

# Social Capital and Local Development in the Small Towns of Romania

## Case Study: Sulina And Isaccea Towns

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### 1. Introduction

**G**LOBALLY, THE concept of social capital is brought to the fore whenever the matter of economic performance, local governance or community development is being discussed (Knack and Keefer 1997; Karametou and Apostolopoulos 2010; Naughton Linda 2014). Therefore, the importance of social relations in organizing and mobilizing members of a community is often stressed by most of the authors. Most of the recent studies focus on identifying new methods for measurement, analysis and interpretation, providing a clearer understanding of the social resources that may be involved in the development process (Putnam 200; Gallois and Schmitt 2005; Kaasa and Parts 2008; McAloney et al. 2011). As a result, the debates on local development have led, most of the time, to the assessment of different types of capital (natural capital, built capital, economic capital, human capital, cultural capital, and social capital) available within the community (Midgley and Livermore 1998; Trigilia 2001; Reynolds et al. 2010; Capello 2011; Fratesi and Perucca 2014). The concept of local development is placed, therefore, at the center of the global-local model, where territorial capital (Camagni 2009; Camagni and Capello 2013) is perceived as a factor of competitiveness and local development (Camagni et al. 2008) and the social and cultural capital (as components of territorial capital) are considered the main driving force of development (Cabus and Vanhaverbeke 2003).

The concept of social capital is widely popular nowadays and represents an attractive subject for social sciences, economic and political sciences, and it is often approached in geography, where is studied in a more integrated perspective, in a strong relationship with the territory and its features. In the Romanian academic literature, the subject was approached mainly by Sandu (1996, 1999, 2005), Voicu (2003, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2010), Zamfir and Stănescu (2007), Popescu Luminița (2011), Nistor et al. (2011).

At the European level, the concerns for developing and strengthening social capital networks are expressed through several policies and programs for local development

and social economy<sup>1</sup>. In this context of awareness, in 2004, at EU level, but also in Romania and Bulgaria, candidate countries at the time, a survey on social capital using the standard Eurobarometer methodology was performed. Key findings of the survey present Romania as a country in transition with high levels of informal social capital where the civil society is lacking and the score for indicators that determine participation in voluntary associations is exceptionally low (EC 2004). In Romania, the interest in social capital has emerged as a secondary, but necessary reaction in order obtain funding and implement EU-funded projects, before and after the accession (Dan 2006, in Voicu 2008).

The performed analysis is mainly based on the definition of social capital given by Putnam (2000). The author focuses his theory on three essential elements: social networks, the norms and the trust that form at their intersection, defining social capital as 'the link between individuals' (Putnam 2000). Based on the different types of interaction between individuals and their participation in the local community, the literature on social capital reveals an important distinction between two types of capital, namely, informal and formal social capital (Pichler and Wallace 2007). The social capital of a community represents a network of both informal connections—that emerge from social relationships established by individuals with their families, friends, neighbors, as well as formal social capital—defined by formal participation in the local community and civic organizations (Pichler and Wallace 2007; McAloney et al. 2011). Thus, social capital is not a unitary concept; it integrates a variety of important functional elements, being a combination of formal and informal ties, both necessary within a community (Onyx and Bullen 2000).

Robert Putnam (1993) offers a geographical perspective on social capital, considering that the connections between individuals are, to a great extent, formed and shaped by their surrounding environment. This theory is also undertaken and subsequently studied by several authors (Mohan and Mohan 2002). Furthermore, according to James Coleman (1988), it is highly possible that communities with a strong sense of internal identity will demonstrate high levels of social capital. Moreover, Onyx and Bullen (2000) consider that smaller and isolated communities are more likely to achieve higher levels of social capital. The results of the case studies carried out by the aforementioned authors have led to the conclusion that, when a community lives in an environment with particular features (such as isolation) people will be more inclined towards community-related activities, such as social programs, volunteering or any other activity involving the community.

