

Applying a capitals approach to understand rural development traps: A case study from post-socialist Romania



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ABSTRACT

Rural development models to date have failed to adequately explain why development stagnates in certain regions, and have often focused on single policy areas. This paper proposes a more holistic approach by combining the concept of traps with the sustainable livelihoods approach, applied to a case study in Central Romania. Based on semi-structured interviews with rural inhabitants from 66 villages in 2012, we analyze the barriers creating and maintaining a lock-in situation characterized by an apparently stable low-welfare equilibrium state. By clustering development barriers into livelihood capitals we find that barriers to rural development are multiple and interacting, and are strongly mediated by the institutional context. We show that while financial, social, human, and built capitals are inadequately developed, the region's rich natural and cultural capitals stand the best chances to foster rural development. Yet, these capitals are likely to deteriorate, too, if all other capitals remain under-developed. Given this interconnectedness of development barriers we argue that one-sided interventions cannot help 'unlock' the trap-like situation of Central Romania. Instead, multiple barriers will need to be tackled simultaneously. The development of social, human and financial capitals should be of priority concern because of their potentially positive spill-over effects across all other capitals.

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized world, rural areas are confronted with enormous development challenges. Rural areas, by definition, comprise relatively small and geographically dispersed settlements and (social) infrastructure (Sarris et al., 1999; Iorio and Corsale, 2010). Therefore, rural inhabitants often possess relatively low levels of formal skills, educational attainment, and financial resources compared to urban dwellers (Ashley and Maxwell, 2001). Agriculture, and in particular smallholder farming, often provides the backbone of rural livelihoods (International Fund for Agricultural Development, 2013), but the future viability of this sector is threatened by a rising integration of rural areas into the global economy, and thus an increasing exposure of primary product markets to liberalized trade regimes (Rizov, 2006). As a result, rural residents often need to diversify their incomes, specialize, or shift away from

traditional farming activities – a set of changes that is closely linked with the notion of rural development (Knickel and Renting, 2000). Several models of rural development have been proposed, but they do not always adequately explain why development stagnates in certain regions. In this paper we provide a possible explanation for such stagnation. Specifically, we seek to demonstrate that rural development research could benefit by combining the concept of traps with the sustainable livelihoods approach.

Although a comprehensive and agreed upon definition of the term 'rural development' is missing (Van der Ploeg et al., 2000), it can generally be considered "a sustained and sustainable process of economic, social, cultural and environmental change designed to enhance the long-term well-being of the whole [rural] community" (Moseley, 1996, p. 20). Several competing conceptual models and policy strategies have been put forward. The *agrarian* or *farm-centric model* centers on the belief that agriculture is the essence of rural development, with derived policies often focusing on the improvement of agricultural productivity (Hubbard and Gorton, 2011). Recognizing that agriculture has multiple roles beyond the supply of food and fiber, such as the contribution

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to rural viability or the provision of public goods, the agrarian development model has been amended to capture the multifunctionality of agriculture (Potter and Burney, 2002; Ward et al., 2005). In contrast to the agrarian model, the *exogenous model* sees urban centers as the main drivers of rural development. Policies based on this model therefore seek to attract external capital into rural areas, which in turn offer low land and labor costs (Hubbard and Gorton, 2011). Finally, the *endogenous model* suggests that rural development strategies should focus on harnessing local resources specific to an area, such as natural resources or cultural values (Ward et al., 2005). This view has been criticized, however, because it disregards questions of power and agency, as well as the effects of the wider economy on local markets (Gorton, 1999). For this reason, the model has been extended to a *neo-endogenous* approach, which recognizes the interdependence of local resources and external factors. The neo-endogenous approach underlines the importance of building local institutional capacity, and of focusing on the needs of local people (Rizov, 2006).

While the farm-centric, exogenous or (neo-)endogenous rural development models provide different policy foci for managing rural development, common to all of them is a lack of ability to explain why development appears to stagnate in some rural areas, despite external financial inputs or local endeavors to build capacity. One example of such a region is Central Romania which, more so than most other parts of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), is characterized by high rates of rural poverty, outmigration and low infrastructural development (Ghisa et al., 2011) – despite Romania having received considerable amounts of agricultural and structural funds since its accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007 (Gorton et al., 2009; Mikulcak et al., 2013). Contrary to the social aspects of rural development of this region, it boasts high biodiversity attributable largely to its traditional cultural landscapes (Fischer et al., 2012) that are vulnerable to both farmland abandonment and agricultural intensification (Müller et al., 2009, 2013). The area thus appears ‘trapped’ between the requirements to adjust its rural economy to liberalized trading conditions and competition in the wider EU common market (Beckmann and Dissing, 2007), the conservation of its cultural and natural heritage, and the need to secure an improved living standard for rural inhabitants (Rizov, 2006).

The notion of ‘trapped’ social-ecological systems promises to be useful in the context of rural development because it emphasizes the role of institutions as well as dynamics across spatial, organizational, and temporal scales in creating undesirable states that are difficult to overcome (Allison and Hobbs, 2004; Carpenter and Brock, 2008; Maru et al., 2012). The traps concept builds on the theory of complex systems (Barrett et al., 2011) and considers social systems and the natural environment as tightly coupled and mutually interdependent (Allison and Hobbs, 2004; Enfors and Gordon, 2008; Maru et al., 2012). The traps concept has been used to describe different forms of lock-in states. So-called *rigidity traps* refer to the inflexibility of a system because of highly connected and rigid institutions (Holling, 2001). *Social-ecological traps* are the result of self-reinforcing or self-correcting feedbacks (Serman, 2000) causing a persistent decline in both human well-being and ecosystem services (Cinner, 2011; Dasgupta, 2011). The most commonly used notion, however, is that of *poverty traps*, which are defined as self-reinforcing mechanisms beyond people's control that cause poverty to persist (Barrett et al., 2011; Chappell et al., 2013). Mechanisms keeping a system trapped in an undesirable low-welfare equilibrium state (Carpenter and Brock, 2008; Enfors and Gordon, 2008) can be ‘fractal’ (Barrett and Swallow, 2006), that is, occurring and reinforcing one another across multiple social or spatial scales (Cash et al., 2006; Vervoort et al., 2012).

