



Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) – Armenia

A program of Eurasia Partnership Foundation

This research has been implemented in the scope of CRRC-Armenia Research Fellowship Program, financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

**Grants to Support Social Science and
Policy- Oriented Research**

Final Analytical Report

Restructuring schools in Armenian neighborhoods: does social capital matter?

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Grant # C07-0511

Yerevan - 2008

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Abstract

This study investigates the effect of communities' social capital on the renovation of Armenian schools. Comparing four school communities in Yerevan – two from a rich, and two from less wealthy neighborhoods, the study explores how economic well-being affects the social capital of the communities and how those factors affect communities' willingness to restructure/renovate their schools. A quantitative survey was conducted in the neighborhoods of the selected schools to assess their economic status, social capital and willingness to participate in school restructuring. Further, indices are calculated for bridging and bonding capital in each community. The findings of this research suggest that income determines the level of social capital – the higher the income, the higher the social capital. There is a further relationship between social capital and school renovation – the higher the social capital, the more likely is that the community will take part in school renovation.

Community Challenges of Post-Sovietism

Public schools in the Armenian capital are facing serious problems of restructuring. Most have not been renovated since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Will the communities take the responsibility to at least partly contribute to this community challenge? The answer depends not only on socio-economic well-being but also on public cooperation. The present research tries to elaborate on the concept of social capital in four neighborhoods of the Armenian capital. The study will try to answer two questions: “Does economic well-being affect the level of social capital in the neighborhood?” and “Are the neighborhoods with higher social capital more likely to be willing to participate in school renovation?” It will be hypothesized that the higher social capital in a neighborhood, the more likely it is to participate in the renovation of a public school.

Shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, post-Soviet Armenia faced serious challenges on the national and local level. While the national government struggled against energy shortages, economic blockade and consequences of a devastating earthquake, community level challenges deepened with collapsing kindergartens, schools and roads. Some seventeen years have passed since Armenia disintegrated from the Soviet community but many community challenges have remained unresolved. Following the modes of Soviet experience, the society expects that the national or local governments will take charge of their problems. Due to budget constraints, the local administration proved to be unable to tackle most of the problems, including housing, schools and roads. On the other hand, the community seems reluctant to engage in any civic action to build the communities.

It is generally assumed that so called Soviet mentality prevents people from participating in common actions. Others claim it is the absence of a supportive institutional and governance environment at the macro level that discourages citizen participation in service delivery and democratic decision-making (Babken Babajanyan, 2005). Further reference is made to lack of positive experience and low trust in social institutions. “The general trust in people and institutions outside the immediate circle of acquaintances presents a challenge to democratic development in Armenia,” IFES writes (IFES, 2004, p.10). The report further elaborates that “three quarters or more of Armenians have not attended a community council meeting in the past year, signed a petition, or discussed their local community budgets with acquaintances.” (IFES, 2004: p. 9)

Whereas many international and national initiatives have taken the task to restructure schools, a study conducted by Babken Babajanyan indicates that even in cases when community involvement projects were implemented, like by Social Investment Fund, “the project did not change the existing patterns of local social organization and had no significant impact on the nature of participation in the beneficiary communities.” (Babken Babajanyan, 2005: p. 1.) The author concludes that “Bottom-up, capacity-building interventions that mainly focus on changing patterns of interpersonal social relations may not be effective in fostering sustainable civic institutions without changes in the nature of a country's governance.” (Babken Babajanyan, 2005: p.1).

Defining Social Capital

A huge volume of scholarly literature indicates to social capital is an important element of economic wellbeing. World Bank points to evidence that shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable. The importance of social capital has been variously emphasized by writings of different scholars. Grootaert and van Bastelaer point out to at least three:

“Participation by individuals in social networks increases the availability of information and lowers its cost.”

“Second, participation in local networks and attitudes of mutual trust make it easier for any group to reach collective decisions and implement collective action.”

“Finally, networks and attitudes reduce opportunistic behavior by community members. In settings where a certain behavior is expected from individuals for

the benefit of the group, social pressures and fear of exclusion can induce these individuals to provide the expected behavior.” (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002:11-12)

Whereas many engage in research on social capital, there is no commonly accepted definition of the construct. Christiaan Grootaert, Deepa Narayan, Veronica Nyhan Jones and Michael Woolcock distinguish between two lines of discussions on social capital. The first “refers to the resources (such as information, ideas, support) that individuals are able to procure by virtue of their relationship with other people.” (Christian Grootaert, Deepa Narayan, et al, 2004: p.11) In this sense, the informal networks the individuals engage become an important virtue to secure their position in the society. Who you know becomes an important capital that shapes a person’s life.

“The second approach is commonly attributed to political scientist Robert Putnam.... It refers to the nature and extent of one’s involvement in various informal networks and civic organizations.” (Christian Grootaert, Deepa Narayan, et. al, 2004: p.11) Putnam argues that “social capital allows citizens to resolve collective problems more easily.” Further, he says “social capital greases the wheels that allow communities to advance smoothly.” (Robert Putnam 2000: p. 288-290)

Pierre Bourdieu’s definition focuses on “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition -- or in other words, to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.” (in Reinhard Kreckel, 1983: 2) Several key points need to be emphasized here. Bourdieu tells about “more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition,” or in other words “to membership in a group which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital.” However, “the volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected,” Bourdieu continues (Kreckel, 1983: 3). This means, the publicly non-institutionalization of social capital may bring to unequal benefits to many.

