policies in Europe and also in Latvia tend to promote greater activity of local actors.

Although there are number of recent studies about socio-economic issues in rural territories (e.g. Karklina R., 2012 and LVAEI, 2011), they do not focus specifically on analysis at community level and do not examine particular cases. This paper represents a part of the results derived from the main findings of the PhD research focusing on community capability and community involvement in rural development in Latvia. The case study approach was chosen for the research and empirical data were obtained in three rural municipalities (Figure 1). Document analysis, expert interviews, and semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to obtain the data. The aim of the paper is to characterize capability of rural communities as precondition for sustainability of rural areas, and to analyse factors affecting community's capability. In order to reach the aim, the following tasks were set:

- to explore theoretical discussion about the concept of rural community and to support it with empirical data;
- to define the concept of capability of rural communities and discuss its relations with sustainability;
- on the basis of qualitative research data, to identify internal and external factors affecting capability of rural communities.

The author of the paper seeks to find answers to the following research questions:

- (1) What are the links between capability of the community and sustainability of rural area?
- (2) What internal and external factors affect capability of rural communities?

Research methodology

The case study approach (Yin R.K., 2003) was chosen for the PhD research. In 2014 and 2015, empirical data were obtained about three rural municipalities (novadi) representing three Latvia's regions: Riebini municipality (Latgale region), Rundale municipality (Zemgale region), and Strenci municipality (Vidzeme region) (Figure 1).



Fig.1. Rural municipalities selected for the case study

The cases were selected according to the following criteria: 1) rural municipalities should represent different regions of the state; 2) the size of the territories and numbers of inhabitants should be comparable; 3) territory development index should differ among the municipalities; 4) selected municipalities should have different geographical allocation and distance from Riga and regional centers; 5) rural municipalities should vary by economic structure (diversity of economic activities, employment structure, unemployment, economic potential), socio-demographic structure, service infrastructure, natural and cultural resources; 6) rural municipalities should vary by number and structure of administrative units (villages, small towns, *pagasts*); 7) presence of active NGOs and local initiative groups in municipalities.

Document analysis, expert interviews, and semi-structured interviews were used in order to obtain the data, which characterized capability and resilience of local rural communities. Both expert interviews and semi-structured interviews focused on socio-economic aspects of community capability within a context of sustainability: community involvement in local development planning, local problems and challenges, community's abilities and skills to use financial and other supportive instruments provided by local governments, foundations, and national rural development policy. Two expert interviews were held with representatives of organizations supporting local initiatives in rural communities all across Latvia: *Liesma Ose* (Chair of the board of the Latvian Community Initiatives Foundation) and *Valdis Kudins* (Chair of the board of the Latvian Rural Forum). Experts were asked to share their experience and vision about the involvement of communities in local development processes, their ability to respond to current socio-economic challenges, and factors affecting community's capability. Twenty-one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the representatives of local governments and community members (mainly activists of local NGOs). They were asked about local initiatives and community involvement in local development processes, abilities and skills to cooperate and use available financial instruments etc. In order to support qualitative

data, the strategies for sustainable development of the particular municipalities, and development strategies at national level (for example, Rural Development Programme 2014-2020) were analyzed in the research.

Research results and discussion

Contemporary rural community: theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence

The concept of the community is used by sociologists in several different ways. In this research, the concept is used considering that the community is a group of people sharing a common territory as well as common interests, goals, participation, and identity. The concept of the rural community might seem self-evident; however, it raises many questions and sometimes confusion. What is a community in contemporary globalized world where people have both face-to-face interactions and virtual connections beyond their rural settings? Can we still find communities having close relationships, mutual trust and reciprocity, community spirit and self-awareness? What are boundaries of the community? Do people living in the same village or municipality necessarily form a community? Still, in contemporary world there is no question whether communities exist but more what types of local relationships people sustain and what dependence they have on local institutions (Scott J., 2006). Number of scholars relates an idea of community-led development with a shift from government to governance, thus, "communities have the capacities to take a more active role in their development" (Herbert-Cheshire, L., Higgins, V., 2004:389). However, it is very important to identify local actors which would be able to represent community opinion, define objectives and participate.

The research results show that the concept of community still has not enrooted very well in everyday communication at the community level as well as in vocabulary of policy makers. Definitely, a community is much more than a place. As one of the experts stated: "*Community is about recognition and acceptance of an internal diversity*" (the expert interview with Liesma Ose). Both experts suggested applying the concept on smaller territorial units than municipality, for example, a village or even a part of it. The case study results approve that communities in rural areas are not homogenous; they internally differ in social structures and relationship patterns which have been developed historically. Variety of socio-demographic groups, ethnicity, cultural and religious differences makes communities heterogeneous.

