

REGIONAL ECONOMIC DISPARITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY: EVIDENCE FROM CROATIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relationships between the different aspects of social capital and regional economic disparities in Croatia. The focus is given not only to the analysis of the quantitative aspects of civil society, but also to its different qualitative characteristics.

On regional level, there are significant changes and shifts in the development of civil society and social capital in Croatia. Although the number of civil society organizations has been increasing, the enhancement of the quality of social capital is not proportional to its numerical growth. All evidences originated from different surveys and researches conducted in the last decade have stressed the very low level of trust in Croatian executive and legislative power as well in judicial authority. In addition, they documented the trend of reducing the density of social networks and disrespecting the social norms. The regional dispersion of the registered legal non-profit entities shows agglomeration pattern in the biggest Croatian cities and their belonging counties. This spatial clustering of civil entities as well of social excluded group corresponds to the level of regional economic development.

The paper discusses also the case of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development as an example of good practice. The Foundation shows how social capital, decentralized organizational structures and financial initiatives as well as local civil community may stimulate social partnerships, improve administrative capacity and so help meet its goals.

JEL clasiffication: P25, R11

Key words: social capital, civil society, regional disparities, Croatia, National Foundation for Civil Society Development

1. INTRODUCTION

Croatia, as one of the Central and Eastern European countries, has started its transformation from a centrally managed economy towards a modern knowledge-driven market economy and pluralism in all areas of its economic and social life from 1989. This transformation has been followed not only by favorable processes, such as the strengthening democracy and civil society, but also by many unfavorable processes, such as increasing the regional economic disparities.

There are three NUTS-II regions in Croatia: the North-West Croatia (with the capital), the Central and East Croatia (Panonian) and the Adriatic Croatia. On the NUTS-III level there are 21 counties, of which one – the City of Zagreb – holds a double status of town and county. Counties are self-governmental regions and they have their own representatives and executive bodies. Croatia's division at the NUTS-II and III levels is shown in Table 1, Appendix (the first column). The problem of regional inequalities in Croatia is a well-known fact (see Borozan, 2009 for a brief review). According to GDP per capita in 2006, the last available year regarding the official statistical data, the most developed region is the North-West Croatia, while the Central and East Croatia is the least developed region.¹ In the same terms, two most developed counties are the City of Zagreb and the County of Istria. Two least developed counties are the counties of Brod-Posavina and Vukovar-Srijem. Their GDP per capita is less than 60% of the national average.

Thisse (2000) stressed that the magnitude of spatial disparities is very sensitive to the design of the regional borders and that this is true especially for small regions, such as those confined to the limits of a city. This is confirmed by statistical data for Croatia. At the NUTS-II level, the difference measured by GDP per capita between the most and least developed region was 1.82 in 2006 while at the NUTS-III level it was 3.4 times higher. Recent growth trends across Croatian regions have actually widened, especially after the Homeland war, not narrowed (NCC, 2005). Among many causes underlying the obvious disparities, the following ones are usually noted: historical knowledge, geographic position and possibilities for capitalizing on spill-over effects, resources allocation, war damages and the absence of political will, accountability and cooperativeness to minimize this problem, lack of coherent regional development policy on national level, etc.

¹ Source of data: Croatian Central Bureau of Statistics: Priopćenje, Zagreb, February 24, 2009

Answering the question, why regional disparities exist, is a dual approach of answering the question what the key to the regional growth and development is. A brief review of answers to that question ranging from the traditional, predominant mainstream economics to the in part no-mainstream one can be find in Westlund and Calidoni-Lundberg (2007). Recently, scholars put emphasis on social capital. Social capital relates to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and trust due to their favorable role in facilitating coordination and cooperation for the mutual benefit of all organization's members (Putnam, 1995). It includes ensuring the development and maintenance of the relations that enable mutual cooperation and sharing resources. The stock of social capital in a society is proportional to the number of social networks and to the intensity of social relationships.

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the relationships between the different aspects of social capital and regional economic disparities in Croatia. The focus is given not only to the analysis of the quantitative aspects of civil society, but also to its different qualitative characteristics. Since the density of social networks, and active and trustful social relations contribute to reducing the regional disparities, a case of the National Foundation for Civil Society Development will be presented. It will be shown that the Foundation through its organization and activities, civic finance initiatives contributes to the development of civic activism, decentralization of Croatian society and consequently slightly to reducing the regional disparities.

2. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Social capital, as an intangible asset, has an important role in explaining human behavior, features of human networks and the society in general. According to Putnam (2000) social capital is a feature of those organizations which networks, norms and trust are elements that make easier coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit of their members. Taking into consideration the important differences in prosperity and social capital between regions, Rutten and Boekema (2007) stressed that the regions are more adequate level for observing contributions of social capital to economic development than the whole nations. This is an argument that justifies the existence of regional social capital. Parissaki and Humphreys (2005) underlined that the regional social capital is important because horizontal cooperation (i) can bridge the cultural differences, pace of development and the other regional differences; (ii) can support global interventions instead of independent isolated activities; (iii) have synergistic influence.

Intangible assets, such as social capital, influence the efficiency of regional innovation networks (Rutten and Boekema, 2007). Norms, values and customs make easier cooperation of such networks on mutual benefits. Innovations increase the success of networks, and social capital helps in explaining why the network of innovative firms is so successful. In that way, regional differences in social capital contribute to understanding the differences in regional economic development. This is supported by Harrison (2008) who developed the model in which social capital is used to describe the structure of relationships that exist in a society. Social capital is also the by-product of interactions between institutions and processes developing in a community. In addition, as it is stated in Harrison (2008), it influences the regional competitiveness and development by creating the changes that lead to innovation and reputation. Social capital influences the sustainable local and regional economic development through facilitating the interactions among individuals, groups, regions, governments and states. Putnam (1995) stressed that social capital is a necessary and sufficient reason for socio-economic development. However, nowadays it is not precisely defined if social capital is really a reason of development or its by-product, or both. Either way, its importance as the indicator and contributor of regional and national development is well-known and confirmed by many researches.

However, social capital can not significantly influence community development if it is not institutionalized into organizations (firstly in organizations of civil society, i.e. in non-government sector). In the democratic society, civil society organizations have an important role in preparation, formulation, implementation and monitoring of the government policies and the state in general. Nowadays, social capital is a basis for the civil society development. Civil society is a bridge that enables interactions between ordinary people and the state in a whole through non-government sector. According to Cooper et al. (2005), contemporary researches indicated that the density and scale of local organizations of civil society have critical role in spreading information that can help in creating the conditions for efficient and effective management of economic development. Blair and Carroll (2008) pointed out that if a community does not have enough organizations that create social capital, it cannot do a lot considering its creation. In Croatia on regional levels, there are significant changes and shifts in the development of civil society and social capital especially in the quantitative terms.

3. REGIONAL INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CROATIA

3.1. Unbalanced development of civil society

Since the mid-1990s, Croatian civil society has been accepted as a specific kind of social acting and communication, in which non-government instances try to achieve their and common interests through a broad specter of associations and organizations. The notion of civil society organizations refers to associations, foundations, social enterprises, non-profit, professional non-government associations oriented to services, social movement and trade unions (Cooper et al., 2005). The existence and scale of formal civil organization memberships in a country or a region is often used as an indicator of the country's or region's degree of civility (see for review Hvenmark and Wijkstrom, 2004). Table 1 in Appendix offers a review of regional dispersion of the registered legal non-profit organizations in Croatia in September 2001 and 2009. The registered legal entities including institutions, bodies, associations, funds and organizations belong to non-profit organizations.

The regional dispersion of the registered legal non-profit organizations confirms the thesis stated in Bezovan et al. (2005) that Croatian organizations of civil society are still relatively urban phenomenon, the most visible in the biggest cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek) and their belonging counties. Namely, approximately 50 percent of the non-profit legal entities are agglomerated there. It is interesting to note that the level of regional economic development measured by GDP per capita corresponds to the regional clustering of civil society organizations. In the most developed regions, the highest number of the non-profit entities per 10,000 inhabitants is registered; in the less developed regions this number is the smallest one. Furthermore, there is an increasing trend of the number of civil society organizations. However, the trend is under-average in the most underdeveloped region the Central-East Croatia. The fastest development of non-profit entities in quantitative term is recorded in the most developed region, the North-West Croatia.

Quantitative aspects of civil society, such as number and shares of organizations and members, of ethnic or religious groups, etc. can indicate the impact of civil society on spatial development. However, these aspects say nothing on the degree of interaction and qualitative characteristics between organizations, or members, i.e. on the norms, values and attitudes within and between these groups (Westlund and Calidoni-Lundberg, 2007). Although the number of non-profit entities has been increasing in Croatia, Bezovan et al. (2005) stressed there

is a small number of those ones that are really active and have employers. For that reason, the same authors indicated that if some actions exist, they result in dropping motivation for actively acting in community, in disturbing trust due to insufficient support and understanding of environment, and in reducing the number of active individuals that, with real and concrete activities, want to make impact on their better tomorrow.

The Report on social development (2001) documented the negative trends of (i) mistrust in Croatia (in legal authorities, parliament, daily press, police and trade unions), (ii) of spreading the culture of cynicism and opportunistic behavior, and (iii) of reducing the density of social networks (reducing the number of civil association members). The trends have had a negative impact on self-organizing as the way of solving local problems and respecting the social norms. The findings of researches conducted in the organization of GfK, the Centre for Market Research in 2000, 2005 and 2007 on a representative sample consisted of 1,000 citizens older than 15, confirmed the existence of low level of trust in Croatia. GfK recorded that citizens have the most trust in people who they socialize with, then in army and police. That (i) confirms the importance of social capital that develops just among individuals in a community, and (ii) opens a debate on the strength of social capital in Croatia. The similar research by GfK from 2006 showed that Croatia shares the same level of trust as 19 European countries and the USA (in average); doctors, church and army attract the most trust, but the political parties the less.² Additional qualitative argument that supports the importance of civil society development on local and regional level offered the Puls's research on trust in different levels of government (Puls, 2006)³. Croatian citizens trusted the most to local structures, i.e. to citizens and local self-government. The main reasons for trust in local self-government are the feeling of closeness, better knowing of people and greater concerns for local issues.

² More on the methodology of research and the findings in Poslovna mreža.hr: Uvjerljivo najmanje povjerenje u politicare, 29.11.2006, available on <http://www.poslovn mreza.hr teme/30/> (accessed August 10, 2009)

³ Representative sample consisted of 800 Croatian citizens older than 18. More about research, methodology and findings in Puls, Marketing and public opinion research agency, 2006, http://isite23.isite.com.hr/Download/2006/03/14/Report_UI_Hr_v2.ppt (accessed August 10, 2009)

In organization of Eurobarometer (European Commission, 2009), a standard public opinion research is conducted by the end of 2009 on random sample consisted of approximately 1,000 face-to-face interviews in each of the EU27 plus Croatia and Turkey. Existed mistrust that Croatian citizenship have in the Croatian executive and legislative power, as well in judicial authority reflects to the level of trust that they have on European bodies. Croatian citizenship stated 10 percent more tendency not to trust in the European Parliament (43% vs. 33%) and in the European Commission (44% vs. 32%) than the EU27 in average. The same number of people is not satisfied with the way democracy works in the EU27 (44% vs. 32%). However, the most of Croatian citizenships are unsatisfied in its own country with the way democracy works than in the EU27 member states (84% vs. 45%). Therefore, it is not surprising that 71% of Croatian respondents thought that things are going in the wrong direction in Croatia.

Social exclusion addresses the insufficiency of participation in social activities and the lack of social links and power. Programme of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in its report 2006 under the name “Poverty, unemployment and social exclusion“ (UNDP, 2006) presented the regional distribution of social exclusion in Croatia. Social exclusion is prevalent in Slavonia, which is a part of the most underdeveloped Croatian region, and it markedly exceeds the national average. The reasons for that are not only to be found, as it is stated in the report, in the region’s relatively large share of rural (i.e. predominantly poorly educated) inhabitants, but also in the living conditions marked by the economic lagging behind and the huge war direct and indirect damages. The highest degree of inclusion was found in the most economically developed regions – in the Zagreb area, Primorje and Istria. The professional public in Croatia has considerably failed to recognize the social exclusion as the important issue. Consequently, the civil society organizations in Croatia have small success in introducing the interests of their members and citizens to government representatives. In addition, valuable knowledge and values following the local and regional changes and shifts in civil society are partially destroyed.

