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## Social Capital and Sustainability in International VET Cooperation

**Gessler, Michael**

mgessler@uni-bremen.de, University of Bremen, Germany

**Siemer, Christine**

chsiemer@uni-bremen.de, University of Bremen, Germany

### Abstract

Germany is one of the largest donors in international VET cooperation. Here, a central question is and not only after the completion of a project: *How can the sustainability of funded international VET cooperation be adequately captured and measured?* Based on Bourdieu's concept of capital and the social network analysis, a research approach is outlined which might answer this question.

### Keywords

social capital, international VET cooperation, social network analysis

## 1 Context

On the one hand, vocational education and training (VET) has a difficult international standing: The social reputation and quality of education and training are often poor. On the other hand, work-based programmes, apprenticeships and especially the German dual system gained considerable political esteem in the wake of the economic crisis of 2007/2008 (OECD, 2010; ILO, 2021). This publicity has led to strong international interest in the dual system over the past decade. The growing demand prompted three major funding programs in Germany developed by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF), including: (1) Vocational Education and Training Export by German VET Providers (2009-2017), (2) Internationalization of Vocational Education and Training (since 2017), and (3) Research on the Internationalization of Vocational Education and Training (since 2019). More than 80 international projects are listed in the project database (DLR Projektträger, 2020). A key question facing all project participants and the funding agency BMBF is how sustainable this commitment of international VET cooperation is.

## 2 Theoretical framework

### 2.1 Multidimensional value references

Vocational education and training cooperation has multidimensional value references. In addition to the classic economic benefits, the development of social capital (e.g., building cooperation, trust), cultural capital (e.g., competence development, certificates) and symbolic capital (e.g., prestige, image of Germany abroad) must also be taken into account (Gessler & Siemer, 2019). Here, we refer to Pierre Bourdieu's (1983/1986) concept of capital and subsequently



focus on the chapter type social capital, as its contribution “to sustain net benefits over time” (OECD, 2019, p. 12) in the context of international cooperation has so far been largely disregarded. Bourdieu defines social capital as follows: “Social capital is 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” (Bourdieu 1983, p. 190<sup>1</sup>).

## 2.2 Predictors for sustainability

Assessing the sustainability of international VET cooperation measures requires a predictor variable that is capable of predicting the sustainability of the cooperation benefits. Up to now, institutionalized anchors, such as the assumption of tasks by partner and executing organizations, political strategies, national development plans, or laws, have been considered as key variables in particular (Stockmann, 2019). Institutionalization is an important predictor on the one hand. On the other hand, even this “hard” indicator can be of limited value. For example, in the Philippines in 1994, the “Dual System/Training” was integrated in the Technical Education and Skills Development Act (so called TESDA act, Republic of the Philippines 1994) as a result of vocational education and training cooperation. However, as of 1994, the dual system was not implemented nationwide, but rather the British-Australian approach of competency-based education and training (CBET). The TESDA law has now been in effect for more than twenty years and has had little effect in terms of spreading dual training approaches.

Social capital follows a different logic. Non-institutionalized relationships, such as trusting relationships, have strengths that are difficult to achieve by means of rules: Trust in the workplace promotes information flow, consideration of divergent opinions, motivation, participation, involvement, satisfaction, and adherence to commitments, among other things (Petermann, 2013). Weak relationships are not less valuable, but valuable in a different way. The importance of weak relationships lies in their potential to cross the boundaries of dense networks and connect divergent networks. Weak relationships form bridges between networks; they are important for the diffusion of information (Granovetter 1973, 1983). Weak relationships create bridging social capital, while networks with strong relationships create bonding social capital (Patulny & Svendsen, 2007). Social capital, once it exists, is independent of the formal conditions (including duration, funding) of a project. Clearly, it is worthwhile to consider social capital as an indicator of sustainability. However, there is a lack of instruments for data collection and analysis so far.

## 2.3 Research approach

On the one hand, social capital can be interpreted as an intrapersonal or individual characteristic of a person. A person “possesses” social capital. On the other hand, social capital can be seen as an interpersonal or relational characteristic. The relationship represents the social capital. These extreme poles are combined in the “personal networks” or “egocentric networks” approach (Perry et al., 2018): Social capital exists as a relationship, but the relationship can be accessed through a focal person (ego). In order to capture projects or project networks using this approach, it makes sense to look at the personal network of the project coordinator, as this role is responsible for performance and relationship management in the project. However, the project coordination does not provide access to the entire social capital of the alliance. The social capital of the network is thus underestimated on the one hand. On the other hand, it can be assumed that the personal network of the project coordinator is more comprehensive than the average of the individual networks of the other project partners. The individual value is thus

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Richard Nice (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248).