To enter into some kind of social exchange, the members of the group must possess at least some level of trust. In the words of Fukuyama, “one of the most important lessons we can learn from

an examination of economic life is that a nation's well-being, as well as its ability to compete, is conditioned by a single, pervasive cultural characteristics: the level of trust inherent in the society." (Fukuyama, 1995:7) He argues that "while many countries have had trouble creating the institutions of democracy and free markets, and others, especially in parts of the former communist world, have solid backward into fascism or anarchy, the world's advanced countries have no alternative model of political and economic organization other than democratic capitalism to which they can aspire." (Fukuyama, 1995:4)

Another important element Fukuyama emphasizes are cultural norms and habits. In his words, "a thriving civil society depends on a people's habits, customs, and ethics – attributes that can be shaped only indirectly through conscious political action and must otherwise be nourished through an increased awareness and respect for culture." (Fukuyama, 1995:5) The notion of values is emphasized in the writing of Grootaert and van Bastelaer who say that "the social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development." (Grootaert and van Bastelaer, 2002:8)

Last but not least, Aaron V. Cicourel quotes Parson's usage of status referring to role-expectations:

"Role-expectations, on the other hand, are the definitions by both ego and alter of which behavior is proper for each in the relationship and in the situation in question.... Sanctions are the 'appropriate' behavioral consequences of alter's role-expectations in response to the actual behavior of ego. Both role-expectations and sanctions may be institutionalized to a greater or lesser degree. They are institutionalized when they are interacted with or 'express' value-orientations common to the members of the collectivity to which both ego and alter belong, which in the limiting case may consist only of ego and alter (Parsons and Shils, 1951: 154)

Thus, we may conclude that social capital is closely interrelated with concepts like *trust, networks, cultural norms and values and role-expectations*. Our analyses of social capital will elaborate these concepts in relations to school restructuring and the level of social capital in two Armenian neighborhoods.

Measuring social capital in the context of post-communism

Despite of its popularity, there is no commonly accepted measurement for social capital, either. Most scholars at least agree that people must possess some level of trust to enter into mutually beneficial exchange. Concurrently, Sabatini argues that “we have to be very cautious in carrying out international comparisons laying just on a single basic indicator (like trust levels).” (Sabatini, 2005: p2)

An additional requirement is to find a meaningful conceptualization and measurement of social capital in the context of post-communist countries. Despite of widespread belief that social capital facilitates economic growth, Petr Mateu argues that in the context of post communist societies “social capital stemming from informal networks and exchanges allowing people to develop coping strategies facilitating their success, may hinder effective functioning of market mechanisms and, consequently, economic growth.” (Petr Mateu, 2002: 2) Petr Mateu (2002) differentiates between social capital as an attribute of an individual and as an attribute of society. When defined as an attribute of an individual, as person’s potential to activate and mobilize a network of social connections for material and non-material exchanges, social capital is viewed as a private good. On the other hand, when defined as an attribute of a society or as a quality of networks and relationships enabling individuals to cooperate and act collectively, social capital takes the properties of a public good requiring interpersonal trust as well as trustworthiness of public and political institutions that establish and uphold the rule of law and making transactions transparent and safe. Petr Mateu conclude that “in transforming societies the concept of social capital is one of the key issues for research aiming at understanding the process of social change and its consequences for peoples' career mobility and life chances, while in advanced countries, the same concept, though defined differently, is being used to contribute to the explanation of cross-national variance in economic growth and overall well-being.” (Petr Mateu, 2002: 3)

Given the ambiguity of the concept for cross-cultural comparison, a distinction is made between what Woolcock calls ‘*bridging*’ and ‘*bonding*’ social capital. By ‘bridging’ social capital often is mean ties with outsiders and open channels of mutually beneficial exchanges whereas ‘bonding’ social capital limits itself only to ties with close friends or the family. It is a closed network for outsiders and benefits are exchanged within narrow boundaries of the group.

Jan L. Flora and Cornelia B. Flora have outlined community social capital typology (see table 1) according to ‘bridging’ and ‘bonding’ types. This scheme will be applied in the course of the study to locate the Armenian communities according to their bridging and bonding types.

Table 1

Community Social Capital Typology			
B O N D I N G Social Capital		B R I D G I N G Social Capital	
		-	+
	-	Conflict with outside/Internal factionalism	Inclusion – horizontal ties within community; diverse horizontal/vertical ties to outside
	+	Apathy; Extreme Individualism	Clientalism (internal and external ties are mainly vertical)

The following typology will be applied to locate the Armenian school communities according to their bridging and bonding types.

Empirical study of social capital in four school communities of Yerevan

Methodology

The questionnaire was designed taking into consideration cultural peculiarities of Armenia as a post-communist society. Useful insights were taken from the Integrated Questionnaires of World Bank Working Paper No 18, ISSP 2001 – Social Networks II Questionnaire and New Russia Barometer studies under CSPP program.

While doing the sampling we were guided by the criteria of relatively wealthy and less wealthy communities. Community budgets for the 10 month of the year 2007 was taken as an indicator for determining the communities to be studied according to the list provided by the municipality. Taking the community budgets on income part and dividing that on the number of population we identified 3 communities to be studied, Kentron, Nor Norq and Davtashen with Kentron being the wealthiest while the two others were with less budget income per capita. The selection of schools was done based on the list of Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Armenia in the mentioned communities using simple random method. The final households were selected starting with a random start in the school community and every other household with a child going to the selected school included. Taking into consideration of school mobility, that is,

children going to the selected school while living in another community, we took the telephone numbers from the classmates and interviewed such parents through telephone. Thus, our investigation enables to process data both for school communities including parents not living in the area and the neighborhood itself. This relates only to downtown Yerevan where a minor percent of families did not live in Kentron community.

We also collected data from major stakeholders working in the school restructuring and interviewed them.

Findings

Major stakeholders in school restructuring

After the reform on education, schools are considered a part of the community as part of a program to become more self-sustained. It is mandatory to have a representative of the community authorities among the members of the school board. It is obvious that in many instances an extent to which the community participates in renovations depends on the community head's determination in supporting schools, since he/she holds all the managerial means in hands. This provides an opportunity for the direct link between the school and community and, consequently, the decision of the board to take a part in renovation of the school is supported among the community' authorities through that member.

Yerevan municipality is in charge of school restructuring. The normal procedure is to call a tender and assign construction companies to implement the restructuring. The state has increased its allocations to school restructuring releasing funds up to 3 bln 700 thousand this year. The municipality also allocates funds from its own budget. Special attention is paid to local heating system due to its health impacts on schoolchildren.

In addition to interventions on the national level, many international efforts are also directed to school restructuring. Lincy Foundation is implementing reinforcement and renovation of school buildings also paying attention to current seismic safety norms. The renovated schools are adapted to 12-year education system with new colors, furnishing, gym hall, local heating system and other conveniences (Republic of Armenia daily, September 19 issue). Having \$18,6 million under its School Building component, the foundation does the restructuring on its own and “without community involvement,” Lincy foundation official says.