Capability of rural communities within a context of sustainable rural areas

The role of the community is to fulfil specific purposes that its members cannot satisfy alone (Brager G., Specht H., Torczyner L.J., 1987). Capability at the community level means that community is able to mobilise its resources and abilities, is aware of opportunities and recognizes them, and takes action actively, purposefully and accordingly to the goals set by the community. Ability of self-organization for achieving community's aims or interests, and for

preventing from marginalization, poverty and other negative processes is a factor significantly influencing capability of a community (e.g. Narayana D., 2005; Alsop R. et al, 2006). Capability has several dimensions. *Social and cultural dimension* means awareness and ability to maintain community's identity and cultural life, to support community members and satisfy their needs. *Environmental dimension* is related to community's responsibility to use and take care of its natural resources and anthropogenic environment. *Economic dimension* characterises involvement of the community members into economic activities, labour market, and private businesses. *Political dimension* means ability to establish or to be involved actively in local, nongovernmental and public organizations which have impact on community's life. In reality, these dimensions are interrelated. Capability is crucial for sustainable communities, which are in the core of sustainable rural areas. Schouten A.H.M. et al. denote rural areas as social-ecological systems, comprised of social and economic (or human) and ecological (or biophysical) characteristics (Schouten A.H.M., van der Heide M.C., Heijman J.M.W., Opdam F.M.P., 2012:166). In this system, the human subsystem (Socio-economic subsystem) is comprised of individuals, groups, networks and institutions (rules, regulations and procedures), which intervene with the ecological system (Ecosystem). Both subsystems interact: ecosystem provides services but humans intervene on ecosystem in different ways (Schouten A.H.M., van der Heide M.C., Heijman J.M.W., Opdam F.M.P., 2012:167) both positively and negatively. All these aspects should be considered when analysing rural community capability.

Analysis of the community initiatives shows that they are mainly focused on social, educational and cultural activities; there are few attempts to establish entrepreneurial initiatives. This leads to conclusion that social and cultural dimension of capability is more developed in rural areas, whereas, economic dimension is very weak. As local economy should be inclusive, developing community businesses requires community needs assessment and skilful resource management. The experts emphasize that rural people often lack business thinking skills and are not able to assign value to the services they can provide or goods they create. This, in turn, impedes developing new businesses. The most active social categories in rural areas are women, youth and seniors. These groups are mostly involved in community activities, which are related to social and cultural sphere. Capability in rural areas is often affected by ethnicity; it plays important role if ethnic groups form smaller closed communities and therefore they do not involve so actively in processes of wider community (local municipality).

Components of sustainable communities are as follows: effective and inclusive governance; good transport system and communication; public, private, voluntary and community services; inclusiveness; flourishing local economy; housing and the built environment; fair, tolerant and cohesive social environment; strong local culture (Sustainable Development Principles). To reach this condition in rural areas, governmental and municipal institutions need to develop purposeful public policy. However, more detailed analysis of the rural development policy

statements in Latvia (Ministry of Agriculture, 2014) leads to some doubts whether policy makers indeed treat rural development in its broader sense instead of focusing mainly on traditional rural activities (agriculture, forestry, fishery, natural resource management). It seems that diversified economy, social inclusion and reduction of poverty as well as improved road infrastructure, and services in rural areas are still the matter of political rhetoric. It is difficult to find one strategic document or plan purposefully focusing on rural problems in a systemic way except support to already mentioned traditional rural economic activities. These arguments were supported also by the respondents.

The interviews reveal that in most cases rural people and local governments (especially those allocated far from the capital Riga) struggle for surviving without reasonable vision on how rural areas should be developed in a future. In the interview, the expert Valdis Kudins defined sustainable community development this way: sustainable community development means that people sharing common territorial interests and having clearly defined objectives know how to reach them by self-organizing and restructuring local resources. Sustainable communities attract external means after restructuring local resources. The core idea of this statement is that community itself should be able to define objectives, purposefully use local resources and to turn its efforts in particular results. In this sense, definitions of capability and sustainable community development have basic arguments in common. The experts acknowledge that rural communities are too dependent of external resources which restrict ability to develop sustainable long-term strategies based on both local and external resources and opportunities.

Factors affecting capability of rural communities

The experts, members of local governments and community activists identified variety of factors, which have impact on capability of the community. In some aspects respondents shared common opinion; still the experts pointed more specific arguments based on their experience with rural communities all across the country. Community's capability is very much affected by both internal and external factors, for example, migration and population mobility, availability of financial and human resources. Summaries of the main factors having both positive and negative impact on capability are presented in Table 1 and Table 2.