Because traps are systemic in nature, piecemeal change or large initial financial investment, as advocated by some economic theorists (Sachs, 2005; Collier, 2008) may not suffice to unlock a trap. Rather, multiple interacting factors or barriers may need to be considered and tackled (Maru et al., 2012). To this end, the sustainable livelihoods framework could be useful (see Scoones, 1998) for identifying multiple barriers that form traps.

Based on the capability and entitlement approaches (Schumacher, 1973; Sen, 1981), the livelihoods framework analyzes at the household or community level how different combinations of livelihood assets correspond to alternative livelihood strategies (Ellis, 1998; Scoones, 1998). Access to assets is determined by individual capabilities, the institutional context, and social relations (Chambers and Conway, 1992; Allison and Ellis, 2001). Central to the livelihoods framework is the so-called ‘capital pentagon’ (Scoones, 2009; Chen et al., 2013), referring to five main asset categories. These are built capital (e.g. infrastructure, machinery); natural capital (e.g. land, trees, ecosystem services); human capital (e.g. education, health); financial capital (e.g. incomes, savings, credit); and social capital (i.e. bonding and bridging ties within and between people, communities, or organizations; Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993). The notion of ‘cultural capital’ is sometimes used in addition; referring to specific values, world views, and (ecological) knowledge transmitted within a community (Berkes et al., 2000; Dyer and Poggie, 2000; Cochrane, 2006), but also to local cultural resources such as traditional food, folklore, and historical sites (Ray, 1998).

The traps and livelihoods approach share many commonalities: like the notion of poverty traps, the livelihoods approach has a normative emphasis on poverty alleviation and marginality (Allison and Ellis, 2001). Common to both concepts is the applied goal to improve development policy and practice (Barrett and Swallow, 2006; Scoones, 2009). We also note some differences. While trap conceptualizations tend to take a systems approach, the livelihoods approach centers on the capacity building of individuals and rural households. Traps literature largely relies on econometric measures and panel data (e.g. Barrett and Swallow, 2006), whereas livelihoods data are mainly field-based and often gathered by means of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methods (Scoones, 2009). While traps are the consequence of factors and processes beyond an individual's control, and thus considered persistent and difficult to change, the livelihoods approach highlights the role of individual capabilities to influence livelihood trajectories.

In this paper, we argue that combining the traps and livelihood approaches may have a series of useful advantages. With the notion of capital assets, the livelihoods approach can serve to differentiate between different types of rural development barriers, while a systems approach is useful to highlight interdependencies between various barriers, thereby potentially creating a trapped system state. Merging the livelihoods and traps approaches thus may provide new insights in understanding the lack of rural development that some areas experience.

The aim of this paper is to understand the barriers to rural development of a specific social-ecological system, namely Central Romania, and to suggest capital assets that could be leveraged to move this system into a more desirable state. To this end, we combined the traps and livelihood concepts by first clustering potential development barriers, as identified by rural inhabitants, into different kinds of capitals. We then hypothesized that reinforcing feedbacks among various capital stocks, mediated by the institutional context, resulted in a trapped system state. Although we focus on Central Romania, we believe our general approach could be usefully applied to many rural areas worldwide.

Methods

Study area

Since Romania's accession to the European Union in 2007, structural changes have been relatively slow compared to other newly independent states (Alexandri and Luca, 2012; Hubbard et al., 2014). The country of 21 million inhabitants (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2012) remains one of the economically poorest in relation to the 28 EU member states – with a per-capita GDP approximately 45% below the EU average (Eurostat, 2014). Around 30% of the workforce is employed in agriculture or primary production, i.e. forestry and fisheries (Institutul Național de Statistică, 2012), and about half of the population lives in rural areas (Hubbard et al., 2014). As a result of the breakdown of communist industry and farms, coupled with the transition toward a market economy, employment opportunities in the secondary and tertiary sectors are relatively rare (Iorio and Corsale, 2010; Hubbard et al., 2014), leading to high rates of rural poverty and vulnerable rural economies (Fraser and Stringer, 2009; Kuemmerle et al., 2009). Due to de-collectivization and a lengthy land restitution process (Salasan and Fritzsche, 2009), among others, the country's farm structure is strongly polarized and fragmented – with more than 70% of rural inhabitants farming on less than 2 hectares, and only 2% of holdings exceeding 10 hectares (Alexandri and Luca, 2012). Though rural smallholdings may be economically non-viable (Rizov, 2006), they play an important role in Romanian society. On the one hand, smallholder farming is critical for household food security, and represents a 'way of surviving' for many rural dwellers (Hubbard et al., 2014). On the other hand, smallholding is vital for the provision of environmental goods and cultural assets such as landscape amenity (Davidova et al., 2012; Davidova and Bailey, 2014).

One rural region within Romania is Central Romania or Transylvania, our study area. Apart from few urban centers such as Sibiu and Brasov (147,250 and 253,200 inhabitants, respectively; Institutul Național de Statistică, 2011), this predominantly hilly area is characterized by dispersed villages and a rich cultural and natural heritage. Traditional extensive land use practices (Fischer et al., 2012) led to the preservation of a cultural landscape with a unique fauna and flora that has long gone extinct in other regions of Europe (Akeroyd, 2007; Akeroyd and Page, 2011). Yet, farmland biodiversity in Central Romania is at risk from cropland abandonment and agricultural intensification (Stoate et al., 2001; Müller et al., 2013). At present, semi-subsistence or subsistence farming, i.e. households producing for self-sufficiency without recourse to the market (Davidova et al., 2012), the sale of homegrown agricultural products at local markets, and seasonal or permanent migration are important livelihood strategies (Horváth, 2008; Hubbard et al., 2014). The ethnic composition in the area changed after the once dominant demographic group of Saxons largely emigrated in the course of the breakdown of the Communist regime in 1989 (Fischer et al., 2012; Hartel et al., 2014), making Romanians, Hungarians and, increasingly, Roma people the main population groups (Hanspach et al., 2014). At the same time, the condition of many cultural goods created by Saxons, such as fortified churches, is deteriorating. To preserve the region's natural and cultural amenities, and improve the well-being of rural households, sustainable rural development of Central Romania is necessary.

