Farmers’ Organizations: Building Social Capital for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Uganda

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Justification for the Study

Social capital, defined as trust in others, social networks and norms of reciprocity, is essential to foster the collective action necessary to conserve natural resources. Farmers’ organizations can build social capital within groups (bonding) or among groups (bridging).

Four features are important to consider regarding building social capital within organizations: relations of trust; reciprocity and exchanges; common rules, norms and sanctions; and connectedness in networks and groups.

Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILCs) in the Ninkya parish of Uganda consist of a mirroring component and a collectively managed banana plot. We looked for evidence that NGO-supported SILC schemes are building the important features of social capital which could then facilitate the sustainable management of community natural resources.

Can Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILCs) build social capital which can then be used to collectively manage natural resources?

Results and Discussion

There is a high density of farmers’ organizations in the Ninkya parish with several organizations in each village. Seventy percent of the members are women. All organizations observed were either self-initiated and externally supported or externally initiated and externally supported. Organizations without external support quickly dissolve.

Distrust within the community (low social capital) prohibits farmers from participating in organizations. It is also a threat to the sustainable management of common resources, as corruption causes exploitation of resources. SILC groups are influencing social capital within the group (See Table 1) and bringing members together to collectively manage a banana plot. Bridging social capital (outgroup relations) is still lacking, causing strong personal boundaries and inhibiting new members (See Figure 1).

The paradox of high densities of collective organizations with low levels of trust seems to contradict Putnam’s proxy of using membership in voluntary organizations as measure of social capital. However we maintain that the density of voluntary farmers’ organizations is artificially high due to external support and not an accurate proxy for the social capital in this area. Despite the challenge of extreme individualism and distrust, many of these farmers’ organizations manage to build social capital among the participants and provide incentives for farmers to collectively manage their banana plot (See Figure 2). Farmers receive training in management, transparency and accountability which reduces instances of individuals exploiting the groups’ natural resources.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relations of trust</th>
<th>Reciprocity and exchanges</th>
<th>Common rules, norms and sanctions</th>
<th>Connectedness in networks and groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transparency builds trust</td>
<td>95%, repayment rate on loans</td>
<td>Groups collectively develop norms of loans</td>
<td>Members enjoy the spirit of teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distrust is a barrier to participation</td>
<td>Some women must sneak out of house to attend meetings or leave the group if they become too empowered</td>
<td>Sanctions against those who break the rules</td>
<td>Groups support community groups create horizontal connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men receive more loans and more plant material than women</td>
<td>Sanctions applied inconsistently</td>
<td>Disenfranchisement against new members</td>
<td>Groups create few vertical connections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

- Savings and Internal Lending Communities (SILCs) are building social capital among the participants by creating trust, social networks, rules and norms and a culture of reciprocity.
- Social capital within the community is too low for collective action without the support of an external agent such as an NGO.
- Social capital built in SILC groups helps in the conservation of natural resources.

Method

This research was undertaken as part of the AgTrain/ARI field methods training course, a joint course between the University of Copenhagen and Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda. Field work consisted of nine semi-structured interviews and four focus groups with members and non-members of organizations, key informants and NGOs. Interviews were translated from Luganda to English by a local guide.

Bibliography