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## **THE ROLE OF SMALL FARMS IN CREATING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN RURAL AREAS – CASE STUDIES FROM LITHUANIA, POLAND AND ROMANIA<sup>1</sup>**

Key words: social capital, small farms, Lithuania, Poland, Romania

**ABSTRACT.** Social capital is one of the most important factors influencing the development level. In the case of rural areas, it is important to determine its level in farms, because they are key factors influencing the development of these areas. The literature review shows that there are not many studies devoted to this subject from the perspective of smallholders in new member states of the European Union. Therefore, the objective of this article is to determine the social capital of small farmers in three selected countries of the European Union, i.e., Poland, Romania and Lithuania. Our study fills a research gap and provides a basis for further research. To achieve the aim of the study, the method of direct interviews with the owners of small farms in Poland, Lithuania, and Romania (20 farms from each country) was used. The interviews were conducted in 2020. The research shows that the participation of small farmers from Poland, Romania and Lithuania in social activities is low and at a comparable level in each of these countries. The main reason for the low participation of farmers in social activities is the workload. However, the social aspect of the impact of small farms cannot only be narrowed down to direct involvement in social life. It manifests itself primarily in the social functions performed by these farms, that is, cultivating customs, building social ties, reducing depopulation and increasing the vitality of the countryside.

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## INTRODUCTION

The vast majority of farms in the world are small farms, and their numbers are estimated at around 475-500 million [IFAD 2013, Lowder et al. 2016]. Although the role of small farms has been questioned in literature [Davidova et al. 2011], they are still on the world stage and the justification for their existence is developed. Small farms are still important food producers and creators of jobs even in countries with highly technologically developed agriculture [Czyżewski, Stępień 2013]. In addition to the production function, other functions of small farms are underlined [Borychowski et al. 2020], including social capital [Żmija, Szafrńska 2015], which can be perceived as a source of strategic competitiveness [Fukuyama 1997]. Social capital plays a key role in agriculture and rural development [Rivera et al. 2018], especially in the case of the deficit of other forms of capital [Michalewska-Pawlak 2010]. Therefore, the creation of social capital seems to be a chance and a challenge, at the same time, for small farmers.

The concept of social capital is relatively new and was introduced in 1916 by Lyda J. Hanifan with reference to rural educational centres [Fukuyama 2003]. He defined social capital as a set of intangible community values, including good-will, sympathy and social intercourse between members of the local community and their families, which together form a social unit. The interrelations among neighbours enable the accumulation of social capital, which may bear a social potentiality to the improvement of living conditions in the whole community [Woolcock, Narayan 2000]. In contrast to human or physical capital, social capital exists between people, in the structure of interpersonal relations, and not in them or in the products of their work [Coleman 1988]. Social capital is a specific type of private and public good, the possession of which helps to achieve success both for individuals and communities whose members trust each other, can work together and organize themselves for important, common goals [Putnam 2008]. Social capital can emphasize rural development strategies and can be treated as a “rural web” and is one among six other theoretical dimensions that can overcome the weakening of agriculture and improve the quality of rural livelihoods [Van der Ploeg, Marsden 2008, Von Münchhausen, Knickel 2010, Guinjoan et al. 2016].

The role of social capital is underlined from a theoretical and practical point of view. And as social capital is a heterogeneous, multidimensional and ambiguous concept, it is difficult to describe, measure and compare the results surveyed as various aspects of social capital are investigated [Tarkowski 2017, Rivera et al. 2018]. There are some articles that focus directly on social capital in agriculture and rural development. For example, the level of social capital was analysed in Poland among farmers [Łabędzki 2011, Spychalski 2013] and in rural areas [Halamska 2008, Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2011, Gajowiak 2013, Jarosz-Angowska et al. 2015, Tarkowski 2017]. In Romania, social capital was analysed from the perspective of cooperatives, associations of livestock farmers [Georgescu 2016]

and rural development [Farkas 2021]. Some studies are also devoted to social capital in Lithuanian agriculture and rural areas [Rivera et al. 2018, Drożdż et. al. 2021]. An in-depth literature study revealed that there were not many surveys devoted to social capital from the perspective of small-scale farmers from the new members of the European Union.

