

Strengthening social capital with excluded rural populations in Portugal

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Abstract: *The paper concerns the evaluation of training courses in low-density rural areas within Portugal and focuses on the changes in the lives of these participants and their acquisition of social skills as a result of the training courses. The training program objective was concerned with improving employment skills. The discussion addresses social capital and empowerment to emphasize a non-formal educational strategy for excluded rural populations and the implications in their livelihoods. Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have summarised, outlined and categorized empirical studies surrounding social capital and their practical orientation for rural development. The studies posit that excluded groups need to increase their social capital and relationships with other groups, entities and governmental figures to be empowered and participate in the decision-making process in their communities. The paper presents the educational initiatives in training courses that strengthened social and employment skills. These initiatives designed to improve decision-making in isolated rural communities through the construction of social capital and networks, while promoting active participation in governance will be presented as educational interventions and relate to both economic and non-economic training activities in rural mountainous communities. The preoccupation to a lifelong learning process is not one dimensional, but multi-dimensional (economic, social, cultural, environmental and civic) as a rural development process. The conclusion will consider various clues to improve non-formal educational programs for promoting and strengthening initiatives with rural populations.*

Keywords: *non-formal education, rural women, rural development, engagement, empowerment and social capital*

Introduction

The paper is a revised edition of a previously published paper (see Koehnen, et al. 2009). The analysis addresses a set of educational interventions to strengthen social capital and empowerment among excluded rural populations, particularly women. The overall question to be reviewed by this paper is: How can teaching-learning approaches (i.e. educational tools and methods, supervised experience programs, civic and leadership modules) play a greater role in constructing additional social capital for excluded groups in mountainous rural areas where public transport is limited and poor? The educational interventions will be an important point of discussion with regard to the data presented.

The relevance of educational activities to improve the decision-making capacities and social capital of excluded members in rural communities will be treated through various educational approaches. The discussion of the results will also serve to suggest improvements in rural training programs to enhance empowerment within similar contextual situations.

Empowerment and social capital review

Regarding the empowerment concept for rural development, the paper focuses on the human and social skills. These skills are needed by the excluded populations to become more involved in the decision making process within their communities in both governmental and non governmental organizations in rural development (Luttrel et al. 2007). The empowerment process (multi-dimensional) is designed to strengthen self-confidence and the ability to solve community problems.

In this context, Bourdieu (1985), Coleman (1988), Grootaert and van Bastelaer (2002), Putnam, Leonardi and Manetti (1993), Portes (1998), Woolcock and Narayan (2000) and Uphoff (2000) define social capital and discuss the benefits of membership in social networks for society. Many authors address the importance of civil engagement to improve community co-ordinated activities in a collective manner (Putnam, Leonardi and Manetti, 1993, Woolcock and Narayan, 2000 and Portes, 1998). For example one definition states, “social capital refers to the norms and networks that enable people to act collectively” (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000:226).

In addressing civic engagement through voluntary participation in community organizations, the rural development process should improve collective decision-making and social capital. “Social capital can be understood most usefully by distinguishing two interrelated categories of phenomena: (a) **structural**, and (b) **cognitive**. ... The structural category is associated with various forms of social organization, particularly *roles, rules, precedents* and *procedures* as well as a wide variety of networks that contribute to cooperation, and specifically to mutually beneficial collective action (MBCA), which is the stream of benefits that result from social capital.

The cognitive category derives from mental processes and resulting ideas, reinforced by culture and ideology, specifically norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs that contribute to cooperative behaviour and MBCA” (Uphoff, 2000:218). These thinking skills can be reinforced in the training programs through educational activities, methods and tools.

The empirical studies and definitions of social capital reflect or suggest that the quality and density of social networks and institutions relates to the rural development process. Social capital may strengthen the performance of the members in local organizations involved in local development. For this reason, the construction and strengthening of social capital with excluded members in the community through non-formal educational intervention, methods and tools can facilitate the mobilization and empowerment process. “Thus, the identification, protection and strengthening of existing social capital should be very integral elements of poverty alleviation strategies” (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002:36). These strategies should include the role of non-formal educational programs such as rural extension and rural training programs.

In this endeavor, Woolcock and Narayan (2000) have outlined and categorized empirical studies surrounding social capital and their practical implications for rural development. The studies have defended the idea that excluded groups need to strengthen their social capital and relationships with other groups, entities and governmental figures to be empowered and participate in their community decision-making process.