Another agency that implements school renovation programs is Save the Children, an international NGO. With the funding of USAID, Save the Children implements Community Self-Help project within the framework of which announcements are made every 6 months for communities to come up with proposals on renovation of their local schools, partially or in full. Similarly, the community contribution must be 20% which is made either by school boards or in the form of work force.

World Bank is also implementing school restructuring programs through the Social Investment Fund and the government. The government establishes a Project Implementation Unit to implement the restructuring. This relates heating the schools and mainly focuses on marzes, although there are projects implemented in Yerevan as well.

One of the general requirements of Social Investment Fund to engage in community building is 10% contribution by the community. The fund official says that the community fails to make even that 10% contribution on a mass level. Speaking about school restructuring projects, he says normally school management or the Social Investment fund find wealthy people, mainly from the Diaspora. School board funds that the parents normally contribute to every month are also a source of funding for the 10 percent community requirement that the World Bank requires for funding such programs.

Social capital in four school communities

Our study uses five variables for the definition of social capital: civic activism, trust in informal networks, trust in formal institutions, formal/informal channels of solving conflicts, public responsibility for community issues. By civic activism we mean participation in parents groups, NGOs, political parties and religious organizations. By trust in informal network we mean trust to family members, relatives, friends, neighbors and unknown people. Trust in formal networks demonstrates trust in the municipality, government, parliament and the judiciary. Public responsibility for community issues means that a respondent feels fully or partially responsible for building a children's park, renovating schools, leaking roof water in their building and repair of worn-out elevators. For conflict settlement we took the formal channels of resolving conflict like applying to law enforcement bodies, higher instances or the court. We built scales based on these variables for each school community. We then measured how economic well-being affects the social capital of the communities and how those factors affect communities' willingness to restructure/renovate their schools. Both school communities in downtown Yerevan are from wealthy areas and two other communities, Davitashen and Nor Norq, are from less well-to-do areas.

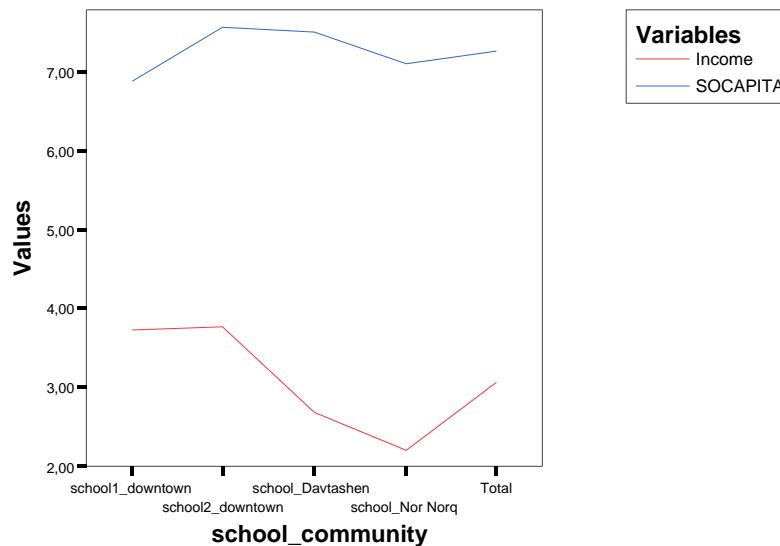
SOCAPITA

school_community	Mean	Std. Deviation
school1_downtown	6,87	2,785
school2_downtown	7,56	3,073
school_Davtashen	7,51	2,509
school_Nor Norq	7,10	2,925
Total	7,26	2,828

The table demonstrates that the communities have little difference in terms of social capital. However, if we look at the table of income according to communities and social capital we will find out that the social capital is higher in wealthy communities - as income declines so does the social capital.

Report

Statistics : Mean



We may conclude that in fact income plays a role in organization of social capital in the communities, the higher the income, the higher the social capital.

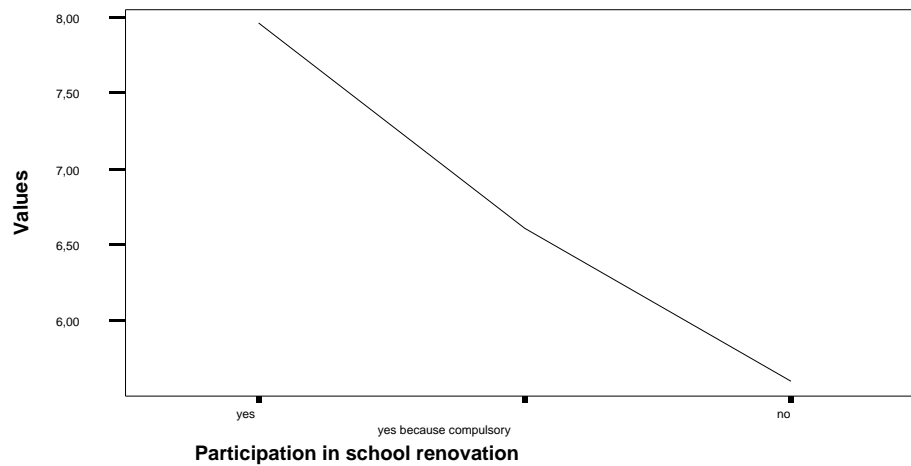
We must now look if communities with higher income are more willing to take part in school restructuring. There is a significantly important correlation between the social capital and school renovation. The higher the social capital, the more likely it is that the respondent will take part in school renovation.

SOCAPITA

Participation in school renovation	Mean	Std. Deviation
yes	7,96	2,762
yes because compulsory	6,61	2,751
no	5,60	1,955
hard to say	5,67	3,055
Total	7,26	2,828

Report

Variables : SOCAPITA
 Statistics : Mean



The table and the graph below show that there is a reverse linear relation between social capital and school renovation. Note that the table and graph are made on the passivity indicator not the participation indicator (yes – 1 because compulsory and no are 2 and 3). So if we look at the line graphs of socacapita and participation, we will see that generally when socapita rises, participation declines (value approaches to 1=yes which means that participation level actually increases).