3.2. A case of good practice - The National Foundation for Civil Society Development

The National Foundation for Civil Society Development (hereinafter NF) recognized the problem of unbalanced development of civil society in the Croatian regions and unfavorable consequences of over-centralization in civil organizations.

Those problems relate to a great part to the lack of capacity of local and regional self-government and organization of civil society. Lack of capacities in terms of social capital refers primarily to shortage of people that can not substantially contribute to the development of local and regional community through the social capital development (first of all trust) and adequate planning and legislation (including management capacity). Considering that issue, NF started two programs in 2007: Decentralization of Grants for Civil Society Development Programme and Regional Development Programme, such as “Salter”, “Step”, “Mrrak”, “E-emisija” and “Jako” (see Picture 1, Appendix). Both programs aim to reduce the regional differences and to enable the decentralized system of development financing although in a different way.

Since 2004 NF has invested in development of civil activism on local and regional level by financing short-run initiatives. In 2007 it made a significant change by introducing the decentralized model of grant allocations based on the agreement of cooperation. Consequently, in the frame of decentralization of financial support, NF demoted to regional level the process of announces vacancies and their implementations under the name „Our Contribution to the Community“. For that purpose, NF signed the agreements with four regional foundations in Croatia. Picture 1 in Appendix shows local/regional foundations, their headquarters and belonging counties, total given financial support in HRK in 2009, as well as the names of the Regional Development Programs.

According to the study Possibilities of Community Foundations Development in Croatia (2004, p. 10) “Community Foundation improves local philanthropy... and it is a catalyst for social capital activization. New relations among individuals are created, i.e. social networks, norms and trust that enable social activities... Strengthening the social capital helps disintegrated communities to mobilize available resources and thus overcome the development issues.” Regional foundations – partners of NF – twice a year announce vacancies for grant allocations to civil initiatives. They are smaller scale than standard projects, but they illuminate inclusion of many people, i.e. broader community in solving concrete problems they face. Furthermore, the members of commissions for application evaluation come from all Croatian counties which are covered by bidding. That is much better approach than the old one (i.e. decision making in Zagreb). The decentralized model of grant allocation to citizen’s initiatives enables financing initiatives of local associations and the other non-profit organizations (in which citizens get together to solve different community issues) on their closest local or regional level. Consequently, so-

cial and financial capital of community have been building and strengthening (see *Civilno drustvo*, No. 20, 2009). For example, social capital of „Slagalice“ Foundation refers to gathering individuals who own specific knowledge and skills, and who have good network of personal, professional and social relations. For now, the programme has had excellent results, and civic initiatives have been very innovative and social beneficent. Civil initiatives have enhanced the awareness level of the importance of civil society and enabled spreading the feelings of collectiveness, self-actualization and trust by including community in the process of building its own future.

A significant disadvantage of civil initiatives refers to inadequate abilities of certain organizations for initiative writing, i.e. in insufficient technical support for grant applications. Therefore, NF has started the second programme called Regional Development Programme and thus, strengthened the abilities of civil society organizations on local and regional level. Through partnership with five regional networks (see Picture 1, Appendix), being specialized as civil society organizations, NF has contributed to harmonization of regional development in Croatia. It has also started cooperation with Charles Stewart Mott the process of empowering the civil society organizations on local and regional level. Consequently, it enables a systematic support through available, qualitative and professional services on local levels. Regional networks provide the services free of charge considering the fact that the implementation of these services is financed by NF. In that way, local citizenship has a possibility to be involved in the process of creating its future and improving the quality of life.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Social capital, as intangible assets presented by system of norms, networks and trust that enables, facilitates and coordinates the collective activities, has an important role in enhancing the efficiency of regions, and thus, in reducing the regional disparities. Communities marked by a high development degree of social capital in both quantitative and qualitative terms record a fast economic growth. In addition, in such communities people can be mobilized much easier to activities directed to common good. However, social capital cannot significantly influence community development if it is not institutionalized into organizations (firstly in organizations of civil society, i.e. in the non-government sector).