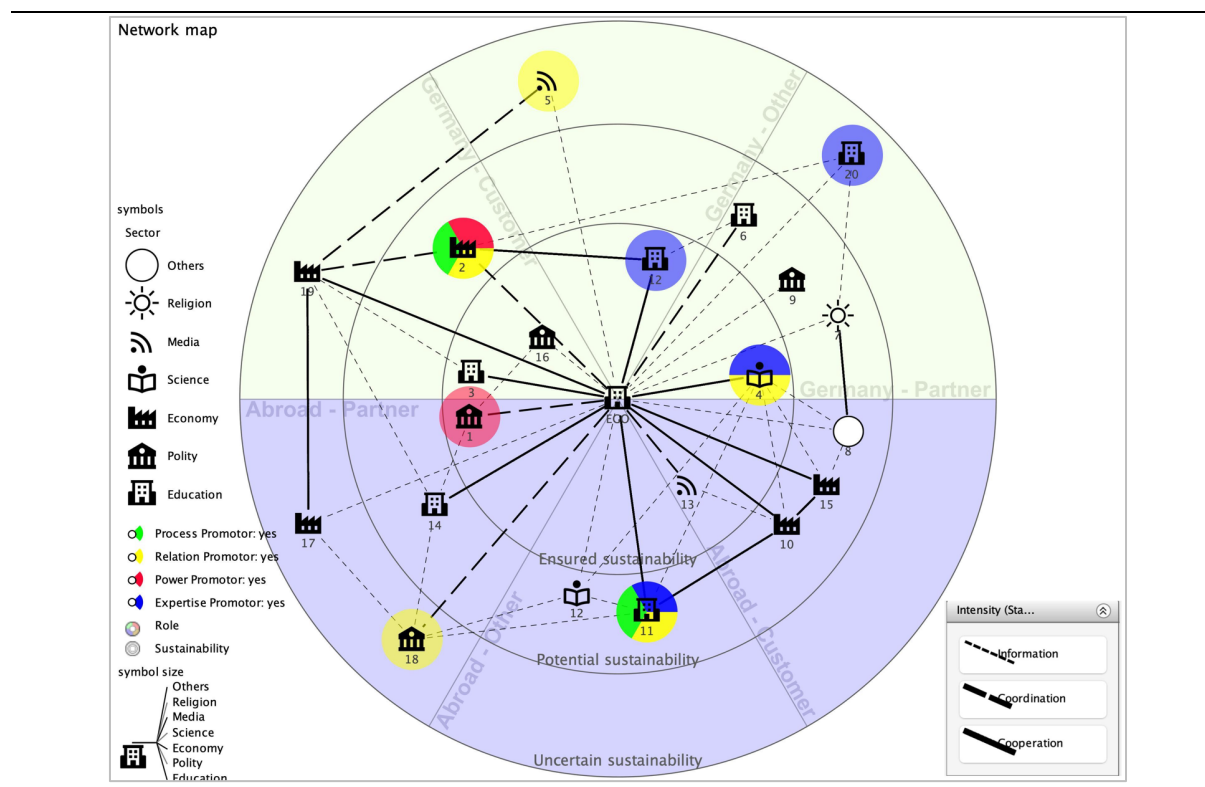
overestimated, which means that overall the determined value lies within a corridor that expresses neither an overly optimistic nor an overly pessimistic value. The value determined is also a valid value for the project network, since the social capital recorded arises in the project network and is indirectly accessible to each project partner. In the personal network analysis, individual data (e.g. age, gender, function in one's own organisation, domicile in Germany or abroad) and relationship data (e.g. number, intensity and content of social relationships) are collected. As theoretical concepts we used the following sources: function systems (Roth & Schütz, 2015), promoters of innovation (Hauschildt & Gemünden, 1998) and intensity of social relation (Gessler, 2017).

## 2.4 Data collection, analysis and result

The data collection took place in two stages. First, the personal networks are collected by means of a network map. For this we use the programme VennMaker (Kronenwett & Schönhuth, 2014). Figure 1 shows an example of a network map of an international VET cooperation project under study. Subsequently, quantitative key figures (e.g., density) are determined.

**Figure 1**

Exemplary representation of an ego network



## 3 Conclusion

The method presented is able to generate a key figure that captures the core of international VET cooperation, the social relationship, and, unlike other key figures, is not limited to the scope or lifetime of a project. Rather, it provides information about the potentiality of the present and future of VET cooperation. In our opinion, the indicator "social capital" is a significant and complementary addition to existing indicators.

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## Biographical notes

Dr phil., Dr h.c. **Michael Gessler** is a Full Professor of Vocational Education and Training at the Institute Technology and Education (ITB), University of Bremen, Germany. His research focus is on innovations and transfer of innovations in vocational education and training.

**Christine Siemer**, M.A., is a research associate and doctoral researcher at the Institute Technology and Education (ITB), University of Bremen, Germany. Her research focus is on digitalization and internationalization of vocational education and training.