

PUHEENVUORO
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Voluntary work as a part of civic society and social capital

Very often voluntary work is considered by the meaning and benefits it gives to a recipient or a giver. Decades ago we used to speak about movements – were they working in social or in other areas. Modernization has been characterized by increasing individualisation. So these societal transformations have also been reported to make volunteerism less collective and more individualistic. (See the analysis, Yeung 2004). So we speak nowadays more often about individuals than movements.

In this presentation I will try to create a larger framework to voluntary work. My main point is that voluntary work is an essential and vital part of civic society and it creates social capital which is necessary for human welfare and also for the economical progress of society. Voluntary work is important itself – it cannot be evaluated only by its immediate outputs.

First I describe what civic society is. Then I describe the concept of social capital. And finally I summarize those three phenomena together.

The welfare society consists of three fundamental elements: the public (state), the civic society and the economy. Beside them is the private and natural living space: a person, his/her family and his/her relatives.

The civic society

What do we mean when we are speaking about a civic society? Very often in Finland we speak about the civic society and the voluntary associations as synonyms. But the civic society is much wider concept. Different non-governmental organisations are only one organized part of it. There are also spontaneous and un-organized forms of civic activity. And we have to speak also about political parties, unions and churches, when we are speaking about civic society.

There are some characteristic features of the civic society. Firstly we can say that it is independent from the state, literally it is non-governmental. Secondly the activity is lead by the actors themselves. We can ask, is the money or are the contracts with financiers limiting the independence? That's true but the group has itself decided to give away their power of autonomy. They originally had an unlimited power to decide about their own work – in the limits what are moral and legal in respective society.

Thirdly the activity is aimed to be non-profit making. It can create surplus but it is not used for the benefit of a single member or leader. Voluntary organisation can pay salaries – sometimes even good ones – but not dividends as business companies pay to shareholders. And then the last but not least point is that the participation is totally voluntary.



Diak

DIAKONIA-AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

PUHEENVUORO
Jorma Niemelä
23.10.2004

You have to be a citizen of the state and you have to be a member of local municipality, but you are totally free to choose whether you are a member of one or ten voluntary associations or activity groups or none.

Civic society is the indispensable foundation for political democracy. Civic society in Finland began to develop in 18 hundreds. We had strong religious movements, a temperance movement, a labour movement and social liberalism all increasing. They created an environment, where an individual was willing and able to act for certain purposes with other same minded individuals, could flourish. This is also the history of many strong women who were especially active in social-religious movements. So the party system began to develop – people learned how to act. So we got universal and equal rights to vote for women and men as one of the first states in the whole world.

We often think that the only official and authentic way to influence society is to take part in political life. But the civic engagement in voluntary actions is as valuable as any other forms of participation. And as I said it is the foundation for political democracy.

The social capital

The interest towards the social capital has been extensive not only in social sciences but also in economics. For instance the World Bank created a large research program around social capital. One of the main conclusions behind it was an assumption that the economical progress is tightly connected to the amount of social capital in the society. If you have trustworthy relationships between citizens, if you have positively regulating norms in human interaction and if you have a lot of participation in local communities, you probably also have a better success rate in economical efforts.

The economical success is not based only on the human capital (on knowing) or in resources (tools) available – social capital is also needed so that important networks and trustful economical operations can be born. This works also in local communities in the daily lives of people. If you have very ordinary things like good will, sympathy, fellowship and social connections, your social needs are more satisfied and this can lead to the improvement of social conditions within the whole community.

We can very easily measure the amount of social capital. Please, take your mobile phone, and look for all the names you can identify if you unexpectedly need a quick loan, for example half of your monthly salary. Or look for those you can call when you have a desperate heart sorrow or you are depressed or lonely. Or if something really cheery happens, how many numbers are in your phone memory that you use to call and tell those people the good news. Social capital is thus an extremely simple matter: it has value, first of all, for the people who are in it. But social capital has also external or public effects. (Putnam 2002.)

I take an example from Finland. Researcher Markku T. Hyypä (2002) studied the differences between the Swedish speaking and the Finnish speaking population on the



Diak

DIAKONIA-AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

PUHEENVUORO

Jorma Niemelä

23.10.2004

west coast. They were living in the same suburbs and villages, they were jogging on the same paths, they bought food from the same grocery stores and they had similar jobs. But the Swedish speaking population was healthier and they lived longer. There were no genetic explanations. The explanation Hyyppä found was in the better human relations, in caring for each others and in the participation of different activities in associations, cultural events and hobby circles including also church attendance.