In Croatia, there are significant changes and shifts aim to build social capital and to implement it through the organizations of civil society. This is supported by data on the increasing number of the registered legal non-profit entities. However, the regional dispersion of those entities and its growth rate indicate the regional unbalanced development. Agglomeration of non-profit entities in the biggest Croatian cities (Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek) and their belonging counties indicate Croatian organizations of civil society are still relatively urban phenomenon. The spatial clustering of civil entities corresponds to the level of regional economic development measured by GDP per capita. In the most developed regions, the highest number of non-profit entities per 10,000 inhabitants is registered; in the less developed regions this number is the smallest one. Furthermore, there is an increasing trend of the number of civil society organizations. However, the trend is under-average in the most underdeveloped region, the Central-East Croatia. The fastest development of the non-profit entities in quantitative term is recorded in the most developed region. Additional issue to the agglomeration, i.e. to spatial distribution of the civil infrastructure is social exclusion. It is prevalent in the less developed region while in the most developed one the proportion of excluded is negligible. Regions of weak community infrastructure and low social capital are unable to support or appropriately articulate and advocate the needs of excluded groups in the way that more organized and developed communities can. Considering those findings, the paper indicates that regional growth and development in Croatia also tends to be depended upon local specific factors such as social capital not commonly associated with the determinants of regional economic success. New research should unveil the cause-consequence relation between regional development and social capital.

Since the quantitative aspects of civil society, such as number and shares of organizations and members, say nothing on the degree of interaction and qualitative characteristics of social capital, we reached for researches and surveys in which the different aspects of social capital had come to expression. It is about trust, civil network and norm respect. All evidences originated from surveys and researchers conducted in the last decade indicate. Croats have a very low level of trust in Croatian executive power, legislative power and judicial authority. Furthermore, the trend of reducing the density of social networks (i.e. the number of civil association members), and disrespecting the social norms has been recorded. However, the most of citizenships are aware of those negative trends; thus, the most of them think things are going in the wrong direction in Croatia.

Weak qualitative elements of social capital present both social and economic issue. Therefore, it is very important to transform the awareness of negative trends into the concrete actions. The National Foundation for Civil Society Development presents an example of good practice for that because it has contributed to the development of civic activism, decentralization of Croatian society and consequently slightly to reducing the regional disparities through its decentralized model of organization, activities, and civil finance initiatives. Trust and confidence, so necessarily when it comes to the impact of social capital on regional development, can be built and nurture only with concrete actions. Local specific factors have an extremely important role in that process and therefore, future analysis of social capital will benefit from a more region-specific approach towards examining its development and impacts.

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Picture 1: The Regional foundations with belonging counties and the Regional Development Programs