External factors are influences coming from wider society, general socio-economic and demographic trends in the country, political and institutional environment, public policies etc. (Table 1). In most of the cases rural community initiatives are supported by the policy instruments provided by the EU funds (LEADER in particular), foundations supporting community initiatives (e.g. Latvian Community Initiatives Foundation, Society Integration Foundation, Soros Foundation, Boris and Inara Teterev Foundation) and small grants of local municipalities. These opportunities have multiple effects on community performances: on the one hand they provide financial resources and ensure practical fulfilment of local objectives

and initiatives, and on the other hand, require and also develop particular skills in local communities.

Table 1

External factors affecting capability of rural communities

Factors with a positive impact	Factors with a negative impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of the EU Structural Funds and financial instruments provided by the Rural Development Programme (LEADER) • Availability of financial support provided as small grants by local government (normally few hundreds of RUR) • Opportunities for international cooperation • Proximity of Riga or regional centre • Improved situation in regional or national economy, better job opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unsuccessful administrative territorial reform, which has led to unreasoned service infrastructure • Unreasoned public policies, which put survival and development of smaller rural municipalities under the threat • Too complicated bureaucratic procedures when applying for project funding • Adverse labour market conditions, high unemployment rate in the region • Too strong or weak neighbouring communities/ municipalities

Source: Expert and semi-structured interviews

Internal factors are related to the community itself and its internal environment: relationships, structures, resources etc. (Table 2).

Internal factors affecting capability of rural communities

Factors with a positive impact	Factors with a negative impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local patriotism and place attachment • Mutual trust, social capital (bridging and bonding ties) within a community and outside the community • Willingness to cooperate and spend time on behalf of the community, readiness to volunteer • Willingness to be still useful (important for elderly people) • Former experience of managing people and organizations, key people as driving force • Good education and specific skills • Being successful in previous activities • Enthusiastic newcomers, who bring novel ideas and have skills to motivate and convince locals; for newcomers it is important to be accepted as trustworthy • Availability of financial support provided by the local governments as small grants (normally few hundreds of EUR) • Municipal support and expertise • Presence of natural or/and cultural heritage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adverse socio-demographic structure • Outmigration of youth and jobseekers • Lack of trust, and bridging and bonding ties within and outside the community • Focusing on problem solving instead of seizing the opportunities • Lack of dialogue and/ or internal competition between subgroups • Historically established reserved relationships between ethnic groups or other groups within a community • Language barriers, cultural and religious differences, which lead to misunderstanding and difficulties to come to agreement • Lack of resources; lack of key people as driving force and brokering • Local apathy, local conflicts, e.g. between local government and informal community leaders • Lack of both understanding and shared vision on future development, priorities and means, how to reach particular targets; fear of change

Source: *Expert and semi-structured interviews*

The data show that economic capability in communities is less developed than other capability dimensions (social, cultural, and political). Respondents were asked to suggest, what should be done to develop economic capability in rural communities. Most of the respondents were not able to answer; even representatives of local governments had difficulties to formulate their opinion. The experts shared their vision and proposed to develop Public Private Partnerships in order to warm-up local economy; also social entrepreneurship was seen as appropriate solution.

Conclusions and recommendations

1. Rural development policy focus on rural sustainability providing special support programmes also for rural communities. Objectives set by the rural development policy can be achieved in viable rural communities with well developed political, cultural, social, and economic capability. 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.

2. Links between sustainability of rural areas are closely related to all dimensions of community capability as they are interrelated. Social and cultural dimension of capability is well developed in researched communities; however, in order to be more sustainable in a long run, communities should focus more on economic activities, cooperation networks, developing new business, establishing social entrepreneurship. The research reveals that lack of project writing skills and inability to formulate particular objectives often are obstacles for applying for funding.
3. Positive impact on capability have local patriotism and place attachment, high level of social capital (bridging and bonding ties), readiness to volunteer and willingness to be useful, good education and specific skills, key people as a driving force, municipal support and expertise. In many cases newcomers become a driving force for change.
4. Capability of rural communities is negatively affected by a number of internal and external factors, such as adverse socio-demographic structure of the community, outmigration of youth and jobseekers, lack of bridging and bonding ties within and outside the community, historically established reserved relationships between ethnic groups or other groups within a community, language barriers, cultural and religious differences, lack of key people as driving force, unreasoned public policies.

Acknowledgments



This work has been supported by the European Social Fund within the project "Support for Doctoral Studies at University of Latvia".

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