



THE ROLE OF PERSONAL NETWORKS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN SMALL-SCALE CIVIC ACTIVITY

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Introduction

■ The social and economic reality of small Hungarian settlements has undergone significant changes in the last decades, which have posed serious challenges to local communities. The demographic and social composition of rural areas has fundamentally changed as a result of the economic structural changes that unfolded after the fall of communism, the intensification of urbanisation, and the influx of younger, more mobile generations into cities. The ageing of the population, declining birth rates, job losses, and the weakening of the local economic base have all contributed to the loosening of community cohesion and raised the question of what factors can maintain and renew the social fabric of small villages. The study of this issue has become particularly timely, as recent socio-economic developments have highlighted that the adaptability and resilience of local communities are key to the survival and development of their areas.

In this context, civil society organisations and community initiatives are of particular importance, as they can contribute to the stability and development of local society through social capital and networks of contacts. Social capital - understood by Bourdieu (1986) as a set of relational resources and by Putnam (2000) as a set of community trust, norms, and networks - is a fundamental resource for the functioning of communities. Close personal networks of relationships, which are particularly prevalent in small community contexts, provide opportunities for the rapid flow of



information, cooperation, and mutual assistance. These networks are also a means of maintaining social control and community norms, stabilising local social relations, and facilitating collective action.

However, the specific social structure of small communities has an ambivalent impact on civic activity. On the one hand, dense networks based on strong bonds (bonding social capital) ensure internal community cohesion and foster the trust and solidarity that are essential for launching and sustaining local initiatives. On the other hand, however, these networks are often closed and less open to new actors and external resources, which can limit innovation and adaptability. In contrast, bridging social capital, which connects individuals to looser, more heterogeneous networks, can bring new impulses and knowledge to communities, facilitating renewal and access to external resources. The balance between these two forms of social capital is therefore crucial for the viability and dynamism of the small-scale civil society sector.

Our central question is through which mechanisms do the close contact structures specific to small communities support community self-organisation and contribute to the preservation or regeneration of local social capital. The study of this issue is not only intended to contribute to the social science discourse, but is also relevant from a practical point of view, as its results can help to better design local development strategies and community development programmes. The theoretical basis for the investigation is provided by classical and contemporary approaches to social capital and networks of relationships (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1973; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2000).

The transformation of rural Hungary has received increasing attention in social science research in recent decades, as globalization, demographic changes, and economic transformations have had a particularly strong impact on these areas. In this context, the study of resilience and social cohesion is not merely a theoretical question but has practical significance for the survival and renewal of local communities. A key point of analysis is the concept of social capital, which can be traced back to the works of Bourdieu, Coleman, and Putnam. Bourdieu's critical perspective draws attention to inequalities in access to social resources, while Coleman emphasizes the integrating effect of norms and mutual expectations. Putnam's classic works highlight the collective benefits of social capital and the strengthening of democratic participation.

At the same time, significant debates have arisen around the concept of social capital, as highlighted in the writings of Fine (2001, 2010), Woolcock (2000, 2001), and Szreter. According to Fine, social capital is often an over-fetishized concept that obscures the problem of structural inequalities. Woolcock's multidimensional model emphasizes the complexity of social relationships, while Szreter introduced the concept of "linking social capital" to interpret the relationships between different social levels. The latter is particularly relevant in the Hungarian rural context, where the relationship between local communities and state institutions often determines development opportunities.



Taking into account debates and theoretical rethinking is essential in order to avoid sticking to classic schemas in the analysis of social cohesion and resilience, and to be able to grasp the specific challenges of rural Hungary today. The framework outlined here is therefore based not only on traditional interpretations of social capital, but also on the critical discourse that places these in new dimensions. In light of this, the study of rural transformation is not only about the internal relationship system of local communities, but also about their embeddedness in broader social structures.

Hungarian rural areas have undergone profound social and economic transformation over the past three decades, the consequences of which continue to shape the everyday lives of communities to this day. The industrial restructuring that followed the change of regime had a severe impact on many settlements, as the loss of local jobs led to long-term unemployment. This process was further exacerbated by the migration of young, educated people to cities or abroad, leading to demographic decline and an increase in the proportion of the aging population. Access to public services—health care, education, transportation—has deteriorated significantly, especially in smaller villages.