Pichler and Wallace (2007) note that in the southeastern European states informal capital is significantly higher than the formal one, family ties (informal) being actually a strong evidence of a weak social capital: "In countries where family or informal social capital predominate to a much greater extent it may be more difficult to establish a vibrant civil society of the kind described by Putnam because the culture does not allow it" (Pichler and Wallace 2007, 24). Furthermore, small and closed communities, which tend to isolate themselves from the rest of the world, are associated with higher levels of informal social capital (Voicu 2008, 12). This disproportion between the two types of capi-

tal creates some negative side effects, such as stagnation or involution in community development. Dumitru Sandu (2005, 81) states that “in communities with high levels of informal social capital the risk for development projects to fail is higher due to the reluctance of community members”. Therefore, the concept of social capital and the theories that have emerged around it represent one of the possible explanations attributed to the differences in the development of small communities. The main argument for analysis is sustained by its feature as a multi-dimensional concept allowing multilateral approaches and may have relevant implications in various spheres of society. Regarded as a collective resource, social capital becomes active only when mobilized through social relationships (Coleman 1990; Portes 1998; Putnam 2000). The proper development of social capital is associated with a bottom-up approach of the society/community that could reduce the unwanted effects of the conventional paradigms (Popescu 2011). Local development practices require innovative approaches that involve accepting the cooperation of citizen-local authorities (Popescu 2011), and thereby the citizens aren’t only beneficiaries but also directly involved in the decision-making process regarding their community. Thus, social capital becomes a key element in the new paradigm regarding local development policies, leading to necessary transformations in the approaches towards development.

In this context, our focus is on analyzing social capital as a factor in the development of small towns in Romania. Specifically, we aim to provide a new insight into the role played by social capital in local development, a context in which we identified and assessed informal and formal networks of social capital of two small towns of eastern Romania and explored the connections between social capital and local development. Moreover, the research hypothesis allows us to analyze in context if the degree of accessibility or isolation of a community has an influence on the social capital of that community, and therefore to observe if physical and social peculiarities of small communities could have a significant influence on their overall level of social capital.

## 2. Data and Methodology

**T**HE RESEARCH methodology employed in this study consists of both geographical and sociological methods and involves the adoption of a case study approach, using qualitative and quantitative methods in data collection and an interpretation of collected qualitative data using the comparative analysis.

Due to the complex nature of the social capital and considering the context in which this research was carried out, the existence of two case studies allows us a valid interpretation of the collected data. The analyzed communities are representative for the current difficult socio-economic situation that characterizes most of the small towns of Romania and the obstacles that these towns have to overcome in their attempt to revive the economy (Petrea et al. 2013), in the current European context of local development.

The second argument in choosing the two communities for the analysis is based on the intention of expressing the extent to which physical and geographical conditions may have an influence on the level of social capital, respectively in the development of small

towns. The two communities present several common features, such as population, ethnic composition, evolution after 1989, economic development, are part of the same geographical region, in southeastern Romania, but are however different in terms of the potential given by their position in the territory: Sulina—a town that is physically-geographically isolated, and Isaccea—a town with a proper degree of accessibility. Sulina is the most eastern settlement of Romania and its peculiarities make it a special environment for studying the social capital. Located in the eastern part of the Danube Delta, on the Sulina Branch of the river, its defining features, such as isolation, manifested at all levels, an extremely fragile and restrictive natural environment, significant historical events, ethnic diversity and a limited number of economic activities, can be both restrictive and favorable factors for the development of the town. For instance, the Danube represents a natural barrier perceived by locals as an impediment for the development of their town, although the history and earlier flourishing of Sulina is exclusively attributed to its location at the mouths of the Danube. On the other hand, although our second case study, Isaccea, is antithetical in terms of accessibility and economic development opportunities, we cannot speak of an economic or social development in accordance with the advantages given by its position.

The results of the study are based on field research carried out in Sulina and Isaccea, where we applied an integrated questionnaire for social capital<sup>2</sup>. The research sample consisted of 200 individuals; this part of the research was completed by informal semi-structured interviews with selective participants such as representatives of the local authorities, teachers, and employers. The participants were asked to fill out a 54 item social capital questionnaire that was made up of 36 questions from the Social Capital Questionnaire (Onyx and Bullen 2000), a questionnaire designed by the World Bank (Grootaert and Van Bastelaer 2002), which includes 12 personal questions and six items on trust in authorities and policymakers (Veenstra 2005, 2065). Responses to each statement were measured with a five-point Likert scale: 1 = no; 2 = rarely; 3 = sometimes; 4 = often; and, 5 = yes, always (Allen and Seaman 2007). The same scale was used to interpret and illustrate more clearly the results.