Data collection and analysis of barriers to rural development

Data on the state of our social-ecological system of interest, as well as on potential development barriers, were collected over a 3 month period in 2012. We visited 66 villages in 17 communes within a 50 km radius around the town of Sighisoara. Communes are the lowest level of administrative subdivision in Romania, and

Table 1

Key barriers to rural development in Central Romania based on interviews in 66 villages, clustered into capitals.

Development barriers	Capitals
Low income levels Lack of jobs in both the farming and non-farming sectors, compared to relatively high price levels	Financial (credit, incomes, savings)
Lack of skilled workers Low quality of education Lack of vocational training Lack of medical care Temporal or seasonal migration of mainly young rural inhabitants	Human (skills, health, knowledge)
Low quality of roads Lack of sewerage systems and piped water Lack of agricultural equipment/machinery	Built (infrastructure, machinery)
Ethnic cleavages, lack of trust and social cohesion Lack of 'leadership' and positive role models Lack of innovation capacity	Social (bonding, bridging ties)
Loss of agro-biodiversity due to cropland abandonment and intensification	Natural (ecosystem services and benefits)
Loss of traditional ecological knowledge, values, and traditions Decay of cultural monuments such as Saxon fortified churches	Cultural (rules, norms, traditions)

are usually comprised of several villages. Villages vary in population size, ranging from a few dozen up to 2000 inhabitants.

Data collection was conducted in two subsequent steps, namely (1) a broad set of short, semi-structured interviews on the state of development, followed by (2) a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with people actively seeking to foster rural development. These two steps were designed to strategically build upon one another. Information gathered during the first round of interviews helped inform the second set of interviews. During both rounds, potential development barriers were elicited. These were subsequently grouped by the authors into capitals, following the sustainable livelihoods approach (see Table 1). Semi-structured interviews around a flexible set of previously developed questions proved useful because we could guarantee that the topics we were interested in were covered, without compromising the freedom of the interviewees to express personal opinions, views, and experiences (Willis, 2006).

The first set of short interviews was conducted with 347 people in summer 2012. We interviewed five to six people from each of the 66 villages, asking about their perceptions of the development state of the study area. Questions were related to the six forms of livelihood assets, but avoided technical 'capitals' terminology. Specifically, questions focused on the perceived economic and infrastructural development of a given village (rather than individual households), employment and educational opportunities, as well as on land use in the area. In addition, we asked each interviewee about what should improve in the future from a village development perspective. Interviews lasted on average approximately 15 minutes. Within a given village, our sampling strategy involved both 'knowledge carriers' (advised by Romanian colleagues), namely priests, teachers, and town hall staff; and other, randomly selected people living in the villages. We made sure to involve all demographic groups, namely Romanian, Hungarian and Roma people during this first round of interviews. Many young rural

residents had migrated (often seasonally) from our study area during the study period, and we therefore conducted few interviews with people below the age of 30. Hence, many interviewees were unemployed or pensioners, which may not fully reflect the socio-economic structure of the villages. We used a translator for the interviews. This initial 'broad but shallow' set of interviews provided a useful overview of the state of development, and potential development barriers, of our study area.

During the first round of short interviews, interviewees occasionally referred us to key individuals within the area that actively sought to improve rural development. Based on the development barriers identified during the short interviews, we undertook a second round of interviews in December 2012 with eleven suggested key individuals. These comprised, among others, teachers, medical assistants, and farmers. The second-round interviews took on average approximately 90 minutes and were recorded following the interviewee's agreement. The interviewees were asked to talk about their activities for rural development and the barriers they faced, to comment on each key development barrier elicited during the first round of interviews, and were encouraged to focus on topics they were most interested in. Seven interviewees spoke only Romanian or Hungarian, and we again used a translator for these interviews. The remaining four interviews were conducted in English or German. All interviews were transcribed and translated into English where needed.

The data collected during the initial set of 347 interviews were entered into a spreadsheet, pooled to the village level, and coded according to the six capitals (see "Introduction"). The capitals approach was also used as 'coding concept' for the second round, in-depth interviews. Data analysis followed two steps. By means of descriptive statistics, quantifiable data of the short interviews were aggregated in order to derive an overview of some readily observable rural development barriers. This captured current limitations to some kinds of capital (e.g. infrastructure), but was of limited value with regards to less readily quantifiable capital stocks such as cultural, social, and natural capitals. For this reason, in a second step, we used qualitative data analysis to analyze statements of the eleven key individuals in relation to all six capitals, as well as the institutional context. Given the apparent interaction of barriers identified by the interviewees, we considered the concept of traps useful to help synthesize and interpret our findings. For this reason, our findings are presented following the capitals approach. In the subsequent Discussion we explain how the inter-connectedness of barriers appears to lead to a trap-like state, and suggest practical ways forward.

Findings

The state of capital assets according to initial, short interviews

Demographic structure of interviewees

Among the 347 interviewees, men and women were represented almost equally (48.7% women; 51.3% men). People with occasional jobs (2.9% or 10 people) and mayors and other town hall staff were the minority of interviewees (4.9% or 17 people), followed by priests and people working in a nearby factory or in commerce (each 11% or 38 people). Teachers made up 12% (or 42 people). The majority of interviewees were pensioners (28.3%) or unemployed (29.4%).