Infrastructural deficiencies and the digital divide also hinder rural catch-up, even though adequate network and technological connectivity are a basic prerequisite for resilience. During the economic restructuring, the dominance of agriculture gradually declined, while the diversification of the local economy was slow to take off. In some regions, tourism and initiatives based on local products offer a way out, but these often provide uncertain and seasonal income. Social cohesion is weakened by the fact that community institutions, such as cultural centers or village community organizations, struggle with a lack of resources and apathy among their members.

At the same time, civil society initiatives and projects supported by local governments prove that it is possible to mobilize community resources. The importance of “linking social capital” is particularly emphasized here: local communities can adapt successfully if they are able to establish links with regional and national institutional actors. The effective use of EU development funds, for example, depends to a large extent on the availability of this relational capital. Resilience, therefore, depends not only on the strength of internal cohesion but also on the quality of external relations.

Based on the above, the transformation of rural Hungary is not a uniform process: some regions are showing dynamic development, while in others the gap is widening. The key to future research and interventions is to explore what forms of social capital, institutional cooperation, and community strategies promote the strengthening of rural resilience.

This paper describes the demographic, economic, and social trends in small Hungarian villages and the changing role of NGOs in this context. How social capital and networks of connections influence the maintenance of community cohesion and the strengthening of local adaptive capacities is discussed in detail. In line with this, the paper will outline the theoretical and practical contexts in which civic activism can be understood as a key factor for sustainable development and social innovation in



small and medium-sized municipalities. In doing so, the research contributes to the broader academic discourse that seeks to identify opportunities for social renewal in rural areas in the face of global and local changes in the 21st century.

Social capital and civil society

Social capital theory is a field of economics that goes back centuries. In delving into the subject, one encounters many theories, from Adam Smith's foundational concept to the systematic work of Gary Becker, Pierre Bourdieu, and James S. Coleman, to Francis Fukuyama (Ponyi, 2014). Many economists and researchers have attempted to define it, but in my paper, I will use László Ponyi's definition, which includes all the concepts I have included below. Social capital in the institutional system of culture and in the dimension of cultural communities is a relational concept that is decisively expressed in relation to the cultural institution, the individual, and a civil community, in their interactions with each other. The individual or community mobilises its resources in pursuit of certain objectives, for some presumed benefit, and primarily on a voluntary basis. It is determined by rules of conduct and norms of behaviour agreed upon by the institution, the individual, and the community, and which, if not met, may be subject to sanctions by the community. These sanctions can lead to changes in the quality and quantity of resources available. Social capital is the basis and the condition for the functioning of civil society and for the cooperation between cultural institutions and the civil society within them. It also refers to the resources, or indeed the set of resources, whose very existence depends on trust.

Initially, capital meant only material goods and money, but later it also included land and labour, and then, in addition to all these factors of production, ideas were formulated that gave the concept of capital other dimensions. The most important in analysing theories of social capital is Robert Putnam's thought (Putnam, 2004). In this paper, he uses the earlier example of Hume to show how farmers can benefit from working together and working together rather than in constant competition and envy. He argues that a community can be effective if it has the necessary trust in each other. He argues that social capital is made up of bonds and networks of individuals, and that its effectiveness depends on trust and cooperation, and that its use develops trust and cooperation. Social capital, as Putnam understands it, includes the personal relationships of individuals, networks of social relations, strong civil society organisations, solidarity, trust, and reciprocity. From its content, it can be deduced that social capital is not held by the individual but by an active community of individuals. Putnam, in another paper, distinguishes between two dimensions of social capital: connective (or exclusionary) social capital and bridging (or inclusive) social capital (Putnam, 2000). The former is characterised by strong ties, the ability to form segregating groups, and homogeneous community consciousness. The latter can be described by less strong ties, but this type is able to break down, bridge,



and link boundaries between groups. According to Putnam, this form is ideal for building relationships between organisations. The presence, strength, and size of social capital in a given society can be identified by a number of indicators. These include generalised trust, i.e., public trust, the level of trust in political institutions and organisations, the activity of civil society, the extent of personal contacts, or even the provision of assistance (Füzér et al., 2005). Public opinion, the state of social well-being, general satisfaction, the feeling of vulnerability, the existence of general democratic demands in the public consciousness, counter-selection, and the systemic-criticism of the systemic justice system are all indicators, that describe the current situation and attitudes of society, which can be used by professionals to map, understand, analyse and describe the current state of social relations and relationships (Hunyady, 2016, 2021).

There are many ways of interpreting the concept of civil society. Only in the Hungarian context can we find different conceptions in the work of András Bozóki (1992) or Miklós Molnár (1993, 1995, 1996). Summarising the writings on the subject, it can be said that the narrow understanding of civil society is limited to the self-organisation of society, encompassing a specific group of associations and organisations (Márkus and Pete, 2018). In the 1980s, the concept was saturated with political content due to the action against the political regimes of the time, but by the 1990s, this content had been emptied. When we think of civil society, we should not only include institutionalised, legally constituted organisations, but also other forms of self-organisation resulting from citizen activism (e.g., neighbourhood cooperation). Its development has been a long process, spanning centuries and millennia, and its various forms can be found in different historical periods and eras. Civil society is, broadly speaking, a stratum of citizens acting as a community. The citizen is not only an individual, but also an active member of a nation, society, or group. From this point of view, civil society is therefore a world of citizens - individuals and groups - acting freely, independent of the state and centred on public life.

Social capital provides a solid basis for the voluntary nature of the civil sector and for exploiting the positive effects of interdependence. This civil society, in turn, has a key role to play in the proper functioning of democratic states through its voluntary and community involvement. As regards the social function dimension, its role in promoting and strengthening integration should be emphasised. Social (and cultural) capital thus plays an essential and important role in civil society, being incorporated into its functioning (either through the public cultural institutions, in cooperation with them, or completely independently of them) in the form of self-organising circles, clubs, and associations. But in addition to organising itself into groups, social capital also transmits basic social norms, patterns of behaviour, and rules that make the functioning of these organisations sustainable, predictable, and stable.

In our country, after the change of regime, civic activity increased greatly, with more and more associations and organisations being set up. In 2021, there were 61,034 NPOs, of which more than 41,000 were social NPOs and 19,700 were NPOs



in the form of non-profit companies, public foundations, and interest groups. The development of civil society organizations provides important background information on the types of social capital that are most prevalent in different communities.

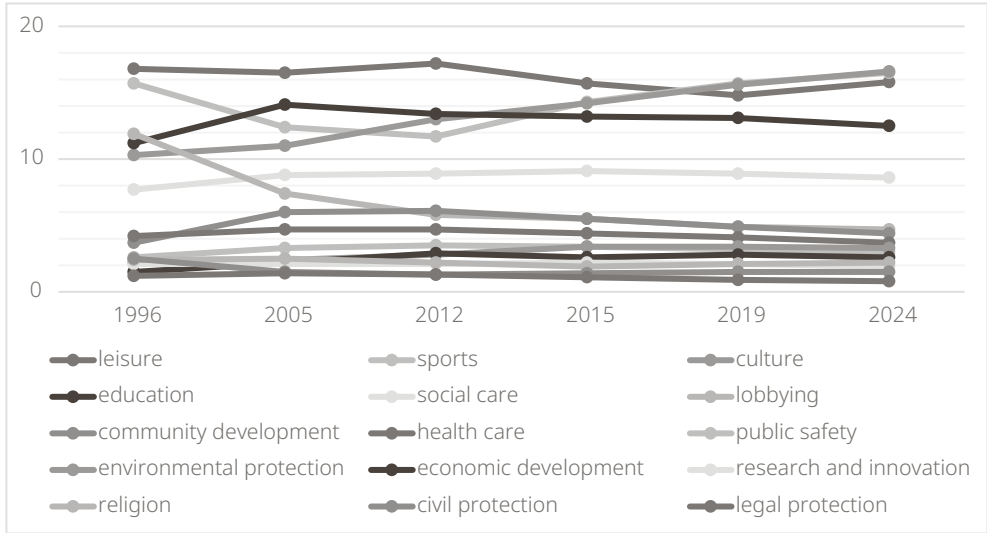


Figure 1: Services and activities provided (%) by NGOs (own editing, using relevant data from the KSH, 2024a)

If we look at the activity profile of non-profit associations (Figure 1), we can see that there have been no significant changes since 1996, except in two cases: the number of associations with an advocacy activity has decreased significantly (from 11.9% to 5.1%) and the number of associations with a cultural profile has increased by about 5% (from 10.3% to 15.2%). The highest proportions are found in associations related to the organisation and promotion of leisure activities (15.7%) and sports (15.2%).