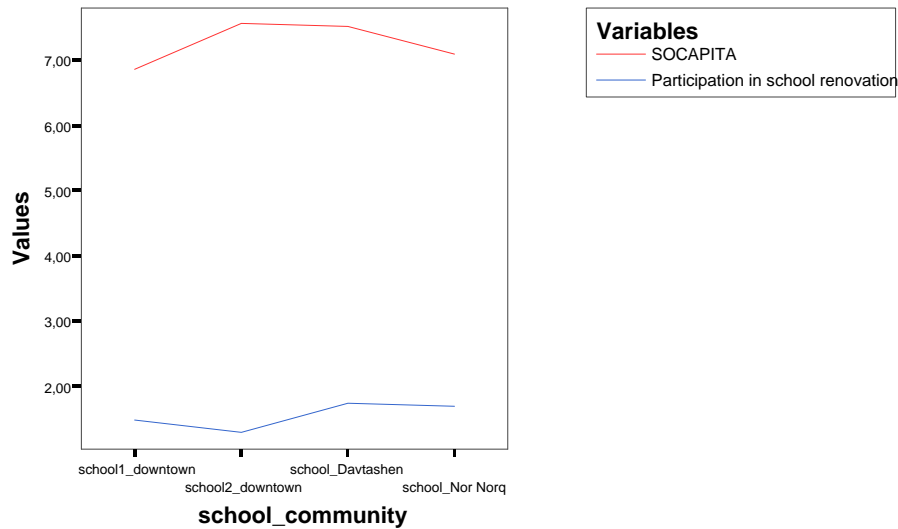
Correlations

		SOCAPITA	Participation in school renovation
SOCAPITA	Pearson Correlation	1	-,212**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,	,000
	N	379	379
Participation in school renovation	Pearson Correlation	-,212**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	,
	N	379	380

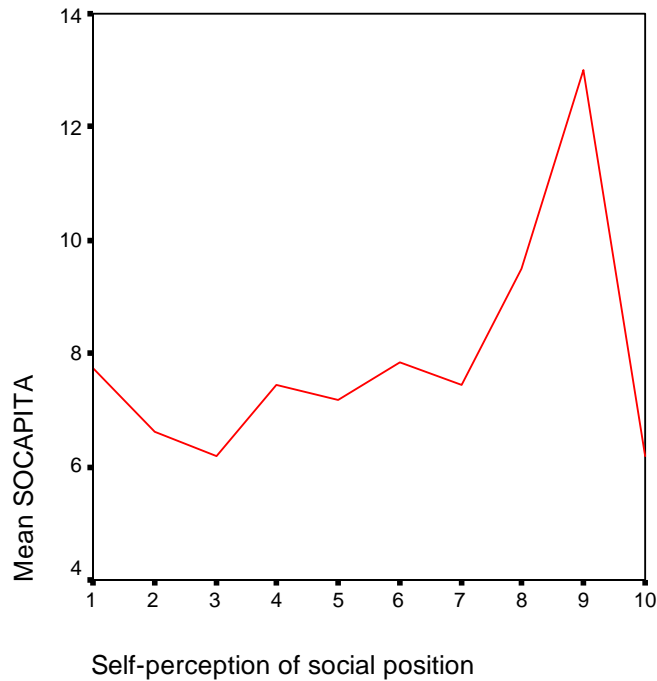
** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Report

Statistics : Mean

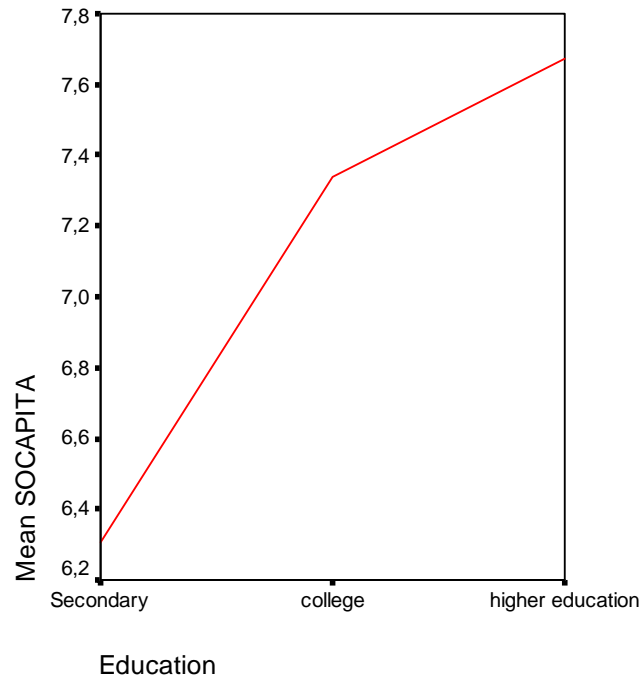


There is statistically significant correlation between social capital and self perception of social status. The respondents were asked: “If the society is divided into layers according to their level of prosperity, where would you put yourself if 1 is the lowest layer and 10 is the highest layer?”



The table demonstrates that as the self perception of social status rises, the social capital also rises. We found interesting data of the highest 9 percent, instead of 10 percent which may mean that those that really believed themselves as high in social status in fact rated themselves 9 instead of 10 trying to avoid the maximum indicator.

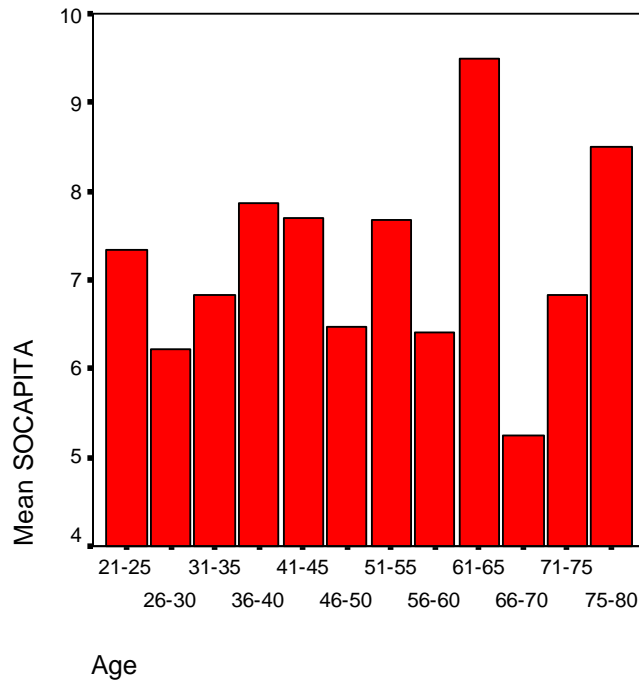
There is statistically significant relation between education and social capital. As a person rises on the education level, so does the social capital.