The authors have listed the following categories of social capital: 1) the *communitarian* perspective (clubs, associations and civic groups) with the understanding that social capital is *good*; 2) the *network* perspective that emphasizes the vertical and horizontal associations among people that value the intra and inter organizational relationships of people in the community; 3) the *institutional* perspective treated social capital as a dependent variable without being good or bad. The capacity for people to intervene depends on the quality of the formal institutions (political, legal and economic) that make up the contextual system in which the stakeholders live and work; and 4) *synergy* perspective summarizes that *embeddedness* (nature and extent of the ties constructed by citizens and public officials) and *complementarity* (mutually supportive relations between public and private actors) indicate the social capital synergy between citizens and governmental officials (2000:236). These perspectives need to be considered in training courses. The perspectives reflect potential training activities for excluded populations to increase social interaction with governmental and non-governmental agencies in local communities.

The mobilization and educational process needs to be directed at those with less civic opportunities and social skills to increase empowerment and social capital within these social groups, while minimizing the negative consequences such as corruption, restriction on individual liberty, the possibility of downward levelling mentality and excess claims on the time of people (Portes, 1998; Durlauf, 1999; Loomis and Beegle, 1975).

Case study evaluation

This case study evaluation was financed by Ministry of Economic and Work Activities in Portugal (*Desenvolvimento e Modernização das Estruturas e Serviços de Apoio às Políticas de Emprego e Formação (POEFDS), da Acção-tipo 4.2.2.1*). The training programs evaluated by the former trainees were carried out during 2003-2005 and had 1182 trainees (999 females and 183 males).

Data collection was carried out using questionnaires (116 participant interviews), focus group interviews, and life story interviews (10). Isaac and Michael (1981), Patton (1980) and many others have supported such instruments to collect quantitative and qualitative data in research and evaluation projects.

Training programs and participant profile

In 2003-2005, the rural development training programs to strengthen employability were in the following areas: conventional agricultural, forestry, organic farming, tourism (handicrafts), management, food processing and transformation of local products. The majority of the training programs involved 60 to 250 hours. If the course (17% of the 116 interviewed) included a formal adult educational component, the number of hours reached the 1000 hours plateau. With this additional component, many participants completed during the training the equivalent of 4th, 6th or 9th grade in the Portuguese formal educational system. In addition, 53% of the participants completed one training course, while the rest completed from two to four professional training courses in areas previously identified.

The description of the participants from these training programs is predominately female (87%), married (80%), and unemployed. Other social roles and aspects of this sample describe them as mothers, 45 years of age, low education level (over 50% with 6th grade or less) and their family income near the poverty level. The questionnaire results also established that only 4% found employment after the training course(s) and the training course(s) contributed to some extent to improve family income. Interestingly, the training courses had a positive impact involving lifelong learning and the social development of these participants, where 78% believed the training programs changed their lives.

The information collected from the life story interviews documents the challenges that rural women faced to attend the formal educational system as children. The difficulties included long distances from school, uninspired teachers, families that preferred to educate the son instead of daughter, lack of monies to support indirect and direct education costs and unfortunately when they showed some dislike or indifference for schooling they lacked parental guidance to instill in them the importance of schooling for the future (Koehnen and Baptista, 2007).

Results and discussion of the participants ratings

The discussion focuses primarily on six questions rated by these former trainees. The answers are complimented by other observations and information from the study such as focus group interviews and life stories. The analysis addresses teaching-learning initiatives and interventions within the training programs that permit active learning by women and men. The analysis considers additional educational aspects to strengthen social skills and social capital as well.

The participants were asked to rate themselves using a numerical five-point scale (5=Very high; 4=high, 3=average, 2=low and 1= none). The ratings were completed after participation in rural training programs and permit an interpretation of their personal growth from their training programs. The results are discussed and described below in the following charts.

Chart 1 shows that the former trainees gained self-esteem and confidence according to their rating from high to very high (45%). The mean rating for this category was 3.3. The social development of these participants to function better in society can be attributed to the participation in these training

programs. The teaching-learning activities such as group work and discussion played an important part in improving self-esteem. The training programs have value if rural women have the possibility to participate and interact with other women in these rural areas and construct networks with other trainees and trainers.

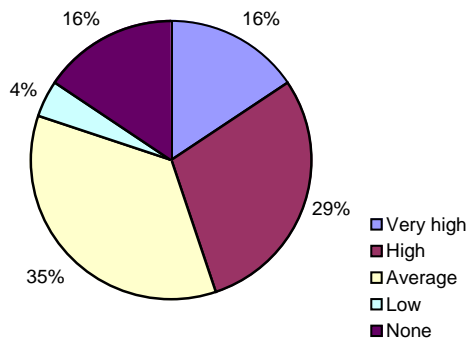


Chart 1. Self-esteem/confidence.

The participants rated an improvement in their communication capacity (see Chart 2) with others as high to very high (39%). Communication is an important competency in the working world as well as non-economic interactions with family and community members. Communication with others and the linking process is important in order to build social capital. The mean rating for assertive communication was 3.1. These training courses required the trainees to present information orally in the classroom among their colleagues and trainers. This was an important teaching-learning activity to improve assertive communication skills. In fact, the focus group interviews identified an improvement in dealing with governmental officials in the employment area. The participants were able to confront local governmental officials with greater communication capacity, esteem and courage.

