

Women's Empowerment and the Creation of Social Capital in Indian Villages

WENDY JANSSENS*

VU University Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Summary. — Community-based development projects are often argued to strengthen social capital. This paper investigates the impact of a women's empowerment program in India on trust and cooperation, using data on 2,000 households. The program significantly increases trust and stimulates contributions to educational and infrastructural community projects. The effect on informal assistance among households is less consistent. The findings suggest substantial spillovers on the wider community. Households who do not participate in the program themselves but who live in a program village are significantly more trusting and more likely to engage in collective action than households in control villages.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — women's empowerment, social capital, impact evaluation, cooperation, Asia, India

1. INTRODUCTION

The involvement of local communities in project design and project management is a growing trend in development cooperation (Pritchett & Woolcock, 2004). The so-called participatory or community-based development (CBD) approach is claimed to have many advantages compared to traditional, top-down development programs (Grootaert & van Bastelaer, 2002; World Bank, 2000, 2002). Among them, participation in projects would enhance social interactions, increase trust between community members, and further strengthen their propensity to engage in collective action. If such projects are indeed able to generate social capital, their impact might multiply over time as communities become increasingly empowered to take matters in their own hands.

Social capital in this context refers to the trust and shared norms of behavior that arise within informal social networks and that generate externalities for the members of a group (Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2004). It influences the resources that an individual can mobilize through his or her social network (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000) and the propensity of community members to engage in collective action (Ostrom & Ahn, 2002). Social capital is considered as an umbrella term that covers a variety of aspects of social organization, analogous to human and financial capital (Coleman, 1990). "Cognitive social capital" encompasses shared trust, norms, and values, which are based on mental processes and often difficult to observe. Social networks, informal organizations, or voluntary associations on the other hand are components of "structural social capital," which is more easily observed and hence has received most attention in empirical work (Uphoff, 2000).

This paper adopts a behavioral approach to social capital as an essential concept in explaining why cooperation arises in some situations, but fails to materialize in others. The paper specifically focuses on trust and on cooperative behavior as an important source and a manifestation, respectively, of social capital.¹

In his seminal work *The Logic of Collective Action*, Olson (1965) convincingly described the social dilemma inherent to collective action. Free-riding problems, often described in terms of a prisoner's dilemma, lie at the core of many theories that explain the absence of cooperation. In reality however,

behavior often deviates from the assumptions of strong rationality and self-interested utility-maximization (Ostrom, 1998). A number of systematic findings from experimental economics support this less pessimistic view. For example, experimental trust games reveal that people generally show substantial levels of trust toward others, and that this trust is often rewarded (Cardenas & Carpenter, 2004). Likewise, cooperation in one-shot public good games is much more prevalent than that the theory predicts. This is found in communities from Papua-New Guinea to Zimbabwe to Belarus (Barr, 2001; Gaechter, Herrman, & Thoeni, 2004; Henrich *et al.*, 2001), as well as in many industrialized countries (Fehr & Schmidt, 1999).

Trust in others can help to overcome the prisoner's dilemma inherent in social dilemmas. It reflects the expectation that others will not betray you or cheat you for their own benefit (Ostrom, 1998; Ostrom & Ahn, 2002), opening the door to cooperative outcomes. Trust can grow and be destroyed: individuals regularly adopt their beliefs about others based on past experiences. If a CBD project successfully joins members of a community in cooperation, it seems likely that they will trust each other to do so again at the next opportunity. Thus, trust and cooperative behavior are interdependent and mutually beneficial.

Abundant field evidence shows that trust and cooperation are positively correlated (e.g., Ostrom, 1990; Platteau, 2000), although the direction of causality is more difficult to establish empirically. However, despite the growing budgets devoted to CBD projects, surprisingly few quantitative evaluations exist to support the claim that CBD projects can

*The author is very grateful to Jacques van der Gaag and Jan Willem Gunning for their continuous support and detailed comments, as well as to Jean-Philippe Platteau and Simon Gaechter for their very helpful suggestions. She greatly appreciates the discussions with Marleen Dekker, Arjun Bedi, Jetske Bouma, and other seminar participants at the NAKE workshop in Maastricht, the Institute for Social Studies in The Hague, the Sunbelt Conference in Los Angeles, the Dutch Ministry of Development Cooperation, and the EAEPE conference in Istanbul. Special thanks are due to the Mahila Samakhya program in Bihar for its cooperation and hospitality, and in particular to Shantwana Bharti for the many inspiring discussions. Final revision accepted: December 3, 2009.

indeed create social capital.² Evidence so far is ambiguous. For example, Rao and Ibañez (2005) conduct a mixed qualitative-quantitative evaluation of Social Funds in Jamaica. They find a causal and positive impact of the Social Funds on trust as well as on collective action, especially for the elites. Conversely, Tripp, Wijeratne, and Piyadasa (2005) are pessimistic about the capacity of Farmer Field Schools in Sri Lanka to produce the expected social capital benefits.