Considering the role of social capital in contemporary rural development, the main objective of the research is to indicate the level and differences of selected aspects of social capital of small farmers in Lithuania, Poland and Romania. To achieve the goal, in-depth interview methods were used. The conducted survey allowed, to some extent, to determine and compare social capital, its level and manifestations in selected small farms in the countries analysed. Considering all of the above and to the best of our knowledge, our paper fills a research gap and provides rationale for further research.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

Social capital was evaluated on the basis of selected small farmers that were part of a broader research project “The role of small farms in the sustainable development of the agri-food sector in countries of Central and Eastern Europe”. Taking into account the different conditions for distinguishing small farms [EC 2011, Lowder et al. 2016, Guiomar et al. 2018], for the purposes of the research project, the following criteria were adopted: agricultural area up to 20 ha, standard production up to 25 thousand euros and at least 75% of the labour input of family members. The research process was conducted in two stages. At the first stage, the levels of sustainability of small farms in analysed countries were evaluated, which allows to indicate the small farms with the highest degree of sustainability. The base included farms among which questionnaire surveys were conducted within the research project “The role of small family farms in the sustainable development of the food sector in Central and Eastern European countries”. The surveys for the three countries covered 710, 900 and 1,000 units in Poland, Lithuania and Romania, respectively. The extracted variables used for measures of economic, social and environmental balance (Table 1), in the case of stimulants, were subjected to zero unitization.

From the whole sample of analysed farms, 20 farms with the highest sustainability level were selected each from Poland, Lithuania and Romania. At the second stage, in-depth interviews were conducted with owners of these selected small farms. Twenty interviews were conducted in each country, that is, 60 in total. Due to the relatively small number of farms surveyed, the research on social capital can be treated as case studies. The interviews were conducted in 2020. The table below presents the basic statistics of the farms analyzed.

It was assumed that social capital is defined as the characteristics of social organisation, such as trust, standards and relationships between units that increase their efficiency in

Table 1. Variables used to determine the synthetic measure of sustainability of surveyed farms in Poland, Romania, and Lithuania

Sustainability component	Variable name	Variable type*	Weight of variable for the individual sustainability component	Weight for the synthetic measure of sustainability
Economic	Income gap indicator (difference between average income in the national economy and total income of the agricultural holding)	D	0.1280	0.3304
	A subjective assessment of the household's financial situation	S	0.3398	
	Level of agricultural investment	S	0.3356	
	Estimated market value of the holding	S	0.1967	
Social	Dwelling/house furnishing index	S	0.1819	0.3089
	Usable floor area of dwelling/house per family member	S	0.0959	
	Participation in a lifelong learning system	S	0.1511	
	Participation in social or cultural events	S	0.2823	
	Membership in an organization, club, association etc.	S	0.2887	
Environmental	Livestock Units (LSU) per ha of UAA**	D	0.1383	0.3608
	Monoculture index	D	0.2730	
	Eco-efficiency (according to DEA)	S	0.1133	
	Share of forest in the farm area	S	0.0315	
	Share of permanent grassland in the farm area	S	0.0784	
	Share of arable land covered with vegetation during winter	S	0.1992	
	Balance of soil organic matter***	S	0.1664	

\* Variable type: S – stimulant, D – destimulant

\*\* Livestock Unit (LSU) – is a reference unit that facilitates the aggregation of livestock of various species and age according to convention, by using specific coefficients established initially on the basis of the nutritional or feed requirement of each type of animal

\*\*\* Calculated according to the methodology of the Institute of Soil Science and Plant Cultivation in Pulawy, Poland, as the ratio of the sum of the products of the area of cultivated plants, the mass of natural fertilizers produced, the mass of straw potentially intended for plowing and corresponding reproduction or degradation coefficients in relation to the area sown on arable land in a given farm

Source: own calculation

Table 2. Basic statistics for the farms interviewed, 2020

Farm characteristics	Average value		
	Poland	Romania	Lithuania
Farm area (ha of UAA)	13.4	13.2	10.3
Standard output (EUR/year)	17,905	12,650	7,501
Age of farm manager	49	46	48
Level of education of farm manager*	4.6	4.8	5.1

\* Level of education in the range from 1 to 7, where 1 – no education, 7 – higher education  
Source: own calculation based on interview data

collective actions and, at the same time, make them a community, allowing them to achieve certain goals impossible to implement without this capital [Coleman 1990]. Therefore, to achieve the main objective of the survey, the owners of small farms were asked about their participation in different activities that are the manifestation of social capital, the reason for the indicated level of social capital, the willingness to initiate social activities and their assessment of the role of small farms in social life in rural areas. The questions asked to the farmers were grouped into four parts as follows:

- how would you rate your own and your family members' social activity (participation in events, parties, participation in organizations, associations, etc.)?
- why these participation are high, average or low?
- do you or your family members initiate various types of social activities?
- what do you think are the benefits of a small-scale farm for the development of rural areas and their social life?