Financial capital

According to the interviewees, there was 'no' substantial economic activity in more than two thirds (68%) of villages, such as a company, factory, or a shop other than a small village shop – which existed in all villages except for two. One quarter of villages (26%) had 'little' economic activity, that is, one company or shop

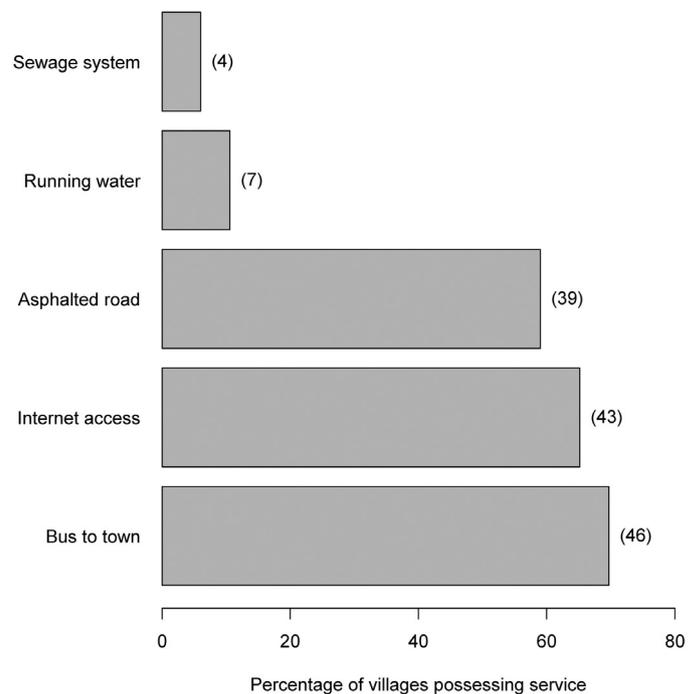


Fig. 1. State of built capital in Central Romania according to 347 rural residents interviewed in 66 villages. Numbers in parentheses indicate the amount of villages possessing this service.

in addition to the small village shop. Six percent of villages were considered as having 'much' economic activity, that is, two or more companies or shops in addition to the small village shop.

Human capital

In about one fifth (18%) of villages, nobody appeared to be working in a close-by urban center. In the majority of villages (72.7%), 'some' people worked in town, while in approximately 9% of villages, 'many' or 'the majority' of people worked in town. In 64 out of 66 villages (97%), young people were known to migrate seasonally to other EU countries such as France or Germany, working mainly as harvest hands or nurses. In more than two thirds of villages (70%), people stated that seasonal migration was practiced by 'many' or 'the majority' of young people.

Built capital

While almost two thirds (65%) of the villages were reported to have internet, only one tenth (10.6%) had running water (Fig. 1). Only 6% of the villages possessed a sewage system. In 59% of the villages the main road was asphalted, yet with side roads being in very poor condition. More than two thirds of villages (69.7%) had a bus connection to a bigger town. In most cases, however, buses were privately owned and considered expensive, or they were factory buses that collected workers but did not transport other villagers.

Future improvements

People's aspirations for the future development of their villages were diverse (Fig. 2). Out of 482 responses, most responses (192 or 39.8%) related to the wish for more local jobs, and 129 responses (26.8%) to improvements to built capital. Other desires ranged from various support mechanisms for farming (34 or 7%) to a higher level of interest, information distribution and activity by local authorities (26 answers or 5.4%). Another set of answers dealt with improved financial capital such as higher pensions or wages (18 or 3.7%). A small number of answers related to respecting the rule of law by political and economic elites as well as improved education (each

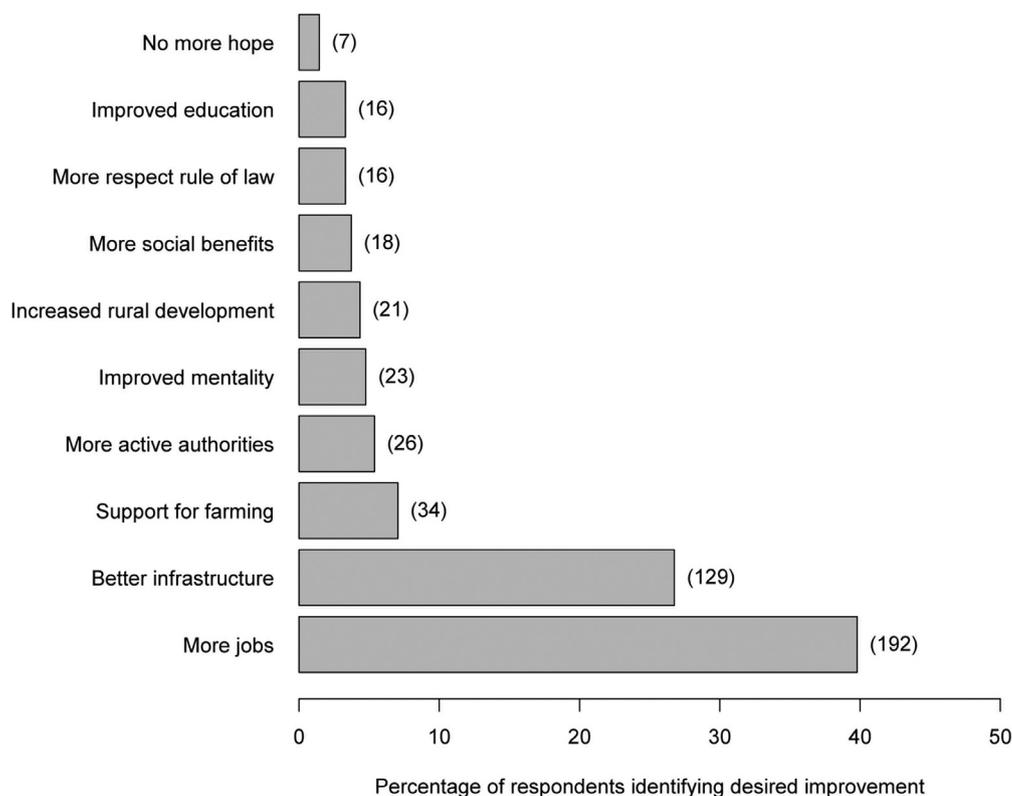


Fig. 2. Areas of improvement for rural development identified by 347 rural residents in 66 villages of Central Romania. Numbers in parentheses indicate the amount of answers related to each area of improvement (several answers were possible).

16 or 3.3%), as well as aspiring to rural development (21 responses or 4.4%).