Some features of social capital

According to Robert D. Putnam (2002), a great developer and researcher of social capital, we can find some important divisions of social capital:

Formal versus informal social capital. Some organizations are formally organized, some not. Informal associations like family dinners, informal basket-ball team, picking up a telephone to say hello or neighbours gathering together to form a voluntary work party can be more instrumental than formal associations in achieving some valued purposes.

Thick versus thin social capital. We naturally appreciate strong ties, but on some occasions the weak ties might be more important - for instance in the situation where somebody is seeking a new job. All the close friends of yours know each other, but a casual acquaintance might know just those people needed in this case.

Inward-looking versus outward-looking social capital. Some groups tend to promote interest of their own while others are outward-looking and promote public good. But it is difficult to say that one way is good and another is bad and selfish. For instance we had before strong co-operative societies – farmers or industrial workers founded co-operative shops of their own. Those organisations profited firstly the members of co-operatives but they were important also to society as a whole and to its economics.

Bridging versus bonding social capital. Bonding social capital unites people who are like one another in central respects (social class, ethnicity, age, gender). In some cases the bonding social capital can be destructive and restricting. Bridging social capital unites people who are unlike one another. We had in Finland a civil war just at the beginning of our independence. The whites and the reds – and I mean political colours, not a hue – struggled against each other. We had a lot of bonding social capital in our society before and during the civil war. But we were lacking the bridging social capital. After the war we had a huge challenge to develop bridging social capital.

Nowadays we have a common challenge in all our societies with immigration. Different ethnic groups might have a lot of bonding social capital in their own circles but how do we offer precondition to create bridges over the ethnic boundaries?

If we take these concepts and phenomena's of social capital and civic society into view, we see the importance of voluntary work in a new light. During recent years we have often heard questions about what voluntary organisations do. But it is only one aspect and a

PUHEENVUORO
Jorma Niemelä
23.10.2004

much more important question is what they are. I will expand this later on.

Identity – the personal basis for creating social capital

Now I will share an additional point of view – the question of identity . I think this matter is more acute in those cultures and societies which have gone through a rapid modernization and alteration of communities, than those societies where there are still firm family ties and local connections.

When we grow up we create in a very natural process and in relationship with people near to us, our self. The self gives us a personal meaning of existence; we know who we are and we feel the right to exist. It gives us at its best also a feeling of security: basic safety gives us courage to live our “own” life. Sometimes we speak about authenticity: self makes us unique in the whole population. The self helps us to be a subject: responsible, active and self-governing citizen, who is able to be responsible also for other people.

When the self is in relation to others and the outside world, we speak about identity. The identity is our self in relationships and in social interactions. It’s our self experience in relation to the outside world. Very often we speak about the self and about the identity as synonyms. That can be correct, but in my definitions I like to speak about the self as our own entity and about the identity as a relation.

In our contemporary culture we get less and less material for our own identity from history, class background, solid work careers, permanent living communities or other stable sources. Also family relations have changed and are more discontinuous and insecure. As we grapple with the insecurity and uncertainty of “liquid modernity”, Bauman (2000, 2004) argues that our socio-political, cultural, professional, religious and sexual identities are undergoing a process of continual transformation. Identity - a notion that by its very nature is elusive and ambivalent - has become a key concept for understanding the changing nature of social life and personal experience in our liquid modern age.

The identity can also be destroyed in quite a short period. Those who have experienced traumatic incidents – especially in their childhood – can suffer the consequences of their inner self and identity having been totally broken down. Violence, rejection, abandonment, physical, mental, or sexual abuse can be such traumatic origins of the breakdown of a child’s identity. They can have severe problems as an adult to create loving relationships, and trust in anyone. Those traumatic incidents can change one’s life to a life long struggle in seeking the right identity.

We might think that the recovery process is only medical, psychological or social in its nature. Yes it is all of them, but it is also a mental and sometimes also a spiritual process where one’s identity becomes integrated at an existential and a spiritual level.