As was mentioned, in-depth interviews (face-to-face) were conducted. This method offers a comprehensive picture of reality as perceived by the individual [Van Maanen 1998]. They can be used to describe phenomena, develop theories and test theories [Shah, Corley 2006]. Therefore, our use of in-depth interviews to verify the level of social capital perceived by small farmers was fully justified. The implementation of the research process made it possible to obtain information on social capital in the farms analysed, which according to Matthew B. Miles [1979] was: “succinct, complete, real and creating access to causality”, which are the most important advantages of qualitative research. Another important advantage of the interviews was that they met the criteria of an interpretative evaluation, as focused on the individual perspective, on the unit and on his/her interpretation of reality [Denzin, Lincoln 2000, Konecki 2000]. Thus, they provided plausible and reasonable explanations for a deeper understanding of the reasons why small farms undertake social capital activities. However, there may be some doubt

in the research regarding the small sample of farms interviewed. At this point, it is worth recalling that qualitative research is characterized by labour-intensive data collection [Miles 1979] and much higher financial expenses than quantitative research, which weakens the charge of an insufficient number of respondents.

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to 50% of all small farmers surveyed in Lithuania, Poland and Romania their and their family members' social activity was low. In Poland and Lithuania, up to 55% of the farmers surveyed and less than 40% in Romania stated that their social activity was low (Figure 1). On the other hand, 35% of Polish farmers assessed their social activity and their family members as high, which distinguished them from Lithuania and Romania (20% and 25%, respectively). However, it should be stated that the differences in social activity of the farms analysed in Poland, Lithuania and Romania were not big, which is confirmed by the results of the comparative analysis of distribution of responses of farmers of these countries (Figure 1). Small-scale farmers in Poland, Lithuania and Romania generally rate their social capital at low and average levels. This was expressed by their weak participation in events, parties, organisations, associations, etc.

A similar result can be found in some earlier empirical studies. For example, the low social capital of small farmers was also indicated in Poland [Halamska 2008] and Lithuania [Riviera et al. 2018]. Less activity was also observed in various organisations in Polish rural areas compared to cities [Jarosz-Angowska et al. 2015]. But according to the survey by

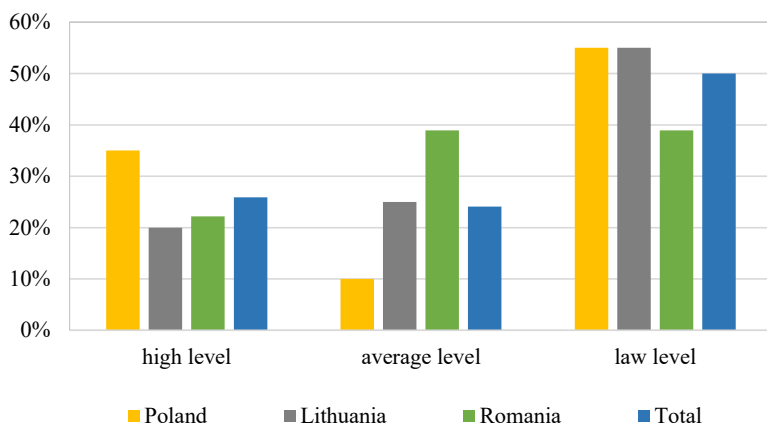


Figure 1. Distribution of answers to the question: How do you evaluate your and your family's social activity (participation in events, parties, participation in organizations, associations, etc.)

Source: own elaboration

Henryk Łabędzki [2011], farmers willingly participated in cultural, recreational and sporting events. They rated the interest of the general population in these events as high or medium. And most of the residents participated in cyclical events, especially harvest festivals.

Looking only at professional organisations, social capital can be analysed by the ability to cooperate in agriculture, belonging to producer groups, which are an institutional expression of teamwork and bring tangible benefits to its members. The interesting conclusion was driven by the Romanian survey [Georgescu 2016]. Taking into account the low level of local social capital, the inspiration to create the associative structure for farmer activities was mainly foreign. The survey in selected villages in Romania revealed that communities with strong social capital were able to use their endogenous resources and were in a better position compared to villages with weak social capital [Farkas 2021]. In Lithuania, farmer attitudes to cooperate in formal producer groups were not widespread [Drożdż et. al. 2021], but informal cooperation between small-scale farmers seems to be important [Lutz et al. 2017]. According to the Polish survey, farmer cooperation (the shared use of farm machinery or mutual assistance in farm work) was relatively rare and such unwillingness to cooperate was unfavourable [Łabędzki 2011].