Barriers to rural development according to in-depth interviews

Low levels of financial capital

Interviewees targeted for in-depth interviews reported that the breakdown of large industries and state-owned farming cooperatives after the breakdown of the communist regime in 1989 resulted in an overall scarcity of jobs in Central Romania, both in the farming and non-farming sectors: “There are zero income options here. The only option in our village is casual work” (Interviewee 10). Some villagers found employment in close-by urban centers such as Sighisoara, mainly in the textile and manufacturing sectors, and some were employed seasonally on bigger farms. Consequently, many rural residents were elderly, unemployed or without permanent working contracts, and thus had disproportionately low levels of financial capital (Interviewees 2 and 4). The incomes people received, whether pensions, social benefits or wages, were very low. According to the interviewees, a factory worker earned on average around 700 lei per month (~210 USD), and a teacher between 800 and 1000 lei (~240–300 USD). Unemployment benefits per month amounted to 400 lei (~120 USD); social assistance to 200 lei (~60 USD); and pensions to 350–430 lei (~105–130 USD). Given that commodity prices in local shops were often comparable to Western Europe, and access to loans or credits was restricted, rural inhabitants were highly dependent on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods (Interviewees 3 and 4).

Low levels of human capital

The education sector, both in the villages and Romania in general, was said to be a “disaster” (Interviewee 8). Many interviewees complained about “unqualified” teachers and the selection of school

directors and staff after political interests (Interviewees 2, 3, 8 and 9). Because traditional values such as altruism, morality or closeness to nature were rarely passed on anymore, the education sector may even contribute to “the withering away of rural life” (Interviewee 3). In addition, vocational training almost disappeared after 1989, and the remaining institutions offered insufficient training opportunities, leading to a lack of qualified workers (Interviewee 8). Because of the lack of jobs, low incomes and few local educational options, temporary or permanent migration of mainly young rural residents to urban centers or abroad was widespread: “The problem is that people today have many options, and prefer moving to France or Germany to work for higher salaries instead of staying here and work for little money” (Interviewee 4). Ironically, even though interviewees reported that farming and living in the countryside was increasingly unattractive to the young generation, rural migrants to Western Europe often went to find jobs in the farming sector.

Low levels of built capital

As highlighted via the short interviews, the level of built capital or infrastructural development was very low (Fig. 1), which interviewees related to poverty among the rural population and a lack of interest from local authorities. Low incomes seemed to deter people from demanding village infrastructure projects: “A local teacher said ‘don’t let them build the sewage system! We would need to pay for it otherwise’” (Interviewee 5). Interviewees argued that low income levels and a lack of financial incentives fostered illegal work and maintained a low work ethic, in particular regarding construction work: “If you pay somebody properly, he will do a proper job. But if we only pretend to pay the people, and people pretend to work, we won’t make any progress” (Interviewee 4).

Beside poor quality roads and inadequate sewage systems, another problem was a widespread lack of medical care facilities (Interviewee 1). Moreover, the public transport infrastructure connecting villages and urban centers was largely based on privately

owned buses deemed too expensive for many rural dwellers in the region. These high transportation costs meant that many parents could not afford sending their children to secondary schools in nearby towns, leading to high drop-out rates from school (Interviewee 5). At the same time, the low connectivity to urban centers appeared to deter many villagers from selling homegrown products on local markets, while a lack of agricultural machinery often impeded farming bigger patches of land (Interviewees 3 and 9). The lack of built capital, then, not only seemed to be a barrier to improving quality of life, incomes, health, and access to secondary education, but also to attracting investment, for instance in terms of tourism: “*Our villages need to look better so that we don’t have to be ashamed if we receive visitors*” (Interviewee 9).

Low levels of social capital

Rural life in most villages appeared to be characterized by low information exchange, skepticism toward new developments, and mutual mistrust – reportedly an aftereffect of systemic suppression and top-down control during the communist era (Interviewees 2, 3, 6 and 9). Low social capital, combined with low human and financial capitals as well as high migration rates among young people, seemed to suppress innovative capacity and entrepreneurship: “*I think people have been taught not to think, but instead there’s always somebody to tell them what to do. This has eventually killed all self-initiative*” (Interviewee 3). Other barriers to building the social capital necessary for collective action were rising individualism and a lack of leadership; the latter had supposedly been performed by Saxons before they emigrated out of the region: “*Saxons aren’t role models anymore today. TV and computers are today’s role models*” (Interviewee 8). After the exodus of the Saxon population from Central Romania, former Saxon institutions that used to organize village life, so called “neighborhoods”, had disappeared in many villages (Interviewees 2 and 7). At the same time, the number of Roma people was rapidly rising. The Roma population, however, often lacked education and job skills due to societal prejudices, and a lack of state supplied educational opportunities (Interviewees 10 and 11). In combination, the demographic shift and the lack of social capital in most villages was perceived to be further “*fragmenting the community structure that has already been fragmented after the Saxons left*” (Interviewee 7). Yet, individual actors could make a difference and motivate villagers, for instance regarding the signature of petitions (Interviewees 5 and 6).

Endangered natural and cultural capitals

Because the rural population was aging and Roma people often did not possess land or a farming tradition (Interviewees 10 and 11), agricultural land was increasingly abandoned or leased out to foreign investors. This development would not only endanger aspects of the region’s natural capital such as farmland biodiversity, but also cultural capital such as traditional cuisine (Interviewees 3 and 8). Regarded most problematic for the future of (smallholder) farming in Central Romania, however, were high migration rates among the rural youth, and a lack of appreciation of traditional and cultural values attached to agriculture in both the education sector, and more broadly in Romanian society (Interviewees 3, 8 and 9). The increasing detachment of young people from a rural lifestyle and the negative image of farming were considered to result from past, top-down induced collective agriculture, and an overall societal change: “*People sent their kids away from the village as they wanted to spare the next generation this difficult life. That’s how the villages depopulated*” (Interviewee 3). At the same time, the region’s natural and cultural capitals arguably stood the best chances to generate incomes because they served as basis for organic farming or tourism (Interviewees 2–7). According to Interviewee 2, “*young people would be fine with staying in the village*” if local resources were properly utilized. The fact that young villagers migrated and

often worked in Western European farms was a “*silly drain of workers*” according to Interviewee 7. (Foreign) Investors should rather create local businesses and support local farms, “*instead of bringing Romanians by truck to Germany.*”

Institutional context

According to the interviewees, the lack (or low quality) of financial, human, physical and social capital resulted from, and was exacerbated by the institutional context. Many interviewees complained about a lack of interest in village development from local politicians, a lack of information transfer, and disrespect for the rule of law (Interviewees 1–5, 8, 10, 11). In the commune of Interviewee 5, for instance, the mayor “*sells cars, gets cars from Germany, and has a construction company of his own. . . He does everything, but nothing for the community.*” Various interviewees reported cases of entanglement between local politicians and the economy, but also of party politics in the health and education sectors up to the national level (Interviewees 1, 3 and 5). According to Interviewee 1, “*the heads of the institutions change as soon as the political color changes – with only few exceptions.*” Communal projects were often not approved or financed if the mayor was in a party other than the governing party. Moreover, almost every interviewee reported incidents of intimidation of political opponents, the misappropriation of funds or vote-buying, particularly among poorer villagers: “*There are many poor people. . . that elect the mayor if you give them 50 lei [~15 USD]*” (Interviewee 5).

The low levels of financial, social and human capitals of rural residents thus seemed to perpetuate an institutional environment characterized by corruption and nepotism among local decision makers, which in turn suppressed the development of social and human capital as well as entrepreneurship. Reportedly, high levels of bureaucracy and taxes as well as ineffective local governance deterred many individuals from actively working for rural development or setting up a rural enterprise such as an organic farm. This deterrent effect was further compounded by a lack of financial incentives for rural development interventions in the region (Interviewees 1, 4 and 8). To set up a business and circumvent high taxes, one needed to be influential or wealthy: “*The investment climate is hostile – if you don’t know the culture and the right people*” (Interviewee 7).

Notably, Romania’s integration into the European Union was typically not considered a solution to overcome the barriers of development in Central Romania by the interviewees, but on the contrary it was said to aggravate the situation. The import of subsidized foodstuffs from, and the attraction of cheap human capital to Western European countries ran counter to the development of the local agricultural sector (Interviewee 4). Moreover, EU policy was related to a lot of bureaucracy, which apparently undermined the already low efficiency of local authorities, and set high burdens to apply for EU funding. Reportedly, only few rural dwellers possessed the financial and human capitals because applications were often demanding, and required co-financing or preliminary payments such as in the case of the EU rural development initiative LEADER¹ (Interviewees 1, 4 and 7).

Discussion: how interacting barriers cause a trap

Our empirical findings suggested that Central Romania is subject to a multitude of rural development barriers, associated with a lack or endangerment of various different types of capital assets. Moreover, our findings indicated that development barriers are often

¹ *Liaison entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale* [Links between actions for the development of the rural economy].

interacting and mutually reinforcing, with the effects of some barriers being the cause of others. For instance, low wages seemed to foster a low work ethic; and the fear of additional costs such as for water or electricity hampered infrastructural development. In other words, low financial capital appeared to be one major cause for low built capital. Insufficient built capital, in turn, was considered a barrier to the development of rural enterprises such as tourism, and thus to potential income opportunities (i.e. financial capital; see Baumgartner et al., 2013). Because local jobs were reportedly scarce and the quality of education low, migration was common, which fostered the loss of human capital. Historical legacies of systemic suppression, and a lack of positive role models were considered the causes for reduced trust and cooperation between villagers, leading to a lack of interest and participation in community-level endeavors and local governance (see also Howard, 2002; Pascaru and Buțiu, 2010). Low social capital subsequently combined with low financial and human capital apparently made rural residents vulnerable to bribery and corruption by local authorities (see also Van Assche et al., 2011). Corrupt policy practices appeared to reinforce the lack of these capitals, constituting a positive or reinforcing feedback effect. In combination, our findings thus suggest that Central Romania is prone to a variety of linked feedbacks as a consequence of interacting barriers which together cause a trapped system state.

With Romania's integration into the European Union, our study area has become embedded in a multi-level governance system (Piattoni, 2009; Mikulcak et al., 2013), influenced by EU legislation and international market forces. Curiously, however, the EU was widely considered as yet another barrier to rural development. Development barriers of Central Romania hence occur across different levels and scales (Cash et al., 2006), creating a fractal trap situation, that is, a series of simultaneous traps occurring at multiple scales (Barrett and Swallow, 2006).

Unlocking the trap: the enabling role of natural and cultural capital

Central Romania appears to be relatively poor in all capitals, except for natural and cultural capital. Our findings suggest, however, that these capitals are at risk. Cultural capital in the sense of traditional values and regional-specific architecture is deteriorating due to an aging rural population, the migration of young villagers, and the exodus of Saxons (see also Ghisa et al., 2011). A recent report supports our finding that the onset of a rapidly growing Roma population, often lacking a farming tradition or access to sufficient agricultural land (World Bank 2014), is causing a profound cultural and land-use change in many villages. Various authors further confirm our results that farmland abandonment and land use intensification are common and increasing, with leased farmland often being converted into large-scale industrialized monocultures (Bouniol, 2013; Dale-Harris, 2014). This intensification-abandonment dynamic threatens the cultural landscapes and farmland biodiversity of Central Romania (Henle et al., 2008; Kuemmerle et al., 2009). Besides, the benefits of smallholding in terms of household food security and the conservation of traditional food preferences may be lost if land rights are transferred (Mathijs and Noev, 2004; FAO, 2014). Moreover, high levels of mechanization associated with agricultural intensification are effectively a substitute for human labor (Sinaga, 1978; Agarwal, 1981) so that agricultural intensification is unlikely to substantially increase employment opportunities in the area.

Our findings indicate that Romania's natural and cultural capitals provide perhaps the best opportunity to break out of the current trap. Several interviewees suggested that eco- and cultural tourism or the sale of handicrafts and specialty foods would be good strategies to foster rural development (see also Iorio and Corsale, 2010;

Fischer et al., 2012). The characteristics of smallholder farming in this region (high biodiversity, short supply chains) thus provide a valuable asset for alternative rural enterprises of greater value (Davidova et al., 2012), and rural development, therefore, should focus on both the diversification of rural economies and the specialization on Central Romania's cultural and natural capitals (see Ray, 1998; Rizov, 2006; Davidova and Bailey, 2014). A diversification of incomes by specializing on regional products and traditional (ecological) knowledge would be in line with the endogenous model of rural development (Ward et al., 2005), and could have a positive or 'spiraling up' effect on other (community) capitals (Emery and Flora, 2006). Yet, as the neo-endogenous rural development model suggests, rural residents will struggle to specialize and convert natural and cultural capitals into financial capital as long as all other capitals are low (Shirley, 2005; Hubbard and Gorton, 2011). Our findings suggest that most villagers lack the financial means, access to training, and (managerial) knowledge to set up a business, as well as innovation capacity due to low social capital (see also Rizov, 2006; Baumgartner et al., 2013). Moreover, those individuals willing to set up a rural enterprise, and theoretically capable in terms of human, social and financial capitals, are often deterred by high taxes and bureaucratic hurdles, or an unfavorable institutional context respectively.