The correlation between age and social capital is also significant.

Correlations

		SOCAPITA	Age
SOCAPITA	Pearson	1	,027
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,	,601
	N	379	379
Age	Pearson	,027	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,601	,
	N	379	380

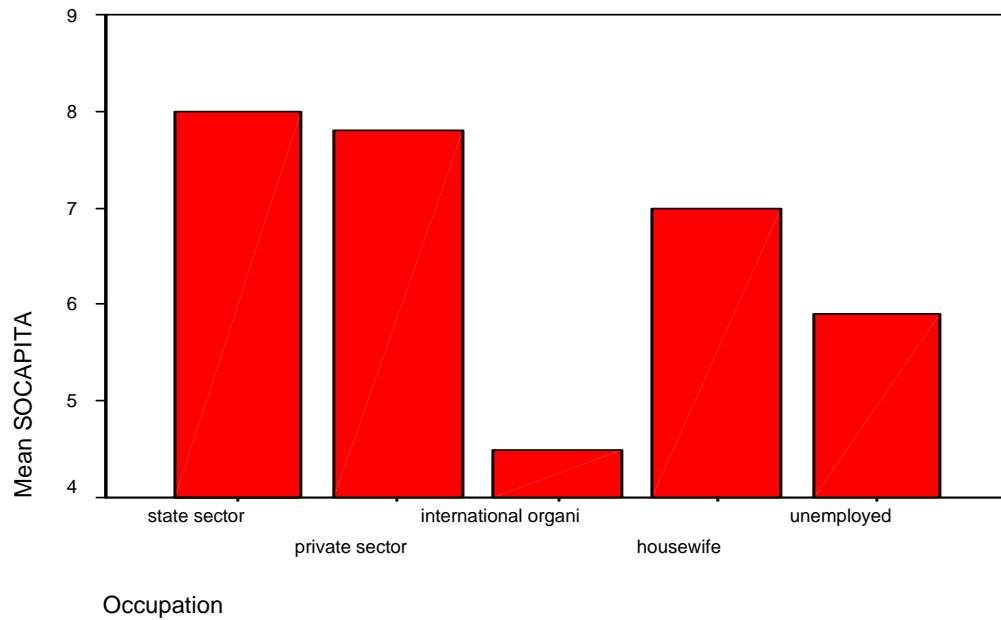


The report below shows that employees of the state sector are the highest on social capital, followed by private sector, international organization, housewife and the unemployed.

Report

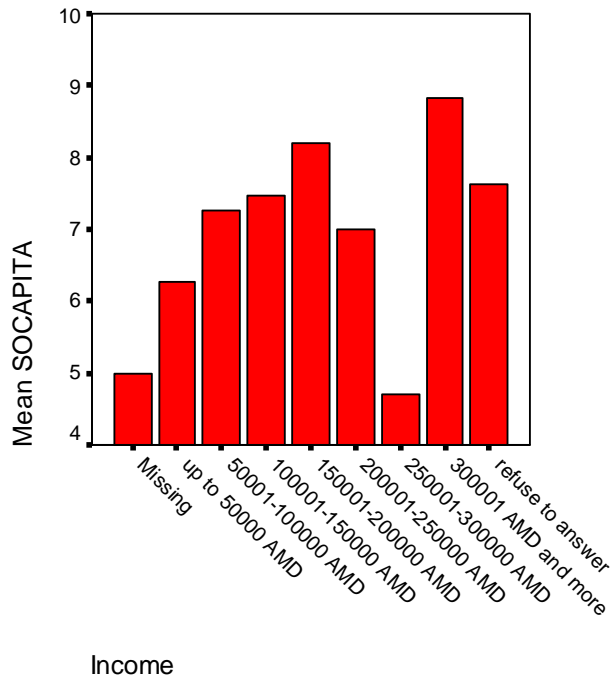
SOCAPITA

Occupation	Mean	Std. Deviation
state sector	7,99	2,624
private sector	7,80	2,800
international organization	4,50	3,536
housewife	6,99	2,753
unemployed	5,91	2,793



It is interesting to note that the employees of the international organizations demonstrate the lowest level of social capital which means that they are a slightly isolated group compared to other groups.

Lastly, we found statistically significant relation with income. The higher the income the more likely it is that the respondent will demonstrate higher social capital. We found an unexpected decline in social capital for respondents reporting 250,001-300,000 Armenian drams but the highest income mentioned in the list, 300,001 and above is the highest in social capital. It is interesting to know that high social capital is also demonstrated by those who refused to report their income.



Bonding and Bridging Typology

The communities demonstrate little difference in terms within bonding and bridging capital. Applying to acquaintances for borrowing money, using personal contacts and personally visiting job places as well as using acquaintances and giving tip for solving a conflict with public officials are used as indicators for bonding capital. Applying to bank for borrowing money, applying to job agency or watching job announcements in the newspaper or internet, as well as applying to higher instances, courts or legal establishments for solving conflict with public officials are indicators of bridging capital.