The information provided by the questionnaire is related to participation in the community through formal or informal networks, social behavior and the feelings of safety and trust. In addition, the questionnaire allows us to establish the type of relationships that arise in the community providing, for example, information on citizens' trust towards neighbors, friends and family connections and work connections (see table 1). Additionally, it examines the acceptance of diversity, an important aspect when several ethnic groups live together in the same community. At the same time, it provides information about the value of life of the individuals, elements that may have an influence on the development and evolution of social capital networks.

Table 2 presents the general profile of the sample: in Sulina only 15% of those interviewed have university qualifications, with a higher frequency of women with secondary education (40%) and a university degree (10%), while in Isaccea 17% are university graduates and 77% have received a high school education, with a higher frequency of women with high school and university education. Concerning the origin of the inhabitants, the majority of those questioned in Sulina were born there, in Tulcea County or

TABLE 1. Formal and informal social capital indicators used in the study

Informal	Formal
Neighborhood connections	Participation in local community
Trust in neighbors	Willingness for participation
Willingness to help an neighbor	Membership in a group / organization
Integrating newcomers	Frequency of participation
Family and friends connections	Proactivity in a social context
Degree of social isolation	
Tolerance of diversity	The felling of trust and safety
The perception on ethnic diversity	Trust in others
	The felling of safety
Work connections	Perception on life value
The feeling of being part of a team at work	
	Trust in authorities
	Participation in decision making process
	Trust in local authorities

SOURCE: after Narayan and Cassidy 2001; Onyx and Bullen 2000

TABLE 2. Sample profile – who answered the questionnaire

Socio-demographic indicators	Sulina	Isaccea
Place of birth	66% Sulina 56% women	60% Isaccea 50% women
Age	17 to 72 years, 65% over 30	31 to 60 years, 67% over 45
Education	55% high school education, 22% vocational education	17% university education, 33% high school education, 34% vocational education
Monthly income	36% earn between 501-1000 lei/month	34% earn between 501-1000 lei/month

DATA SOURCE: the data was collected in the field

in the Danube Delta villages (62%), the others arrived here during the period of industrial development, coming from different regions of the country (such as Moldavia or Transylvania).

### 3. Territorial Context

The study area includes two small towns in southeastern Romania, in Tulcea County, Sulina and Isaccea (figure 1). Although less important in terms of population, due to economic functions held in certain historical periods these towns exercised their role as a local polarizing center for the surrounding rural area. The political changes that occurred in the late '80s, as in the case of many small towns of Romania (Filimon et al. 2011; Petrea et al. 2013), led to their decay, manifested as a loss of economic function and thus as social and physical degradation, the small towns facing complex challenges at the moment.

FIGURE 1. Territorial context within Tulcea County



Sulina is the only urban settlement in the Danube Delta and, due to its exceptional environmental conditions holds special value, harnessed in some historical periods, but most often ignored. Sulina's growth and development were favored by its position at the congruence of the Danube and the Black Sea, the oldest written reference dating back to the tenth century. The establishment of European Commission of the Danube (CED) at Sulina had a decisive role in the development and evolution of the town, also called *Europolis* in the nineteenth century. From a small fishing village, Sulina was quickly transformed into a town with an intense economic, social and cultural life (Covacef 2003; Van Assche and Teampău 2009).

All this incredible progress ended with the beginning of the Second World War (especially due to the dissolution of the CED) and Sulina became a *border region*. The economic life was reduced to activities prevalent a century ago: handicrafts and fishing, leading to increased migration (Van Assche et al. 2008; Van Assche and Teampău 2009).