Taking a broader perspective, Romania is embedded in a wider EU governance framework, and rural development assistance through the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) could be central to the region's sustainable development. Yet, our results indicate that both access and applicability of CAP funding are subject to several tiers of barriers to rural residents, which confirms earlier findings (Mikulcak et al., 2013). Because of Romania's farm structure (see "Study area" section above), so called direct payments disproportionately benefit a few, large-scale farmers (Cionga et al., 2008; Gorton et al., 2009). Out of 3.85 million Romanian holdings (as of 2010), only about one million were eligible for direct payments, with 90% of beneficiaries receiving less than 625 USD per year due to their small farmland areas (Alexandri and Luca, 2012; Hubbard et al., 2014). Many EU rural development measures require the possession of financial capital (e.g. private, preliminary payments to access EU Leader), social capital (e.g. setting up producer groups), and human capital (skills to access and write funding applications or business plans; e.g. Alexandri and Luca, 2012; Hubbard et al., 2014). Approximately one third of respondents subject to our short interviews received EU rural development funding for land or animals, but the amounts were reportedly too low to substantially support farming. Except for one interviewee who received rural development funding for young farmers, none of the interviewed 'key individuals' accessed EU funding, but instead relied on the cooperation with (foreign) non-governmental organizations. Given our finding that young people are increasingly alienated from the countryside (see also Palang et al., 2006) or migrate permanently, rural development funds for young farmers in general may have little effect. Moreover, due to the low connectivity to (urban) markets, increasing competition with powerful retailers (Dries et al., 2004), as well as EU hygiene regulations (Fundatia ADEPT et al., 2008), smallholder farmers often find themselves excluded from dominant supply chains and direct marketing opportunities for their locally produced foodstuffs (Gorton et al., 2014).

On this account, many authors argue that the Common Agricultural Policy was ill-designed for new member states where a large proportion of the farmers are smallholders, because it largely followed an agrarian, farm-centric model, and disregarded the special characteristics and needs of (semi-) subsistence farmers (Hubbard and Gorton, 2011; Davidova et al., 2012). Notably, unlike post-socialist countries, Western Europe had been subject to a gradual agricultural transition (Palang et al., 2006), and farmers from these

regions were able to influence and shape the design of the CAP (Rizov, 2006). Consequently, investors from 'long-established' EU member states such as France or Germany possess the human, social, physical and financial capitals to access CAP funding, to modernize their farming practices, and to establish their businesses in countries such as Romania where land is still comparatively cheap (Murdoch, 2000; Bouniol, 2013). Our results suggest that (foreign) investment in the study area is appreciated and beneficial in principle. In particular, interviewees wish for the creation of jobs and for support in terms of (vocational) training, capacity building, and infrastructure. Yet, according to official statements (Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development, 2008), the Romanian government currently seems to favor investments directed at modernizing the agricultural sector following a Western European model – thus largely ignoring the local context that might lead to potentially negative social and environmental externalities of such an approach (Mikulcak et al., 2013).

Why institutions matter

Our findings demonstrated that the barriers to Central Romania's development are strongly influenced by their institutional context. Interviewees described how the health, education, and business sectors were influenced by governmental authorities, and reported various cases of bribery, cronyism and corruption. Useful information, for instance regarding EU funding for rural development or the inclusion of Roma, was often not passed on from local authorities to rural residents (see Mikulcak et al., 2013). Both the traps and capitals approach highlight the role of institutions. Accordingly, beside social relations, rural residents' access to livelihood assets is modified by formal and informal institutions such as rules, cultural or religious norms, and customs (Ostrom, 1990; Allison and Ellis, 2001). Poverty and rigidity traps are often attributed to dysfunctional institutions or weak governance structures (Barrett et al., 2011; Maru et al., 2012).

Notably, institutions are not static, but subject to continuous changes and path-dependencies (North, 1990; Van Assche et al., 2013). To this end, Altmann et al. (2010) argued that institutions in newly independent states such as Romania were 'molded' by their communist past. Because members of the former Communist Party managed to retain key positions in the economy, the civil service, and the political establishment during the country's transformation process, persistent weaknesses in the legal and governance systems remained. At the same time, EU accession required an unprecedentedly rapid adoption and implementation of new legislation and structures (Spendzharova, 2003; Bache, 2010a), leading to a mismatch between old hierarchical institutions and newly decentralized institutions (Klůvanková-Oravská et al., 2009; Mikulcak et al., 2013). According to Sikor et al. (2009), the externally induced decentralization and reconstitution of decision-making powers and party structures in post-socialist countries would often translate into local power abuses and "predatory practices" (p. 177) in order to consolidate governmental authority. Shirley (2005) argued that democracy is not always a guarantor for the respect of the rule of law and good governance practices. Enduring changes of the governance system were largely influenced by informal institutions, and required supportive norms, beliefs, and constitutional institutions. At the same time, trust and civic mindedness were fundamental both to increase the accountability of politicians, and to foster the credibility of institutions (Letki, 2004). Our findings suggest that trust in politicians, interpersonal trust, and civic participation in politics are very low in Central Romania, which is commonly linked to low levels of social capital (Howarth, 2002; Letki, 2004), but also considered the consequence of corruption (Ristei, 2010).