Report

BRIDGING

school_community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
school1_downtown	,74	89	,776
school2_downtown	,81	90	,806
school_Davtashen	,81	100	,873
school_Nor Norq	,93	100	,769
Total	,83	379	,808

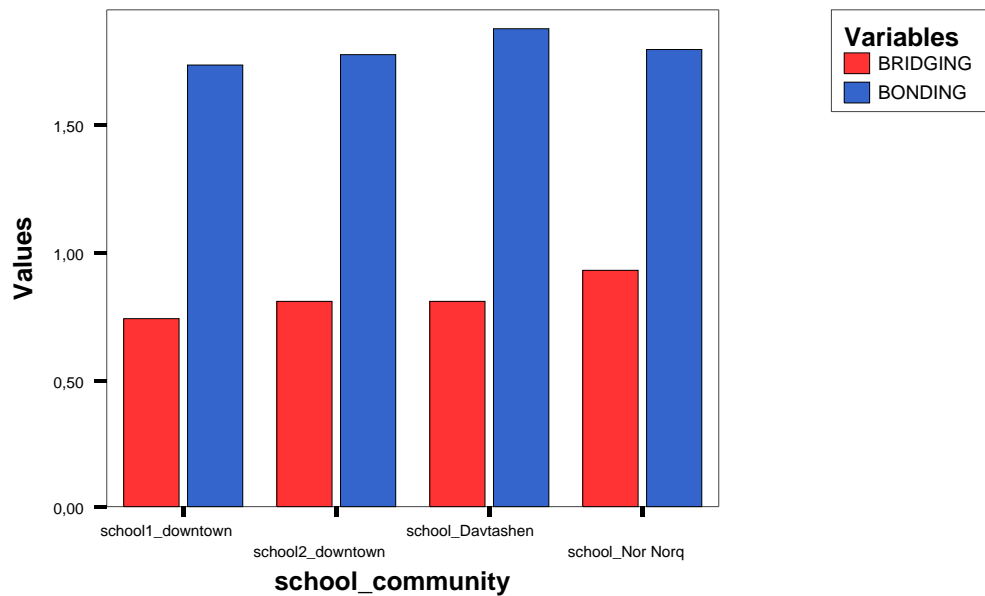
Report

BONDING

school_community	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
school1_downtown	1,74	89	,936
school2_downtown	1,78	90	,909
school_Davtashen	1,88	100	1,008
school_Nor Norq	1,80	100	,816
Total	1,80	379	,917

Report

Statistics : Mean

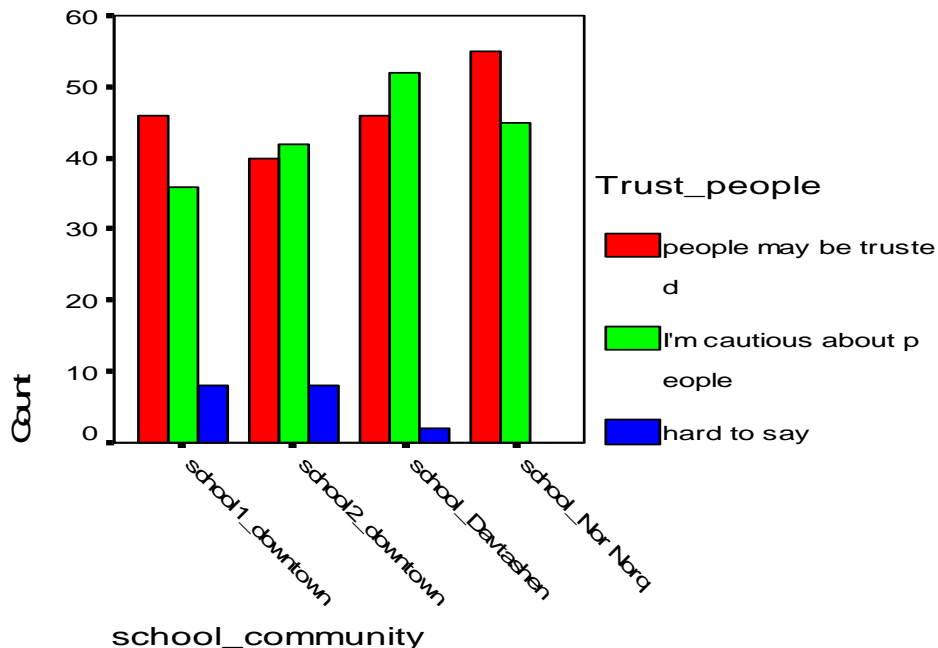


The chart shows that the bonding capital is high in all communities with similar figures whereas the bridging capital is low. Using the typology developed by Jan L. Flora and Cornelia B. Flora, we receive the following picture which is typical for all four communities of the Armenian capital. The communities are characterized by low bridging and high bonding capital which is described as apathy and extreme individualism according to the typology.

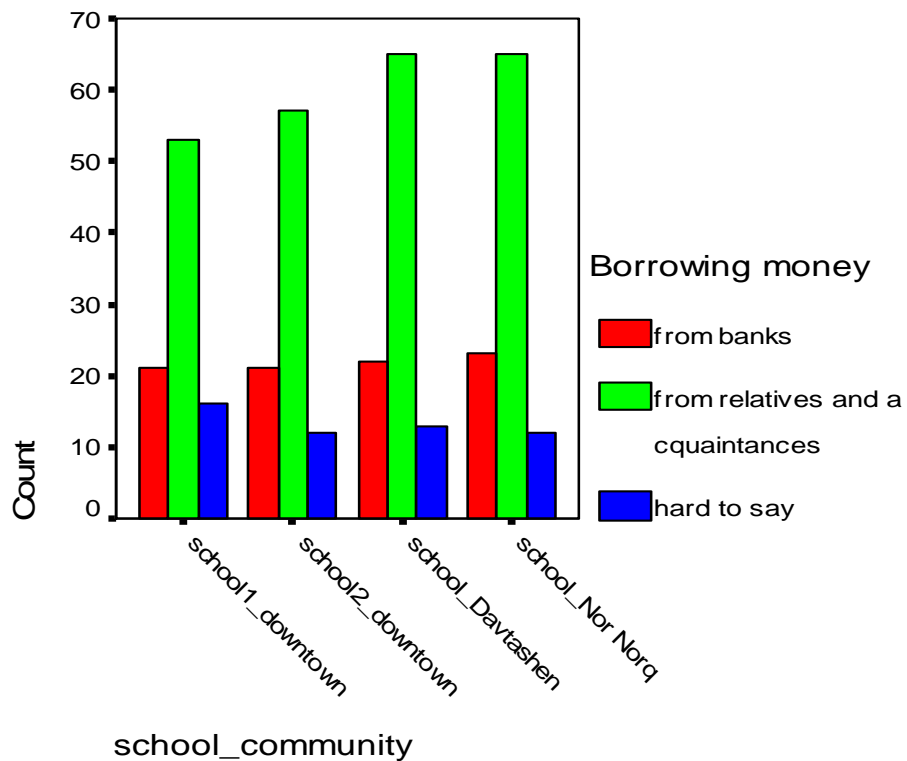
Community Social Capital Typology		
B O N D I N G Social Capital		BRIDGING Social Capital
		-
	+	Apathy; Extreme Individualism