Overall, the development of the domestic civil sphere clearly shows that community initiatives and civic activity have strengthened significantly since the change of regime. The restructuring of activity profiles suggests that cultural, leisure, and sports activities have become dominant in the organization of community life, while advocacy has gradually receded into the background. This process highlights the uneven strengthening of types of social capital: bonding and bridging relationships are growing stronger, while the linking dimension appears to be weaker. As a result, the civil sphere contributes to community cohesion, but is less able to influence broader social and institutional structures.



Demographic, social, and economic situation of small communities

When examining the settlement structure in Hungary, we find a number of regional differences, with the ratio of towns to villages and the size of the population varying widely. The traditional setting for the development of small settlements is the areas with hills and mountains (Western and Northern Hungary, Southern Transdanubia), where they have survived almost undisturbed for centuries, in contrast to the lowland regions, where the Turkish occupation and natural disasters have interfered with the organic development of settlements on several occasions (Szűcs, 2009).

The Hungarian literature uses two terms for small settlements, but does not distinguish them consistently (Körmendi, 1976a; 1976b; Enyedi, 1985; Beluszky, 1985; Sikos T., 1990; Hubai, 1992). For settlements with less than 500 inhabitants, the terms dwarf villages and small villages are used, while for those with less than 1000 inhabitants, the term small village is the most common, but is also used in many literatures for those with less than 500 inhabitants. However, other literature uses the term dwarf villages only for settlements with fewer than 200 inhabitants. In my research, in line with the majority of researchers, I use the term dwarf villages to refer to settlements with fewer than 500 inhabitants and focus my analysis on these (Dövényi, 2003; Balogh, 2008).

In 2019, there were 3155 settlements in Hungary, of which 346 were towns and 2809 villages (of which 128 were large villages).



Figure 2: Hungary's municipalities by legal status, 01 January 2019. (Source: KSH)



Of the municipalities, 1,745 have fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, while 1,077 have fewer than 500 inhabitants. A third of the country's municipalities have fewer than five hundred inhabitants, but their total population represents just under 3% of the total population. According to the 2011 census data, the largest number of such municipalities is found in Baranya, Zala, and Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén and Vas counties, but there is no county where there is not a single village of this size (Balogh, 2014).

Observing the national evolution of the number of small villages since 1960, we see an increase, but between 2011 and 2019, their number decreased. This was caused by several factors; some settlements were completely depopulated, and some had a population of more than 500 inhabitants and thus fell into a different category. The increase in the number of small villages has thus been a trend over several decades, and the reasons for this include agricultural and transport conditions, social structure, and the specific features of the primary education network that was built up in the 20th century (Enyedi, 1980; Beluszky, 1985; Bódi, 1999; Balogh, 2014). The really significant change, however, began in the 1970s, when the situation of small villages deteriorated both economically and in terms of the number and quality of services, culminating in the years of regime change, when most of the jobs that employed the inhabitants of these settlements ceased to exist. The main problems of small villages became population decline, the closely related ageing population, and the tensions caused by economic disadvantage. However, these problems are not concentrated only and exclusively on this type of settlement, as since the second half of the 1990s, population decline and ageing have been observed in all regions, but the difference is that they affect areas at different levels of urbanisation in different proportions (Székely, 2006). If we analyse the demographic data further, we see that the proportion of people under 15 years of age is steadily decreasing in small settlements and increasing in older ones. The inward migration rate is also positive for this type of settlement (i.e., more people move there than away), but it is proportionally lower than for settlements with a larger population. This indicator for small villages is 0.02%, which highlights the lack of attractiveness of the settlement. Looking at educational attainment, we see that for municipalities with less than 500 inhabitants, a significant proportion of heads of household fall into the two lowest educational attainment categories. It can be shown that the larger the population size of a settlement, the more attractive it is for families and households with higher qualifications. No significant difference is found between small villages and other settlements in terms of the occupation of the inhabitants, but for those living in the smallest settlements, there is an over-representation of less qualified occupations. Furthermore, we find that the share of Roma in small villages is higher than the national average (3.6%) (KSH, 2024b).