The social welfare and health care organisations have a special task for giving material and space to identity work. If someone has been injured, has become sick or has a



DIAKONIA-AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

PUHEENVUORO
Jorma Niemelä
23.10.2004

permanent illness, or he/she has an addiction or social difficulties, voluntary organisations give in those life situations clues on how he/she can manage with the problems, what kind of feelings are produced and how he/she can create a new identity where you have accepted the fact that in life there are also pains, sorrows and misfortunes. That's why the public services are never a total answer. The civic movements are needed for identity work.

This work is creating a basis for social capital. If the identities are weak so the mutual trust is also weak and the social capital is not growing in society. – Or it is growing negatively and canalized to destructive subcultures.

Communes of resistance – new ways to create social capital

In the beginning of this presentation I mentioned that the volunteerism is nowadays less collective and more individualistic. But there are some new forms of collective, community based approaches. The communes or communities of resistance are very important paths for many people in transition from marginalization and exclusion to social inclusion. Their meaning for the identity work and for creating positive social capital is vital. (See Manuel Castells 1997.)

One of the teachers of Diaconia Polytechnic, Susanna Hyväri (2001) wrote her dissertation about communes of resistance. She interviewed people who have had addiction or mental health problems or who had been criminals. These interviewed had created some form of communities for people who had similar problems. Values of these communities differed from the prevalent culture of society. Dr Hyväri illustrates in her book how meaningful these communities of resistance were for the identity work. They could change the experiences of the past as an essential part of achieving a new identity. The common speech of the community was a very important element; the common speech took the common history of alcohol, drugs and wrongdoings for working and through this process it was able to change for strength. The residents could be found to be worthy although they didn't fulfilled the expectations of normal society as a result of their past.

This is a vast challenge to our work. Often it is too long a journey to recover from subcultures and exclusion to total inclusion in a normal, average life. Different communes of resistance are needed. They can be life long opportunities to live and work or they can be temporary bridges to an average life. The danger is that our work is so middle class oriented that excluded people feel they are strangers in our activities.

Those communes of resistance are sometimes in a good way bonding people together with similar history. But their most important challenge is to be creating bridges to reach normal life. Those communes are changing the negative social capital to the positive.

But there is also "bad" social capital. For instance joining a gang gives a false identity. Although you recognize yourself as deviant within normal society, you can identify yourself to be normal in a deviant community. You change your weakness to strength by being



DIAKONIA-AMMATTIKORKEAKOULU

PUHEENVUORO
Jorma Niemelä
23.10.2004

associated with others in the same kind of life situation as you. Here are some origins of different destructive subcultures – they are centred upon criminality, juvenile delinquency, violence, substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, sexual deviations – like paedophilia – or false religiosity.

A new or an original framework for voluntary work?

At least in Finland it has often been asked very often “what do the voluntary organisations do”? Very seldom it is asked “what they are”? I appreciate the importance of various services the non-governmental organisations are producing. They are often innovative; they complement public services and also give alternative approaches.

But it's most fundamental to see voluntary work as the basis for an entire and active civic society. It is also an essential precondition for social capital, what is indispensable for the health, success and vitality of any society. There are several ways how they affect to creating social capital – I took before two examples: the identity work as one of the basic tasks for social and health care organisations and the communes of resistance as an important form of voluntary work.

There are some good new signs also in the attitudes of the authorities in Finland. A couple of years ago the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health (2003) published the strategy for co-operation with organisations of citizens. In the paper they emphasize that “civic activity creates for the society social capital which results in positive effects on health, capability to act and social interaction”. In addition the paper points out that the activity and vitality of civic society has an absolute and intrinsic value of its own but it benefits concrete economical profits by preventing and reducing illnesses or sicknesses and social problems and service demands on them.

So the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health emphasizes that it is most important to promote and develop citizens' opportunities to participate and influence.

Behind of these sentences of “a new dawn” is an active and systematic working of the social and health organizations of Finland. On the theoretical and philosophical level they analyzed the position, role and mission of the voluntary work in the contemporary society and they actively influenced to public opinion (Niemelä & Dufva 2003).

In my opinion it is extremely important to emphasize that how personal and individualistic the motives of voluntary work are, the meaning and the influence of the activity are always also on the level of the whole community and society.

PUHEENVUORO
Jorma Niemelä
23.10.2004

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