Looking at separate variables

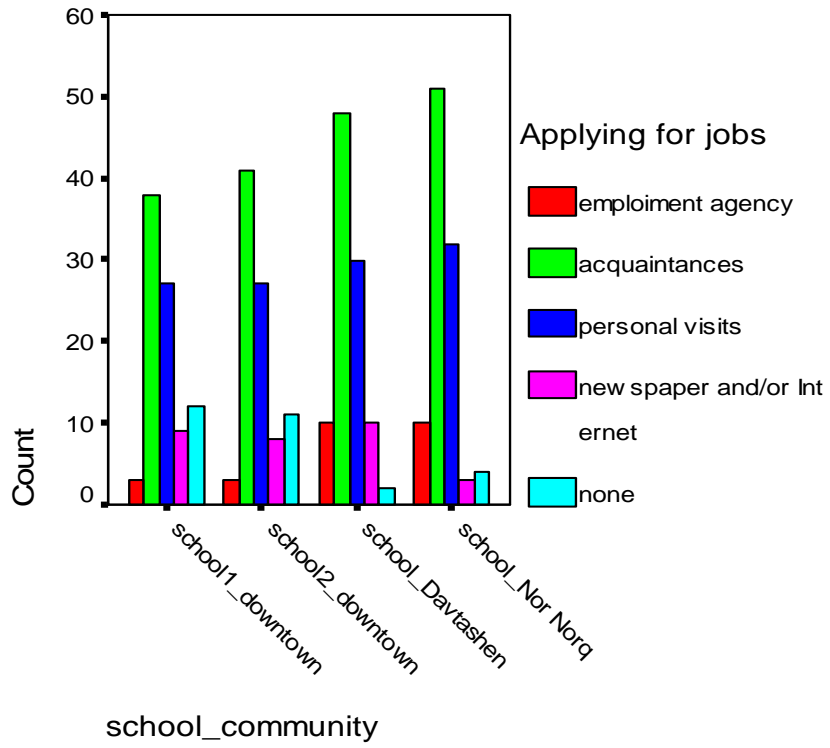
We should also look at variables separately for each of the communities. For that reason we developed the correlations of each variable indicator according to separate communities. The following bar chart is an answer in percentages to the question if people can generally be trusted. The communities demonstrate similar half by half approach to the question if people may be trusted or that they should be cautious about people. The highest indicator of trust is in Nor Norq community which is in a peripheral area. However we also see that people are the most cautious in another peripheral area, Davtashen community, which means that we cannot talk about two distinct types of trust in two groups of communities.



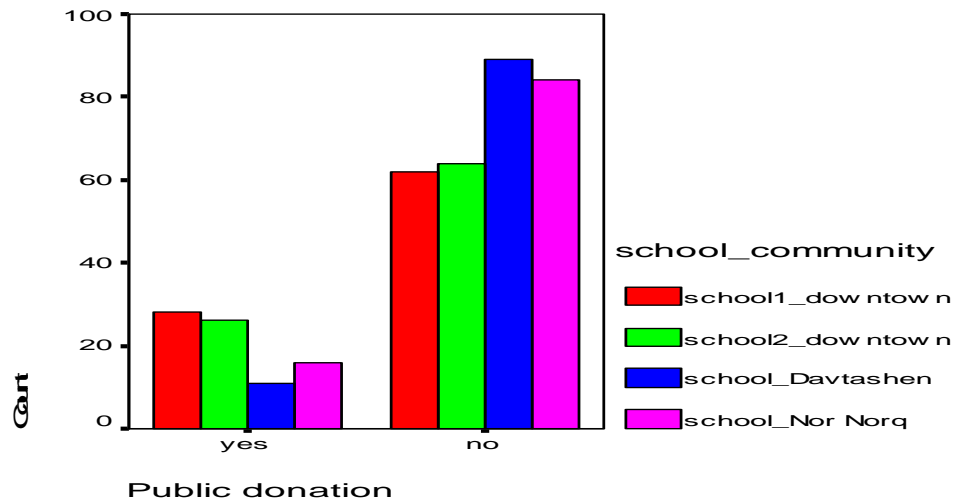
Asked if they would borrow money from acquaintances or the banks, the communities demonstrated similar results in terms of numbers. Almost 20% believe that in such cases they would turn to banks and about 50-65% believe that they would turn to their relatives and acquaintances.



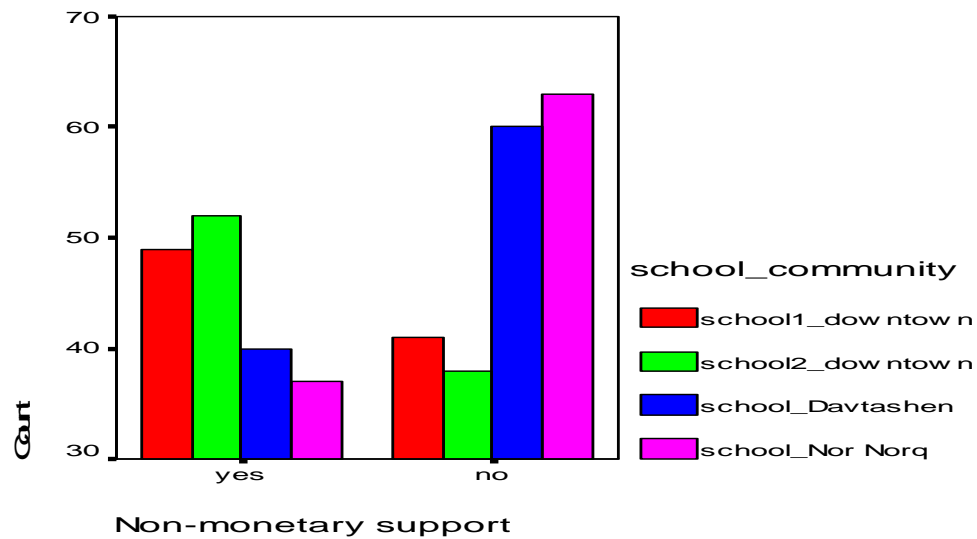
Acquaintances play an important role in search for job, too. About 40-50% of respondents believe in such cases they would turn to acquaintances and only 3-10% say they would look for a job through an employment agency, newspaper and/or internet. However, it is important to note that the personal visits also play an important role in job search strategies. About 30% of respondent said they would prefer to visit job places personally. It is also interesting that the communities outside the downtown prefer employment agencies whereas in the downtown only as little as 3 percent of respondents believe that job agencies are helpful. This may be explained that the job agencies mainly suggest low income jobs and few in the downtown ever apply or would like to apply for their help. So, this is a result of ineffective employment institutions, i.e., management but not the cultural trust.