The communist regime, installed immediately after the Second World War, prepared a socialist development for Sulina, based mainly on local industry—fishing, tinning fish, and naval ship repair, while the demographic structure radically changed (Van Assche et al. 2008; Van Assche et al. 2009). Then, the post-communist period saw a total decline in the evolution of the city. The prosperous local industry during the communism is today characterized by decay, with one of the highest unemployment rates in Romania (Teampău and Van Assche 2007). In addition, Sulina tends to become highly isolated, socially and in geographical terms, since it is only accessible by water (even less accessible in winter when the Danube freezes), and many inhabitants have migrated to the urban areas outside the Delta. Nowadays, the local economy is mostly based on local trade, transportation services, and on various tourism-related activities.

The second case study includes Isaccea, a small town located on the right bank of the Danube. Its position offers the most favorable conditions for development, mainly because of its physical-geographical characteristics favorable for agricultural activities and its high accessibility (both by water, via two ports, and on land, on the European road E87 linking Tulcea and Galați). Unlike Sulina, the town of Isaccea did not receive the same amount of interest throughout its history, even though, during the Ottoman domination, it was a strategic point and a permanent military garrison (Topoleanu 1984). Isaccea's situation seems unusual for its potential: moderate population growth, high unemployment rate, an industrial and agricultural-driven economy. The economy of Isaccea remains underdeveloped and dependent on subsistence agriculture and few industrial activities—mining, manufacturing, and trade.

In 2011, Sulina counted 4456 inhabitants and Isaccea 5451 inhabitants (National Institute of Statistics—INS 2011), both towns experiencing slight decreases in population in the coming years (INS 2012, 2013, 2014) (see table 3).

TABLE 3. Demographic changes in Sulina and Isaccea between 1912 and 2014 (% growth rate)

	1912- 1930	1930- 1948	1948- 1956	1956- 1966	1966- 1977	1977- 1992	1992- 2002	2002- 2011	2011- 2014	1912- 2014
Sulina	-12,9	-47,2	7,3	10,5	22,6	11,6	-16,1	-11,3	-5	-42
Isaccea	11,2	1,6	11,8	-2,8	5,7	5,5	-4,7	0,68	-1,4	31

SOURCE: National Institute of Statistics; Limona 2009; Indicatorul localităților din România 1943

Between 1912 and 2014 Sulina lost almost 50% of its population, while in Isaccea, for the same period, the population grew by 30 percent (see table 3). The pronounced economic decline that occurred after 1990, as a consequence of the decline in the local industrial activity, which can be observed throughout the entire urban area of Romania, especially in small towns, caused significant social changes, the quality of life being reduced significantly.

## 4. Results and Discussions

### 4.1. Informal social capital

**I**N THIS section, we analyzed the results of the applied questionnaire. Thus, the sections that highlight the best informal social capital are those representing the frequency of contacts with different social environments, e.g. family, friends, specifically the sections *neighborhood connections*, *family and friends connections* and *work connections*. The interaction with neighbors or friends recorded high percentages in both communities, but scored lower in Isaccea (86% in Sulina, with Isaccea at 45%). In Sulina, 83% of the sample considered that they could call for help if needed and visit each other frequently (more than 5 times per week) but 69% of them only engage in usual daily activities with their neighbors.

In Isaccea, only 67% of those who responded to the questionnaire stated that they can turn to friends for help if needed, and 50% of them pay frequent visits to each other. To the question expressing acceptance of diversity, most of the respondents of Sulina have shown a positive attitude, as they feel happy to live in a multiethnic and multicultural environment (see figure 2 and table 4); while in Isaccea the results are slightly different. As a consequence of the migration of some ethnic minorities (such as the Turks or Ukrainians) and the growth of other groups (such as the Roma minority), they were more reluctant regarding the coexistence with other ethnicities.