The institutional context seems to keep Central Romania trapped in an undesirable equilibrium state, where the

development of interacting capitals is suppressed. Because many rural residents are vulnerable to being corrupted by powerful players due to low human, social and financial endowments, a system with self-reinforcing (i.e. positive) feedback loops is created where the powerful maintain, or even enhance their power. For instance, due to low government accountability, corrupt policy practices become possible, which undermine the rule of law and moral values, and erode public trust in institutions and democratic governance (Ristei, 2010). Consequently, civic participation and governmental control or balancing feedbacks are hampered, leading to low accountability. Self-correction could be fostered by an active civil society that holds politicians accountable, and provides for transparent decision-making and fair elections. While Europeanization, i.e. the alignment of governance structures and processes with EU policies (Bache, 2010b) has brought about improvements in the Romanian civil society sector (Parau, 2009; Börzel and Buzogány, 2010), civil society actors in the study area to date are apparently ill-equipped to provide for necessary governance checks. So how can Central Romania break out of its current, undesirable trapped state?

Tackling multiple capital deficits simultaneously

In order to overcome a (poverty) trap, classical economic theory would argue for a 'big-push' investment to pass a low economic threshold and move the system to a more desirable state (Sachs, 2005; Collier, 2008). Yet, we showed that existing barriers are multiple and interacting, and mediated by the institutional context. Increasing financial capital thus cannot be a sufficient instrument for rural development if other systemic barriers are not also overcome. Given the complexity of development barriers and their interactions in our study area, rural development endeavors should take a holistic approach, and aim to foster all capital stocks as well as local capacity.

According to Shirley (2005), cash inflows alone can even be counterproductive and undermine the sustainability of reforms if a governance system is characterized by rent-seeking and a lack of institutions keeping this behavior in check. Our results suggest that theoretically available finances, for instance EU rural development funding, are not used effectively due to an information deficit on the side of rural inhabitants, weak administrative capacities, and corruption. As the previous discussion section has shown, Europeanization to date has apparently not succeeded in overcoming Romania's "democratic deficit" (Rizov, 2006, p. 233). Instead of ineffective conditionalities set by the European Union (European Commission, 2010; Gateva, 2010; Spendzharova and Vachudova, 2012), other means should be developed to foster the adherence to the rule of law. For instance, general financial sanctions not only by the EU, but also other international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund could be considered (Gateva, 2010). National actors that are determined to curb corruption should be supported technically and financially (Ristei, 2010). At the same time, existing EU funding mechanisms need to be adjusted to rural realities, for instance by providing additional capacity building and expertise to local authorities and rural residents (Wegener et al., 2011; Mikulcak et al., 2013). Bureaucratic complexities need to be reduced to foster the absorption of funding, and a greater cohesion among governmental levels (Altmann et al., 2010; Iorio and Corsale, 2010).

Drawing on the livelihoods approach, Davidova et al. (2012) underlined that development does not only depend on finances and structures, but also on agency – defined as 'the capacity of the individual to plan and initiate action' (Onyx and Bullen 2000, p. 29, cited in Newman and Dale, 2005). According to the livelihoods literature, rural development should strengthen the capacities of individuals and rural households to improve well-being and access to capitals, rather than targeting the state to provide ongoing cash

transfers (e.g. Allison and Ellis, 2001; Scoones, 2009). This reasoning is in line with the neo-endogenous model of rural development, directing the focus of development on the needs and perspectives of locals, and the enhancement of local capacities (Rizov, 2006; Hubbard and Gorton, 2011). Enhancing agency and local capacities is not only crucial to foster capital building, but also to enable necessary governance checks. As the above explained 'governance loop' exemplified, this means strengthening negative (balancing) feedback loops to slow down positive (reinforcing) feedbacks (Meadows, 1999).

According to Newman and Dale (2005), agency must not be equated with social capital, but is one important component. Beside agency, social capital consists of bonding and bridging ties or networks within and outside a community, social norms, trust and reciprocity (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 1993). Our results suggest that social capital in the study area is very low, thereby restricting access to other capitals. However, key individuals such as those we interviewed possess agency and can serve as positive role models to increase community capitals, for instance by attracting funding, distributing information, providing after-school teaching, creating employment, and assisting villagers with administrative procedures. However, these individuals often lack access to financial capital and supporting networks of actors. Assistance with funding and the expansion of existing networks would therefore be potentially beneficial for rural development in Central Romania. Bridging organizations such as the local Adept foundation or the Mihai Eminescu Trust can play a key role as they do not only have access to external information and expertise, but can also foster learning and act as mediators between local authorities and rural residents (Morgan and Murdoch, 2000; Olsson et al., 2007).

Finally, it seems likely that strengthening financial, human and social capitals will have little effect on the current rate of rural out-migration from Central Romania, as long as job opportunities and incomes remain low. In 2013, the monthly net average wage in Romania was 485 USD (Eurostat, 2014). To improve job opportunities, it is crucial that entrepreneurship in the region is supported via appropriate policy settings and the development of rural infrastructure, including access to markets (Turnock, 2002; Davidova et al., 2009; Iorio and Corsale, 2010). At the same time, investors need to be attracted into the area, mainly with a view on the transfer of human capital (e.g. technical trainings, support of professional schools; e.g. Rizov, 2006). Here, it is of crucial importance that the setup of enterprises actually creates jobs for rural residents, and respects the region's natural and cultural capitals.

Conclusion

With this paper, we sought to contribute new insights as to why development appears to stagnate in certain regions. Combining the sustainable livelihoods approach with traps theory could offer a fruitful, new way to frame rural development research, and develop appropriate policy strategies. Applying this approach to Central Romania, we demonstrated that the region appears to be trapped in an undesirable state characterized by poverty and outmigration. At the same time, the region's exceptionally rich biodiversity that has been maintained over centuries by extensive smallholder farming is at risk from land abandonment and agricultural intensification. Our analysis of the barriers creating and maintaining the locked-in situation of Central Romania showed that development barriers related to capital asset types are multiple and interacting. While the region's natural and cultural capitals stand the best chances to foster rural development, they are likely to deteriorate, too, unless other capitals – financial, social, human, and physical capitals – are also developed at the same time. The development of capitals, in turn, is strongly influenced by the institutional context, which is

reportedly in need of improvement. Given the interconnectedness of barriers, it is highly doubtful that big-push economic interventions alone would successfully 'unlock' the trap-like situation of Central Romania, and such measures could even be counterproductive. Instead, we recommend that policy interventions tackle various capitals at the same time, ideally leading to reinforcing feedbacks connecting multiple types of capitals. Further research will be necessary to specify the precise measures that a holistic rural development strategy for Central Romania ought to entail.

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