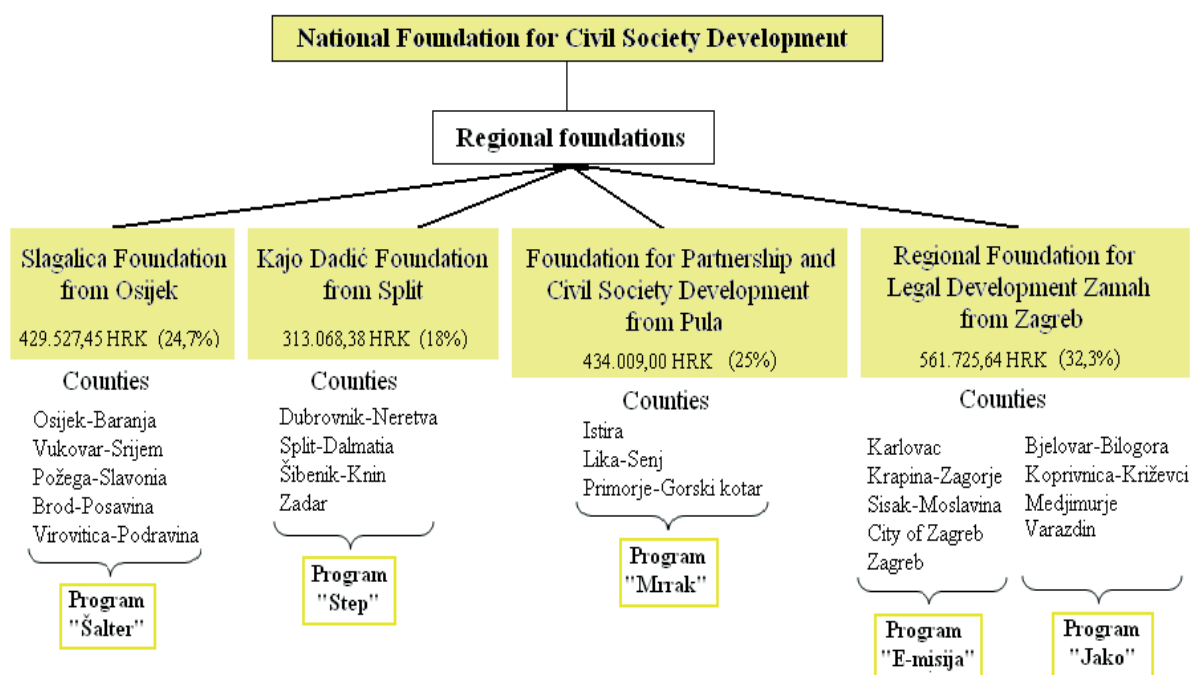


Table 1: Regional dispersion of registered legal non-profit entities in Croatia

	September 2001			September 2009			Growth rate (in %)
	Number of non-profit entities			Number of non-profit entities			
Region / county	in each county	per 10000 inhabitants	Share in total number (in %)	in each county	per 10000 inhabitants	Share in total number (in %)	
NORTH-WEST CROATIA							
City of Zagreb	6315	81.05	17.08	11286	144.85	20.03	78.72
Zagreb	1988	64.19	5.38	2990	96.55	5.31	50.40
Krapina-Zagorje	1156	81.16	3.13	1599	112.26	2.84	38.32
Varazdin	1509	81.67	4.08	2156	116.69	3.83	42.88
Koprivnica-Križevci	1135	91.19	3.07	1419	114.01	2.52	25.02
Medjimurje	977	82.50	2.64	1343	113.40	2.38	37.46
Total/avarage	13080	78.85	35.38	20793	125.34	36.91	58.97
CENTRAL-EAST CROATIA							
Požega-Slavonia	734	85.52	1.99	1057	123.15	1.88	44.01
Brod-Posavina	1236	69.92	3.34	1777	100.53	3.15	43.77
Osijek-Baranja	2743	82.99	7.42	4134	125.08	7.34	50.71
Vukovar-Srijem	1431	69.88	3.87	2163	105.63	3.84	51.15
Bjelovar-Bilogora	1327	99.71	3.59	1743	130.97	3.09	31.35
Virovitica-Podravina	896	95.94	2.42	1231	131.81	2.18	37.39
Karlovac	1279	90.21	3.46	1903	134.22	3.38	48.79
Sisak-Moslavina	1821	98.23	4.93	2586	139.49	4.59	42.01
Total/avarage	11467	84.85	31.02	16594	122.78	29.45	44.71
ADRIATIC CROATIA							
Primorje-Gorski kotar	2752	90.08	7.44	4171	136.53	7.40	51.56
Lika-Senj	601	111.97	1.63	889	165.62	1.58	47.92
Zadar	1350	83.31	3.65	1943	119.90	3.45	43.93
Šibenik-Knin	953	84.42	2.58	1491	132.07	2.65	56.45
Split-Dalmatia	3368	72.64	9.11	5204	112.23	9.24	54.51
Dubrovnik-Neretva	1401	114.02	3.79	2128	173.19	3.78	51.89
Istria	1998	96.83	5.40	3128	151.59	5.55	56.56
Total/avarage	12423	87.06	33.60	18954	132.82	33.64	52.57
CROATIA - Total	36970	83.31	100.00	56341	126.97	100.00	52.40

Source of data on the number of non-profit entities: Croatian Central Bureau of Statistics, Priopćenje, Zagreb, November 10, 2001; November 14, 2009

Note: the number of non-profit entities per 10,000 inhabitants was counted on the basis of the number of inhabitants according to the Census 2001.