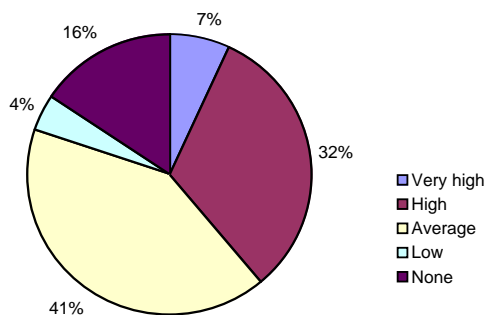


Chart 2. Assertive Communication.

At least 31% (see Chart 3) of the participants rated their social initiative as high to very high after the training courses, while 32% rated their initiative as low or none at all. The mean rating for initiative was 2.8. What is happening at the training site to increase their initiative and autonomy? In some cases, the participants were responsible for identifying, explaining and justifying agricultural production activities and project proposals to increase family income in their discussion groups. The trainers used social interaction and role-playing to permit women and men to share their perspectives, aspirations and ideas for improving their livelihood and family owned properties while strengthening thinking capacities.

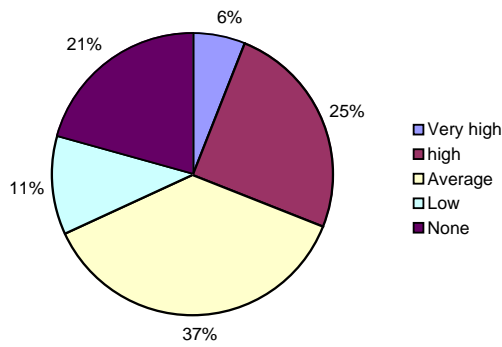


Chart 3. Initiative/Autonomy.

In the working world, many employers are looking for people that have good personal relations, social skills and job skills with fellow workers and customers. The information on Chart 4 can be considered positive in the improvement of social skills that relates to social development and lays the foundation for the construction of social capital in the community. The trainees rated themselves at least high or higher in their improvement with relationships (62%). The mean rating for personal relations was 3.6. The training courses contributed to creating friendships and relationships with the participants, instructors and guests. Many training courses used various instructors in order to give participants the possibility to interact with different personalities and gain confidence to verbally interact.

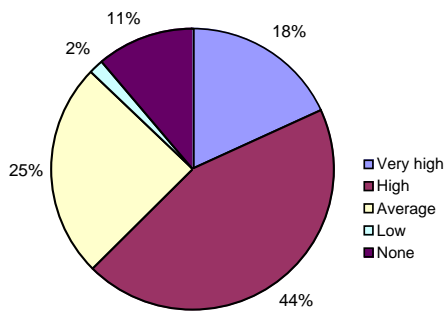


Chart 4. Personal Relationships.

According to Chart 5, the trainees are participating at a low level in community associations after the training programs. The mean rating for participating in associations was 1.6. In fact, 77% said they did not participate in these types of non-economic activities after the training. The training programs must do more to give the participants experiences in non-economic community activities. The activities should focus on improving social and leadership skills by supervised voluntary experiences in community associations or other community activities.

Phipps and Osborne (1988), Elliot, Boone, and Doerfert (1991) and Perrenoud (1996) reflect on the monitoring and supervisory component in training and education and the relevance of this type of experience for the trainee. The supervised experience can be occupational by creating a business project as an entrepreneur or a non-occupational project such as community service by landscaping and maintaining nursing home and school gardens, building a recreational area or park, organize a cooperative for organic products or serve as an intern in community governmental or non-governmental organizations.

These supervised experiences are integrated into a training program as an additional component. In fact, a unit or module should be considered to explain and prepare for the process and allow the trainee to begin a preliminary project plan for the activity and formulate objectives. These activities should be individualized for each of the trainees. However, in addition, one could envision group projects to complement the individual project.

The responsibility of the trainers to make visits to the project is essential for the learning partnership. The trainers encourage the trainees to develop successful experiences and make frequent visits to the non-occupational project or occupational. The project should use innovative practices and techniques, while maintaining accurate and complete organizational records. The learning partnership must be based on respect, trust and solidarity. The trainers during this process use educational methods, coaching, consultation, mentoring and monitoring of the individualized non-occupational experience (Koehnen and Baptista, 2006).

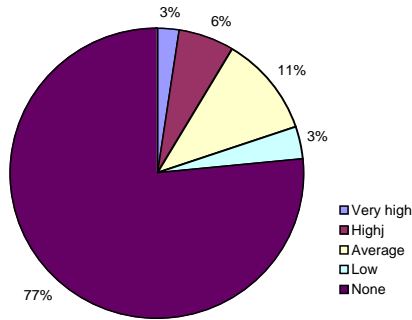


Chart 5. Participate in Associations.