The state support system for municipalities is quite complex and complicated. However, it is clear from the different legislation and support schemes that municipalities with fewer than 500 inhabitants are generally suffering from a lack of resources, which in most cases can only be partially covered by state revenues. The main source of income for small municipalities is the state budget, which has various



uses. This source of income is complemented by the increasing use since 2010 of subsidies from the European Union, the State, and NGOs. Local taxes, where they are levied by a municipality, are low and do not represent a significant source of revenue.

At the same time, the demand for social services is growing among the population, and their inclusion in the basic social and child protection services is formally resolved, but access to them is difficult for the population, as in many cases, they have to travel long distances to reach them. Social services are divided into two groups by Act III of 1993: the first is the so-called basic services, the second is the specialised services provided under the personal care system. The legislation identifies the following basic services: village and parish nursing, catering, home help, family assistance, signposted home help, community services, support services, street social work, and day care. A typical form of compliance with the law is that in many small municipalities, the above services are provided by several municipalities under joint management or under an agreement with a non-governmental organisation.

One of the main challenges for the municipalities of small villages, which has been mentioned several times, is to provide social and health care and support for the elderly population. Care for the elderly is provided mainly through the provision of home help and the availability of a village nursing service. The above-mentioned forms of care are locally based and locally available, so an analysis of their functioning can provide a good opportunity to identify the different territorial differences.

Another key challenge is to increase the vitality of the municipality, i.e., its “quality” of being more attractive to younger generations. A number of government measures have been taken recently to this end: Since 2018, the Hungarian Village Programme for small rural settlements, which helps to support and improve the many dimensions of village life (church and civic sector, renovation of buildings and community spaces, development of the settlement’s image and infrastructure), and a number of relevant measures in the Economic Recovery Action Plan to address the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic (support for the reopening of grocery stores), as well as family support measures such as the Village Family Home Benefit and the National Cultural Fund. This shows that the central government is trying to improve the situation by supporting local authorities, civil and religious communities, and individuals living in small villages. In addition to central measures, many other organisations have provided and continue to provide assistance to people living in small communities. These include, but are not limited to, the Soros Foundation, which was active until 2007, the Norwegian Fund for Local Development and Poverty Reduction grants, and other projects by NGOs and individuals supporting local intervention. It is also worth mentioning the main intervention strands of the Human Resources Development Operational Programme (HRDOP), the most relevant of the 10 operational programmes of the Széchenyi 2020 programme. Improving the standard of living, social and economic situation of the inhabitants of the municipalities concerned, and improving their access to culture is not only a central public administration task, but is in the interest of society as a whole.



When dealing with small villages, we are often confronted with the problem of 'few people - many villages'. Furthermore, these villages present a very heterogeneous picture, both economically and socially, so it is not worthwhile to develop and follow a single development strategy for them. The diversity of governmental and civil initiatives mentioned above also reflects the complexity and diversity of the development task.

One of the elements that can help the local government of small villages and the people living in the villages to move forward economically can be the involvement in village tourism (Csordás & Szabó, 1993; Csapó & Szabó, 1997; Hanusz, 2002). Here, however, the role of the additional revenue to the local government from the tourism tax levied is not necessarily the role of the individuals' own situation being improved. Their possible unemployment status is eliminated, or an additional means of earning money is added to the existing job. This, in turn, leads to an improvement in their quality of life. Rural tourism is most typical in the area around Lake Balaton, in the Central Mountains, and in parts of Western Hungary (Őrség, Göcsej, Vendvidék, Sopron and Kőszeg), and in the Zselic and Lake Tisza regions (Józsa, 2013).