TABLE 4. Informal social capital scores for Sulina and Isaccea

Indicators	Sulina	Isaccea
Family and friends connections	3,88	3,63
Neighborhood connections	4,28	3,78
Work connections	3,75	3,61
Tolerance of diversity	4,32	3,26
Total capital social informal	4,06	3,57

Data source: own calculation

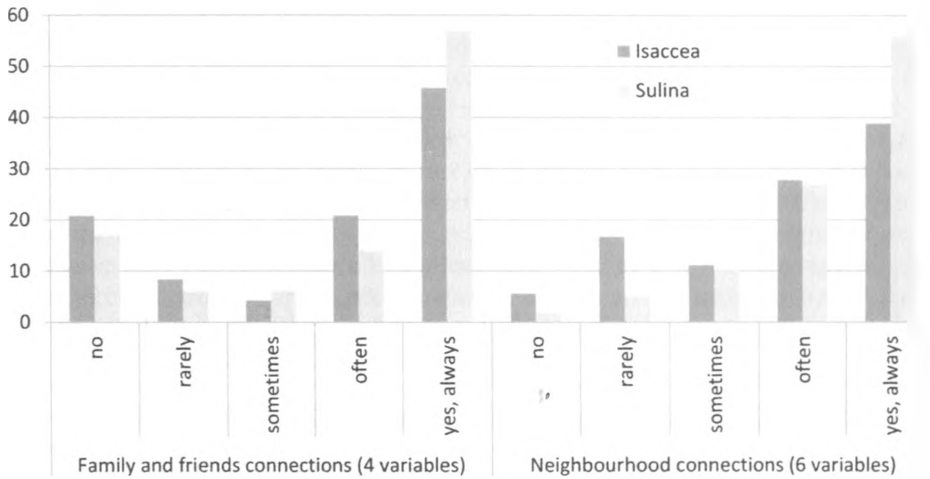
Figure 2 and Table 4 display the results of the descriptive analysis showing a high informal social capital; in both communities interpersonal relations are important and there emerged a strong connection among family members, neighbors, and friends. The reported empirical results confirm the existence of a high informal social capital and sustain the conclusion and statements presented in the research hypothesis.

### 4.2. Formal social capital

An essential element in the social capital analysis is the level of participation in the local community. The results of the questionnaire indicate a very low participation in Sulina (a score of 1.65 out of 5). In Isaccea the score for this indicator is significantly higher, at 3.26 (see table 5). The values for the *proactivity in a social context* indicator are relatively high for both communities, but more pronounced in Isaccea, where a greater openness of the locals to actions that denote citizenship was identified. Furthermore, 75%



FIGURE 2. Informal social capital indicators in Sulina and Isaccea



DATA SOURCE: own calculation

of those questioned in Sulina have never participated as volunteers, 90% of them have never been part of a local organization (see figure 3) or of other forms of social organization (e.g. cultural association, sports club, etc.), justifying their answer by the fact that they don't recall to have ever heard of any volunteer activity in their town, while stating that, if there was such a thing, they would participate.

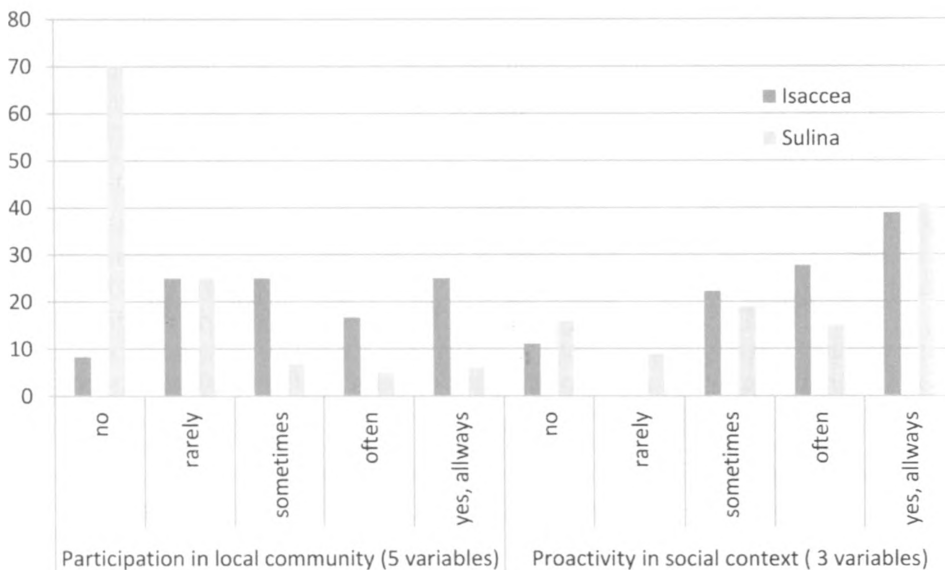
For Isaccea, the analysis of this indicator shows a significantly greater openness towards community participation (3.26 of 5 points), but remains unsatisfactory, most of those who responded positively showing difficulties in remembering if and when they participated in local community activities.