Chart 6 shows that the trainees are also participating at a low level in general community activities after completing the training programs. The mean rating for participating in community activities was 2.3. In fact, 48% said they did not participate in these types of non-economic activities and only 22% rated their participation as high to very high. Once again, internships should focus on gaining experience in participating in community non-economic activities that are supervised by trainers. The principle objective to increase skills in order to become employed must not be the only reason for these training programs. The training programs must also focus on governance and leadership skills in these disadvantaged regions. This population has unequal social capital in comparison to local governmental and non-governmental leaders (Koehnen and Cristóvão, 2006; Koehnen, Baptista and Portela, 2004). They need greater social and civic interaction with local leaders within their communities and supervised non-occupational internships should be considered in training programs.

In addition, the training programs need to strengthen or include leadership and civic educational modules to encourage trust, respect and appreciation of diversity in the community. The participants needs to develop a vision of the future, while promoting collective learning and resolution of problems. The module must assist the trainees to develop social and public leadership skills. The trainees must be prepared to be stewards and leaders for their community (Hastedde and Woodward, 1996).

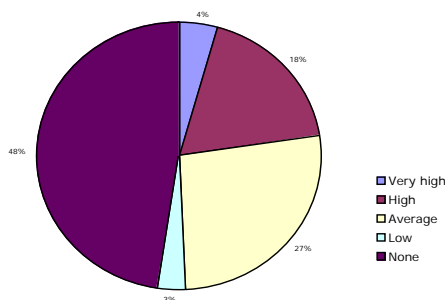


Chart 6. Participate in Community Activities.

The training programs objectives were to increase employment or improve employment skills in a low-density mountainous region. The training programs should have also incorporated other

teaching-learning activities and methods to attempt to increase participation and empower these less affluent members in the rural population. The evaluated training programs were not concerned with implementing non-economic initiatives in rural development. The training programs were primarily concerned about economic initiatives, but non-economic initiatives such as strengthening civic engagement and social capital skills would have been beneficial for these excluded rural actors and the rural communities in which they live.

With this additional objective, the training programs could have developed teaching-learning activities to permit participants to practice constructing networks and synergistic activities to reflect *embeddedness* and *complementarity*. Sustainable rural development requires an active rural population involved in collective or community decision-making and problem solving. The non-economic initiatives (non-occupational) can complement the economic initiatives (occupational) for these rural training programs.

Social capital construction through training activities

Educational and training programs in rural areas play an important role for rural development and allocative ability of human capital (Huffman, 1974). And yet, rural areas in Portugal have excluded populations that are not engaged in community or associational activities (see charts 4 and 5). For this reason, training programs need to develop educational activities and training objectives to increase and strengthen empowerment and social capital within these rural areas. These training programs need to include modules in their training program that include civic education (understanding local government and social services) and social development (in the form of leadership skills). The training or educational programs need to create internship activities for these participants to gain civic engagement experiences while working in governmental and non-governmental organizations in their communities. They need to be motivated to become volunteers engaged in parent-teachers associations, church activities, cultural activities or local cooperative as well as sitting in on town meetings in order to improve their social capital. These non-economic activities would be a part of the training programs and be supervised by the educators. In addition, these engagement activities could be followed up by various group discussion sessions of their experiences in a classroom setting.

The teaching-learning activities need to permit the participant to construct additional networks that reflect the vertical and horizontal relationships found in their local governmental and non-governmental organizations. The engagement skills in the construction of leadership and social skills, social capital and power should be oriented toward collective actions within the communities that they live. Local organizations should be concerned with involving the local populations in an advisory capacity in order to increase community participation and construct additional social capital through participatory activities such as advisory councils and internships.

Conclusion

Rural development policies in Portugal lack a holistic approach to rural development. In many cases, they do not value or include the non-economic activities such as the participation in town meetings, internships in governmental or non-governmental organizations or other volunteer activities. The non-economic initiatives reflect a concern to build partnerships and networks in these rural communities. The construction of the community networks should involve the entire rural population. Those with unequal skills, disadvantaged, blocked from the educational system in the past and lacking in capacities to construct synergistic social capital need to be prepared and engaged in this process through continuous rural training or a functioning extension educational system.

The lifelong learning process is not one dimensional, but multi-dimensional (economic, social, cultural, environmental and civic). It reflects the concern of an educational system or rural development process to increase the participation and empowerment of excluded populations in economic and non-economic initiatives. It is a “learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of

improving knowledge, skills and competencies within a personal, civic, social and/or employment related perspective” (OECD, 2003:15).

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