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Individual Social Capital — A Structural Approach

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Abstract

Social capital has been recently held up as a conceptual framework to build a bridge between the diverse disciplines involved in rural development. Some researchers state that social capital can even become a joint concept for all social sciences. However, despite its potential and the impressively rapid take-up of the concept by the community of development professionals, it remains an elusive construct. No definition is yet generally accepted and many definitions are in use. Recently, social capital in the form of social networks has gained much attention in rural development theory and empirical research. Social networks or structural components of social capital are a largely missing dimension of income and poverty analysis. Moreover, most research on social capital assumes that it is a uniform entity. Therefore, the effects of different forms of social capital on household outcome are rarely investigated. Similar to the broad range of definitions for social capital, there are as many different ways to measure it. The objective of this contribution is to bring more structure into the conceptual framework of social capital and to broaden our understanding of individual social capital in rural household economies prone to poverty. After an extensive literature review, this work proposes a lean and clear definition of social capital: Social capital is best conceived as networks plus resources, (e.g. credit, information). As social capital is rooted in social networks, it should be measured relatively to its roots. Moreover, social capital is assumed to be not a homogeneous entity. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish different forms of social capital. In the case of rural areas in developing countries, the separation into so-called bonding and bridging capital seems to be most appealing. Finally, we propose the operationalization of these two forms of social capital as function of an agent's so-called weak ties (e.g. acquaintances) (plus resources) and strong ties (e.g. close relatives) (plus resources). These issues will be systematically discussed and presented in this contribution in order to make the formerly 'fuzzy' concept of social capital more tangible for empirical research in the area of rural development.

Keywords: Binding social capital, bridging social capital, definition of social capital, measuring social capital, social capital