Culture and (public) education in small settlements

Due to the economic, social, and infrastructural factors already described, access to culture is limited and faces many obstacles. Act CXL of 1997 provides for the provision of municipal libraries, describes the basic services of public culture, and makes it compulsory for all municipalities to support local public cultural activities.

In our country, the network of cultural centres and similar institutions (public cultural institutions) is the largest network of cultural institutions with a public benefit mission. These institutions and the professionals working in them have successfully renewed the content of their work and adapted their organisational framework to the requirements of today's world. However, this process is slower in small towns and cities than in larger ones. However, it is also true that they place much more emphasis on community building than before and that they ensure access to cultural goods in their respective municipalities and try to promote equal cultural opportunities. Community centres (and community centres) remain the mainstay for disadvantaged sections of society in small villages. In most of these municipalities, they operate as multifunctional and integrated institutions: the community centre, the municipal library are often located in the same building, run by the same person, and offer largely the same range of programmes compared to other municipalities. Their role is to promote cultural consumption in the municipality, to disseminate, represent, and support the paradigm of lifelong learning, to assess the needs for cultural events, and to organise and run them. Generally speaking, professionals working in small communities are in a difficult situation because, in line with Maslow's pyramid (Maslow, 1968/2003), as long as the economic and social



situation of the people living in the community is not resolved, it is difficult to motivate their need for cultural consumption. If we summarise the results of several studies on cultural consumption (Hidy, 1997; Vitányi, 1997; Hunyadi, 2004; 2005; Dudás & Hunyadi, 2005), we can conclude that, basically, we can distinguish 4 types of small settlements (described in detail above) (passive, recreational, open accumulation, autonomous-autonomous), but it would be interesting to carry out studies on the proportions of these types.

It should be stressed that improving the quality of access to culture has a stimulating effect on local society, while the development of local society has a positive effect on the demand for cultural consumption. There are many initiatives to develop and promote local culture: a heritage centre, a calendar, support for local publicity, and the presentation of good practices. The main objective of rural cultural development is to reduce the handicaps of the territory. The emphasis should be placed not only on developing needs, as already mentioned, but also on accessibility. There are a number of measures, some of which are not exhaustive.

The role of NGOs and non-formalised initiatives, in addition to local government institutions, is therefore significant because of the factors described above. Their role in preserving community identity and promoting social inclusion is outstanding. The former can be achieved by preserving local values and traditions and organising cultural programmes, the latter by involving different social groups and promoting equal opportunities. For these organisations, the development of community networks also plays a key role. CSOs play a key role in mobilising local resources by linking formal and informal community networks and mobilising human, material, and relational capital that would otherwise remain hidden. Such organisations act as intermediaries between public institutions, local businesses, and the population, facilitating a more efficient allocation and use of resources. They are also often able to attract new sources of funding, volunteer labour, and expertise for the development of the municipality, thus strengthening the self-sustaining and adaptive capacities of the community.

Summary

The analysis of the social, economic, and cultural specificities of small communities has shown that personal networks of contacts and social capital are key factors in the survival and development of local communities. Close, trust-based relationships act as a stabilising force, providing the basis for civic activity and self-organising initiatives, while bridging networks can bring new impulses and external resources into communities. Maintaining a balance between the two is essential to strengthening the adaptive capacity and social innovation potential of small communities.

NGOs have a key role to play in this process: they ensure social inclusion, support the preservation of cultural identity, and act as intermediaries between public,



economic, and community actors. Their activities are not only about mobilising local resources, but also about transferring community knowledge and promoting lifelong learning. In cooperation with cultural and public institutions, they can help to improve equal opportunities and reduce social disparities resulting from local disadvantages.

The analysis also highlighted that the demographic and economic challenges facing small communities - ageing, emigration, lack of resources - are complex problems that can only be tackled through community cohesion and an effective combination of resources. Strengthening local networks, increasing trust, and consciously developing the civil society are key factors in this process.

Overall, the results of the study point to the fact that social capital and civic activity are not only elements for sustaining community life in small communities, but also drivers of sustainable development, local resilience, and social innovation. It is therefore essential for future development strategies and public policies to prioritise the strengthening of personal networks and civil society organisations as the basis on which the social and economic regeneration of small communities can be built.

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