Another indicator often used to measure social capital is *general trust*, used for determining the trustworthiness developed among citizens. The collected data shows that in both communities there is a higher tendency towards distrust, the majority (61% in Sulina and 68% in Isaccea) argue that people can be trusted very rarely or never, while 19% of Sulina locals 34% of people from Isaccea argue that the context is very important. Only 20% of respondents in Sulina believe that people can be trusted, regardless of the context and without knowing their moral characteristics, whereas in Isaccea there were no individuals to support this.

Concerning the results about the *feeling of safety*, most of the interviewees feel safe in the community (69% and 75% in Sulina in Isaccea). These values are slightly different from those recorded at national level, where only 66% say they feel safe and 32% do not support this<sup>3</sup>.

Another element potentially determining the level of social capital is the external factors, in this case the indicator that expresses *trust in authorities*. When asked *do you think you can trust the politicians to serve the interests of citizens*, 71% of respondents in Sulina

FIGURE 3. Formal social capital indicators



DATA SOURCE: own calculation

and 67% of those surveyed in Isaccea said never, while 20% (Sulina) and 17% (Isaccea) answered rarely. Furthermore, 87% (Sulina) and 83% (Isaccea) of the people questioned said they don't think that they have the capacity to influence political decisions in their community, while 86% of respondents in Sulina believe that *money is very important to influence political decisions*, as opposed to just 49% of respondents in Isaccea.

TABLE 5. Formal social capital scores for Sulina and Isaccea

Indicators	Sulina	Isaccea
Participation in local community	1,65	3,26
Proactivity in social context	3,56	3,84
Feelings of trust	2,17	1,83
Feelings of safety	3,86	3,97
Total capital social formal	2,81	3,25

DATA SOURCE: own calculation

The interpretation of results based on Likert's scale allows a clearer perspective on the identified situation (see table 5). Overall, the findings indicate lower levels of active citizenship in the dynamics of the local community. Although the situation in both

areas has many common characteristics, the comparative analysis reveals that the level of participation in community is much lower (almost lacking) in Sulina than it is in Isaccea, where the results were surprisingly higher.

Nonetheless, volunteering activities and association in various organized groups to perform certain social activities have a limited character; the phenomenon manifests itself beyond the local level.

Thus, for Sulina the results highlight low levels of formal social capital, and for Isaccea average levels. The emerging overall picture on the formal social capital for the two communities corroborates the findings of Romanian authors cited above, allowing us to ascribe the lower values observed to the isolation factor. The results presented here are somehow contrary to the research hypothesis regarding the formal social capital, which is not therefore confirmed; the peculiarities of Romanian communities have a strong influence on the values of a civil society and represent an eloquent case on the causes and consequences of the low levels of social capital.

TABLE 6. Informal and formal social capital with a potential impact in local development

Informal social networks (social connection)		Tolerance of diversity	
Q.15 Can you get help from friends when you need it?		Q. 27 Do you think that multiculturalism makes life in your area better?	
Sulina	4,42	Sulina	4,01
Isaccea	3,73	Isaccea	3,32
Local community participation		Trust in authorities	
Q1. Do you help out a local group as a volunteer?		Q 38. How much do you agree with the statement 'We have Community Leaders we can trust'?	
Sulina	1,9	Sulina	1,86
Isaccea	1,9	Isaccea	2,66
Q2. Have you attended a local community event in the past 3 years?		Q 39. Do you think that you have the power to influence political decisions in your town	
Sulina	2,0	Sulina	1,54
Isaccea	2,88	Isaccea	1,17
General trust		Feeling of belonging	
Q 10. Do you agree that most people can be trusted?		Q 13. Does your local community feel like home?	
Sulina	2,17	Sulina	4,47
Isaccea	1,83	Isaccea	4,1

DATA SOURCE: own calculation

The indicators of social capital considered relevant for the development of communities were also analyzed using Likert's scale (see table 6). The values for informal

social capital are still high and constitute a prerequisite for positive community development. For small communities with high social cohesion, interpersonal relationships and strong mutual trust can be a strong point for public policies aimed at local development and could be exploited in this regard.