Other studies document the institutional, socio-economic, and geographic determinants of community-level cooperation (Bardhan, 2000; Beard, 2007; Dewald, Espey, & Hammig, 2004; Khwaja, 2009), the role of socio-cultural heterogeneity and economic inequality (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2000; Baland & Platteau, 1999; Khwaja, 2004; Varughese & Ostrom, 2001), the influence of group size on collective action (Marwell & Oliver, 1993; Poteete & Ostrom, 2004), or the impact of community participation on project performance (Agrawal & Chhatre, 2006; Isham & Kahkonen, 2002; Khwaja, 2004). However, those studies do not analyze whether social capital is strengthened in communities where a CBD project is implemented compared to communities without such projects.

To further gain insights in the potential benefits of CBD projects, this article provides a quantitative impact evaluation of a women's empowerment program in India.

The study estimates the impact of the program on trust and cooperation in rural communities. It is important to emphasize that the study does not disentangle the direction of causality between trust and cooperation. The analysis treats both aspects of social capital equally in the impact study.

Empowerment is understood as "...possessing the capacity to make *effective* choices; that is, to translate one's choices into desired actions and outcomes." (Alsop & Heinsohn, 2005, p. 6) This capacity is primarily influenced by agency and opportunity structure, where the former is defined as "an actor's ability to envisage options and make a choice"; and the latter as "the formal and informal contexts within which actors operate."

The program, called Mahila Samakhya, aims to mobilize women from the lowest castes and poorest families in rural villages to set up women's groups in their community. The women are encouraged to identify their most urgent needs and demands, and to come up with solutions to jointly address these issues. Once the women's groups are formed and functioning, they take up a large range of issues, from health trainings to establishing informal primary schools or setting up rotating savings and credit groups. The Government of India launched the program in 1988. Two decades after the initial successes of the pilot, Mahila Samakhya has been expanded as an independent (albeit state-sponsored) program to nine states in India, covering almost sixteen thousand villages in 2005.³

The research is based on a unique dataset of 1991 households in more than one hundred villages collected in 2003 in the state of Bihar. These encompass 74 villages where Mahila Samakhya is implemented and 28 comparable control villages where the program is not introduced yet. In each village, 20 households were interviewed. In the program villages, both participating and non-participating households were included in the sample. The program was not randomly implemented, but was based on a number of criteria. We use the gradual phasing in of the program to construct a control group. After conducting extensive tests of potential selection bias, we conclude that it is very unlikely that our results are driven by village selection effects.

The empirical investigation starts with an analysis of the household and community characteristics that are significantly related to trust and cooperation. Next, we proceed with estimating the impact of Mahila Samakhya on the social capital variables. In addition to total village effects, we use propensity score matching techniques to estimate spillover effects on households who live in a program village, but who do not participate themselves. Central to the concept of social capital is the idea that it generates externalities for the members of a group (Coleman, 1990; Durlauf & Fafchamps, 2004; Putnam, 1993). But very few studies examine explicitly whether CBD projects create social capital spillovers on non-participants. An interesting exception is Tripp *et al.* (2005), who find no evidence that Farmer Field Schools produce social capital externalities in the community. Alternatively, Janssens (*in press*) estimates the spillovers of Mahila Samakhya on immunization rates of children of non-participants and finds evidence of substantial externalities.

To understand the Mahila Samakhya program in its context, the next section starts with a discussion of the social and economic conditions in Bihar with an emphasis on the position of women. It then describes the program. This is followed by a description of the sampling methodology, the key social capital variables, and the estimation strategy. Subsequently, the paper discusses the empirical results. The last section discusses the findings and highlights some policy implications.

2. THE MAHILA SAMAKHYA PROGRAM IN BIHAR

The paper focuses on the Mahila Samakhya program in the state of Bihar where the program was introduced in 1992.⁴ Ten years later, at the time of the survey, 1890 women's groups were active in Bihar, covering more than 50,000 women (Mahila Samakhya, 2002).

(a) *The Bihari context*

Bihar is situated in the north-eastern part of India. It is a predominantly rural state with a large and rapidly growing population, reaching almost 83 million people at the time of the Census in 2001. This makes Bihar the third largest state in terms of population size, accounting for 8% of total Indian population (Census Office India, 2001). Society in Bihar is agrarian and still largely feudal in nature. Although the old system of landlords and bonded labor does not officially exist anymore, most landless laborers live under extremely harsh circumstances. People are very caste conscious. The lower castes face innumerable social and economic deprivations. The Bihari society is also strongly rooted in traditionally held beliefs and superstitions. Resistance to change is considerable. The gender bias against women is persistently strong (Mahila Samakhya, 2002).

The pronounced social stratification results in a substantial disadvantage in school enrollment for female and lower caste children. This leads among others to the lowest literacy levels of the entire country. The overall literacy rate in Bihar is only 48% compared to the national literacy rate of 65% (Census Office India, 2001). Disaggregation by gender shows that 60% of the male population can read and write, while only 34% of the female population is literate. This is an alarmingly low percentage, also when compared to the national female literacy rate of 54%.

The poor social conditions in Bihar are accompanied by severe material hardship for a large part of the population. In

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

ISIArticles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات