

Toward the Social Capital Benchmarking in Italy

Verso il Benchmarking del Capitale Sociale in Italia

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Riassunto: il lavoro presenta una matrice ragionata di oltre 90 indicatori regionali di capitale sociale organizzata secondo le differenti dimensioni e temi in cui si esplica l'azione del capitale sociale. Questa matrice viene utilizzata per misurare con tecniche di benchmarking i divari regionali nella dotazione di capitale sociale e la posizione relativa di ciascuna regione sulla base di un set di indicatori chiave.

Parole chiave: *Social Indicators, Social Capital, Benchmarking Analysis*

1. Introduction

In the late 90's Social Capital gained wide interest among researchers and policy makers, although the increasing scientific divergences due to its composite nature. Nevertheless, it did prove to be an instrument useful for analysing the socio-economic changes as it allows taking into account factors that work on a territorial level and the characteristics of the actors. Two different formulations of social capital emerged from the scientific debates: the first one has more ancient traditions that are linked to the studying of the social networks and to which Coleman (1988) provides an explicit concept in terms of social capital: the second more recent one, which recalls the works of Putnam (and of Fukuyama, 1996), defines the concept in cultural terms, such as civic culture and trust.

This paper presents a social capital indicators' matrix organised according to the different dimensions and themes where the action of the social capital is expressed and which takes into account the various theoretic formulations. Both the evolution of the phenomena and the territorial level of the indicators are carefully studied when selecting and gathering these indicators. This matrix allows is used for measuring, by means of benchmarking techniques, the regional differences in the endowment of social capital and the position of each region based on a set of key indicators.

2. The social capital indicators' matrix

An important methodological step in realising this matrix regarded the fact of choosing a definition. Taking into account the research experience of the OECD *Social Capital Project*, the following definition, which is widely used on an international level, was adopted: "the social capital consists of networks, together with shared norms, values and understandings, which facilitate cooperation within and among groups" (OECD,

2001). In order to define the dimensions of such concept, together with its themes and indicators, we referred to the experience of a group of experts from the OECD and from the Siena Group, which identified four main dimensions of the social capital together with a nucleus of key indicators (Zukewich, Norris, 2005). Subsequently, within each dimension of the matrix (Social participation, Civil participation, Social interactions and aids, Trust and social cohesion), the themes were integrated in order to preserve the features that characterise the Italian reality and which emerged when examining the Istat surveys (Righi, Recchini, 2005; Righi, 2005). The individual indicators have been calculated since the 1990s up until the most recent figures and the maximum number of indicators has been gathered on a regional level (Nuzzo, Righi, 2005). The more than 90 indicators derive mainly from Istat sources but also from other institutions' sources, and they differ among them due to their type (survey, administrative or census sources) and consequently for the level of geographic and time coverage and quality.

3. A benchmarking approach for the social capital

Benchmarking, or comparative analysis, was created during the 1980s as a method for improving the competitiveness of the enterprises, but soon was experimented in the public sector with the purpose of introducing the quality policies and of strengthening the programming systems by objectives (Cowper, Samuels, 1997). Benchmarking is used not only as a system of performance analysis to identify the best performers but also for improving the performance relative to the follower units. The interest of adopting a benchmarking strategy in relation to the social capital lies in the possibility of identifying the differences in the behaviour models in relation to a set of indicators and of using these data for defining the convergence objectives of the regions that present lower performances as regards some dimensions.

In this perspective, the first phase regarded the realization of a rating of the Italian regions but such phase, though, caused numerous problems relatively to the selection of the key indicators. The lack of theoretic references led to the use of a preventive multivariate analysis on the matrix indicators, choosing to use the variables that, based on a factor analysis¹, resulted more strongly correlated to the three main factors identified (Nuzzo, Righi, 2005)². Consequently, 13 key indicators were selected for the year 2001. They include seven indicators for Social participation, which regard the structural aspects (non-profit institutions dedicated to recreational and cultural activities, volunteers who work in no-profit institutions and social cooperatives) and the level of involvement of people in social associations or groups and in volunteering activities (from participation in meetings and financing of associations to the carrying out of free activities). They also include four indicators for Civil participation, indicating the political vote and meetings, financing to parties and frequency of political information. Finally, they include only two indicators for the Social interactions and Trust dimensions, which indicate the frequency and satisfaction of social relationships. Three groups of regions emerged for their behaviour model in relation to social capital. The first group represents the model of Northern regions plus Umbria and Marche while

¹ The variables were selected using a correlation matrix, than a principal factor component analysis with promax rotation of axes was made.

² The first two factors refer to Putnam's distinction between Bridging and Bonding Social Capital, while the third factor indicates a dimension of strong family networks.

the second group represents the Southern regions plus Lazio. The third residual group is made up of all the regions that differ in a significant way from the other two groups' behaviours, and includes Valle d'Aosta, Tuscany, Emilia Romagna and Sardinia as well as the best performer region, Trentino Alto Adige.

Group 1 presents generally higher levels, compared to Group 2, as regards the indicators corresponding to Social participation (except for the presence of social cooperatives) and for the indicators corresponding to Civil participation (in particular the participation in voting and information on political matters), but presents lower levels as far as the friendship relationships are concerned. Thus, Group 1 identifies a model of social capital that is more oriented towards social participation and volunteering, through both activities and financing to such associations, and in which the political participation is expressed in a significant way in terms of votes. Group 2 characterises a model where mutual-aid type of elements are stronger: importance of social cooperatives compared to the non-profit recreational and cultural institutions and of friendship relationships, and where the civil participation is expressed more by participating in political meetings rather than by voting. As regards Group 3, the maximum levels of presence of social cooperatives distinguish Valle d'Aosta from the Northern model, the maximum levels of participation in voting and higher levels of financing of parties distinguish Tuscany and Emilia Romagna from the North, while Sardinia (together with Sicily for the maximum levels they register regarding the frequency of information on political matters) differs from the South thanks to its higher levels of social participation.

The monitoring of the situation represented a second step in the benchmarking analysis. Let us consider the evolution of the key indicators between 2001 and 2003, or better yet, of those for which a comparison is possible. On a national level, the average of the indicators results rather stable, but each indicator evolved in a different way. The participation in political meetings (+9.2%), the financing of associations (+8.3%) and the participation in cultural associations' meetings (+5.3%) all grew over the years. On the other hand, the indicator relative to the free activities carried out for voluntary associations (-3%), the one on political information (-1.9%) and the one relative to the participation in environmental and rights defence associations' meetings (-1.4%) decreased. Moreover, the regions not all followed the same direction. The average of the key indicators resulted considerably on the increase as regards Valle d'Aosta, Marche, Calabria, Basilicata and, though to a lesser extent, Abruzzo, Puglia, Tuscany, Umbria and Liguria. On the other hand, it followed a decreasing trend in the case of the 2001 best performer region, Trentino Alto-Adige as well as in the case of Molise and Sardinia. It remained stable in the case of all the other regions. In 2003, Trentino Alto Adige was no longer first of the list as regards the average performance relative to the key indicators. This is mainly due to the negative evolution of the indicators on financing of parties and on the carrying out of free activities for voluntary associations. Subsequently, Valle d'Aosta became first of the list as, in the last two years, it has won some points for carrying out free activities for voluntary associations, for financing the parties and for participation in political meetings, thereby becoming the national best performer.

Generally, the regions that registered an increase benefited from the positive trend of the indicators corresponding to the participation in cultural and recreational associations' meetings and in political meetings. This is the case of Marche, which, after Valle d'Aosta, presents the higher average increase of performances. Calabria, which was last of the list in 2001, was no longer last thanks to the positive effect of its

participation in political meetings, civil rights and ecological associations' meetings and for friendships, thereby leaving the last position of the list to Sicily. In brief, the trends observed regarding the growth of the indicators in regions that presented values inferior to the national average and regarding the decrease of the indicators in regions that presented values higher than the national average, are determining a general process of convergence towards a nationally average model. Such interpretation was also based on the reduction registered between 2001 and 2003 of the variance of the regional average performances compared to the national one.

4. Conclusions

Having adopted a benchmarking strategy for the social capital has proven to be very useful for identifying the territorial differences as regards their performance in relation to the social capital. Three groups of regions have been identified and the study carried out on the trends observable between 2001 and 2003 has showed that the regions do not all present the same trend. While the national performance presented a substantial stability, the average of the key indicators resulted considerably on the increase as regards Valle d'Aosta, Marche, Calabria, Basilicata, and, though to a lesser extent, Abruzzo, Puglia, Tuscany, Umbria and Liguria. On the other hand, it followed a decreasing trend in the case of the 2001 best performer region, Trentino Alto-Adige, and in the case of Molise and Sardinia. The regions that registered an increase benefited from the positive trend of the indicators corresponding to participation in cultural and recreational associations' meetings and in political meetings. Moreover, a general convergence towards a national average model can be observed. All these indications are useful for the decision-makers who intend taking some initiatives for new social policies in the field of both the social cohesion and the economic development.

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