However, the low levels for formal social capital indicators display the social difficulties that the two communities have to overcome to benefit from a proper development. Key elements of the social capital highlight low levels with less relevant differences between the two communities. General trust and trust in authorities is limited, and these indicators are generally subject to high pressure from external factors. Usually, trust is a necessary precondition for social capital development, explaining different levels of cooperation in a community, and the low levels identified suggests a weak link in social networks.

## 5. Conclusion

**T**HE CURRENT analysis has several implications with regard to social capital in small towns. We analyzed the role of social capital networks in the development of two communities with severe economic revitalization difficulties, but with different development potential, constituting a representative sample of the small towns in Romania.

Although the performed analysis revealed differences between the two communities, they are not very significant. The findings indicate high levels of informal social capital in both small towns, slightly higher in Sulina, but this fits the general pattern of small towns. In contrast, formal social capital, considered to be the component with direct consequences for local development, recorded lower values in both communities, but the lowest values were attributed to Sulina, mainly because of the low level of participation in the community.

According to what has been discussed above, we believe that the low level of participation in the community in both small towns can easily be interpreted as a Romanian specificity, a consequence of the devaluation of volunteering and involvement in the local community as a result of the mandatory and distorted character of volunteering during the communist period. Physical isolation and the marginalization specific to the Danube Delta, but also other obstacles related to the management of the area and institutional instability, prevent the local population from becoming involved in the management of Delta-related activities and in the decision-making process at local level. All these have contributed over time to the development of a social behavior characterized by a low and inactive civic spirit and a lack of social involvement, and a general distrust, which is manifested by resignation and the inhibition of any initiative at community level. Although Isaccea presents the advantages given by its position, there were no notable differences at the level of local development, both economic and social; the pattern presented above proved to be applicable here as well.

Overall, this study has yielded interesting and useful results. Along with other types of capital, essential for the development of a community (natural capital, human capital etc.), the social capital, especially the formal one, plays an important role, worthy to be taken

into account for development strategies. In the small towns of Romania where the formal social capital decreased as a result of the particular national context, it did not represent, in the post-communist period, a factor for boosting local development. In order to increase the chances of revitalizing the small towns we consider that efforts should be made towards strengthening the civil society and increasing the level of formal social capital.



## Notes

1. See “The Contribution of Social Capital in the Social Economy to Local Economic Development in Western Europe” - EU Research on Social Sciences and Humanities (2007), Territorial Agenda 2020 (2011)
2. Social Capital Questionnaire accessed on-line at <http://www.mapl.com.au/pdf/scquest.pdf>
3. Results captured by Special Eurobarometer 223 / Wave 62.2 – TNS Opinion & Social

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**Abstract**

**Social Capital and Local Development in The Small Towns of Romania.  
Case Study: Sulina And Isaccea Town**

This article analyzes the role of social capital networks in the development of Romanian small towns, after the communist period. To highlight the implications of lower levels of social capital in the already difficult process of revitalization and conversion of small towns, a case study comprising two communities, Sulina, and Isaccea, was undertaken. The analysis focuses on identifying and assessing formal and informal networks of social capital as a factor for the development of Romanian small towns (1) and the extent to which the physical isolation of an area influences the level of social capital (2). The empirical results of the study emphasize that, even though there are some differences in the levels of social capital between the two communities, isolation does not represent a decisive factor for social capital development and the underdeveloped overall social capital can be correlated with the poor development of small towns.

**Keywords**

small towns, social capital, isolation, local development, Sulina, Isaccea