The following part of our survey was devoted to the reasons for the low social activity (i.e., membership in various organizations and participation in events) of small-scale farmers and their families. Respondents indicated different causes, although among Lithuanian and Romanian farmers the most important reason was lack of time. At the same time, Polish farmers pointed out the lack of social needs, claiming that they rest best at home and that contact with nature was enough for them. They also openly admitted that they did not feel like being socially involved and were homemakers. Farmers in Lithuania, in contrast to farmers in Poland and Romania, in addition to a lack of time, indicated a lack of money as a reason for low social activity.

The above results from our study are generally in line with the conclusions of other research. For example, in a survey among farmers in Poland, the significant barriers to participating in common activities was a lack of farmer will due to the way they think about teamwork activities [Spychalski 2012]. Although most of respondents considered relationships with the local community important, a higher level of income increases the sense of group bonding among farm owners. In the survey of Ioana Liane Georgescu [2016] among Romanian farmers, financial reasons were indicated as the main motives for cooperating. Lithuanian farmers did not want to cooperate due to distrust between people and the unwillingness to change their habits [Tuna, Karantininis 2021]. In addition, informal cooperation between neighbours or relatives was indicated as obstacles to cooperating in formal structures [Kuliešis, Pareigien 2010]. These informal relations are a good example of social capital and can be treated as an alternative for formal cooperation, but these same cases can also be evaluated as a barrier to participation in professional organisation.



In the next part of our survey, farmers were asked to comment on whether they themselves or their family members initiate social activities. Due to the low participation in social activities, it was expected that the farmers surveyed would not organize social initiatives themselves. The respondents confirmed our assumptions. Only a few persons or their families from Poland indicated initiating such activities and most often resulted from the function they held, i.e., councillor or member of the village council. Farmers mentioned such activities as holiday festivals, harvest festivals, meetings and events integrating the community of local range. However, only 6 out of 20 Polish farmers indicated their involvement in such activities. Our results partially confirmed previous studies [Łabędzki 2011], which revealed that the most common form of neighbourhood cooperation in the surveyed Polish villages was the joint organization of cultural life, sports events and religious ceremonies. But farmers were passive in favour of joint activities aimed at taking care of the infrastructure and aesthetics of their localities. As far as Lithuanian and Romanian farmers are concerned in our research, all agreed that they do not organize social initiatives because they do not have time to do it and are overwhelmed by work. Therefore, in the case of free time, they use ready-made offers. From the answers of the farmers surveyed again there emerges a very low level of social capital in small farms, especially in Lithuania and Romania.

It should be stated here that in papers in which Central and Eastern European countries are analysed, factors connected with their socialist and communist past and the state-owned farms system are indicated as one of the determinants of a low level of social capital among farmers [Fukuyama 1997, Gajowiak 2013, Gijssels, Bussels 2014, River et al. 2018, Drożdż et al. 2021]. Contrary to declarations that the system reinforced rather than weakened individual selfishness [Fedyszak-Radziejowska 2011], it is an additional challenge in creating social capital in post-communist countries.

The final part of our survey was focused on assessing farmer awareness of the benefits of small farms for the social life and social development of rural areas. It turned out that farmers can easily define these benefits. In their opinion, they result, first of all, from preventing depopulation in rural areas. This is the opinion of Lithuanian and Romanian farmers, which allows us to state that this is the most important contribution of small farms to the social development of rural areas for them. They claimed that: “a small farm helps the village not disappear; small farms keep the whole village from moving out; a small farm is the basis of rural vitality, small farms support the activities of rural communities and rural life; a small farm must show the image of the countryside; the more young family farms, the more beautiful the village; we contribute directly to local development in the sense that we have given bee families to more than 10 people who have been farms in the village of Fintog”.