We may say that public donation is a higher value in the downtown than in the periphery. Some 30% say they have donated for public time in the course of the recent 1 year whereas in the periphery this number is 11-16%. Similarly, the percentage of those who said they did not donate anything in the course of one year is higher in the periphery.

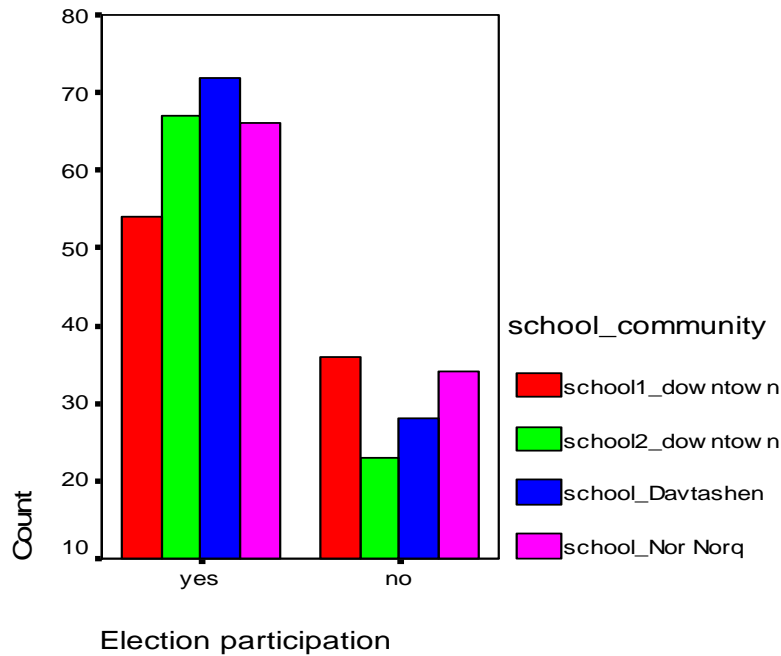


However, when we asked the respondents if they have donated anything for public good in terms of non monetary support, the percentage of those answering positively went higher reaching almost 55 % in the downtown.

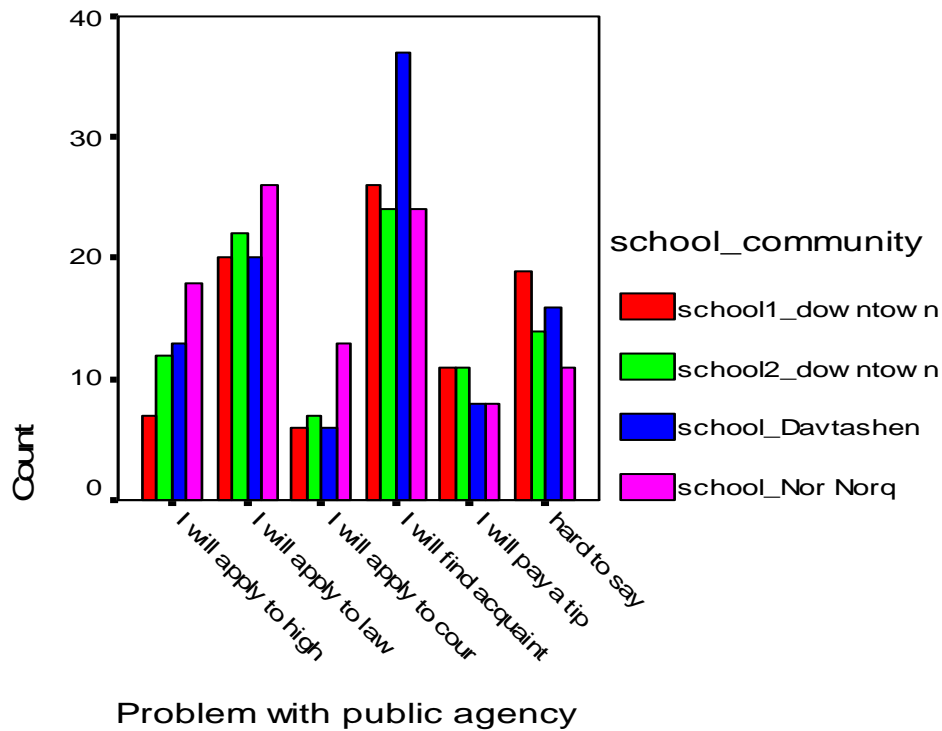


We may conclude that the culture of charity giving is gaining widespread acceptance, especially in the form of helping poor, orphanages or giving away unnecessary goods.

Civic participation is low in almost all communities. Membership to political parties is as low as 13-19%. Membership to public organizations is even lower ranging from 6 to 8%. The electoral participation is the only high form of civic participation. It ranged from 60 to 75%.



Acquaintances and personal contact are the main form of resolving conflicts with public officials although another high percentage of people prefer application to law agencies or higher instances.



Conclusion

Income plays an important function in the composition of social capital – the higher the income the higher the social capital. Similarly, those with higher social capital are more willing to take more part in the renovation of local schools. We found positive relationship of the social capital with education and occupation and social strata. The higher the person on his or her self perception of social status the higher social capital they have. Similarly, the higher the person on the continuum of education, the more likely he or she is to demonstrate higher social capital. The four communities demonstrated high bonding and low bridging capital characterized by extreme individualism and apathy.

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