On the other hand, in the opinions of farmers from Poland, they very rarely emphasized the reduction of depopulation in villages by small farms. They primarily perceived the beneficial influence of small farms on the preservation of rural traditions and culture and the integration of local communities. Some of the most interesting opinions on this topic are: “small farms are a symbol of the countryside; they are manifestations of tradition; in small farms, first of all, one takes care of the family, providing it with a job, propagating tradition, as these are mainly family farms; they give life satisfaction to all family members; they provide satisfaction and maintenance to many families in the countryside; first of all, it is a place of life for (our) family. Here we raise children, teach them a future profession, pass on our experiences, tradition, from social aspects, better children are raised in such farms; we give children a place to play, to spend time outdoors. Children from the city really like to be in the countryside; thanks to the inter-neighbourly help of small farms, the main advantage of a small farm is to maintain and raise a family, to spread traditions and experiences; small farms create interpersonal relations, maintain acquaintances, offer neighbourly help, small farms take care of the culture and tradition of the region, providing local, traditional products; small farms care for tradition in the region, building social bonds in small groups of people, helping each other; the role of small farms is to provide healthier food, taking care of the landscape and biodiversity, cultivating tradition and culture”.

## CONCLUSIONS

Bearing in mind that our survey was only focused on selected aspects of social capital, some conclusions can be drawn. According to small-scale farmers in Poland, Romania and Lithuania, their social capital is generally low or average. The highest number of farmers who indicated a high level of social capital was in Poland. The low level of social capital in the countries analysed was also indicated in other studies, but an in-depth comparison is difficult as various aspects of social capital and groups of respondents were analysed.

The participation of small farmers in social activities in Poland, Romania and Lithuania is relatively low and at a comparative level. They are also not very active in initiating social activities. Such a low level of social capital is justified mainly due to the workload and a lack of money or time. It is interesting that the respondents did not point to the communist past as a reason for low social capital, which was generally underlined in papers focused on social capital in countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also worth underlining that in our survey social activities embraced professional (formal) and non-professional (informal) activities. And as different motives and barriers are connected with participation in these activities, future research should analyse these activities separately.

It can also be concluded that despite the low participation of small-scale farmers surveyed from Lithuania, Poland and Romania in social activities, they indicated the significant role of small farms in the social life and social development of rural areas. They indicated a quite broad range of benefits connected with small farms, from limiting the depopulation of rural areas, preserving the vitality of rural areas, cultivating traditions and customs, to building social ties, creating jobs and providing appropriate conditions for recreation. Although small farmers are aware of the social functions of small farms, they do not transfer it to their own participation in social activities, at least in activities analysed in our study. In other words, the awareness of farmers is not reflected in their behaviour. The authors clearly emphasize that the existence of small farms in rural areas does not automatically mean building or rebuilding social capital. This diagnosed gap between consciousness and behaviour is an important prerequisite for further in-depth research.

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ROLA MAŁYCH GOSPODARSTW ROLNYCH W BUDOWANIU KAPITAŁU  
SPOŁECZNEGO WSI – STUDIUM PRZYPADKÓW Z LITWY, POLSKI I RUMUNII

Słowa kluczowe: kapitał społeczny, małe gospodarstwa rolne, Litwa, Polska, Rumunia

## ABSTRAKT

Kapitał społeczny jest jednym z najważniejszych czynników wpływających na poziom rozwoju. W przypadku obszarów wiejskich ważnym zagadnieniem jest określenie jego poziomu w gospodarstwach rolnych, ponieważ są one kluczowymi podmiotami, wpływającymi na rozwój tych obszarów. Z przeglądu literatury przedmiotu wynika, że nie ma wielu badań poświęconych tej tematyce z perspektywy drobnych producentów rolnych w nowych krajach członkowskich Unii Europejskiej. Dlatego celem artykułu jest określenie kapitału społecznego w małych gospodarstwach rolnych w trzech wybranych krajach Unii Europejskiej, tj. w Polsce, Rumunii i na Litwie. Opracowanie wypełnia lukę badawczą i stanowi przesłankę do dalszych badań. Dla realizacji celu opracowania posłużono się metodą wywiadów bezpośrednich z właścicielami małych gospodarstw rolnych z Polski, Litwy i Rumunii (po 20 gospodarstw z każdego kraju). Wywiady przeprowadzono w 2020 roku. Z przeprowadzonych badań wynika, że zaangażowanie drobnych rolników z Polski, Rumunii i Litwy w działalność społeczną jest małe, na porównywalnym poziomie w każdym z tych krajów. Główną przyczyną małego zaangażowania rolników w działalność społeczną jest obciążenie pracą. Społeczny aspekt oddziaływania małych gospodarstw nie może być jednak zawężony tylko do bezpośredniego zaangażowania w życie społeczne. Przejawia on się przede wszystkim w funkcjach społecznych pełnionych przez te gospodarstwa, tj. kultywowanie obyczajów, budowanie więzi społecznych, ograniczanie depopulacji i zwiększanie żywotności wsi.

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