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A comparative perspective on precarious prosperity and household strategies in Romania and Switzerland in times of economic strain

- COOPERATION ASPECTS -

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Structure of the presentation

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1. Project details

2. Objectives - methods - results

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III. Challenges met

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I. Overview of the project

1. Project details

Team members:

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Dr Iuliana Precupetu, senior researcher, Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy, Romanian PI

Prof. Monica Budowski, Division of Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy, University of Fribourg

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Dr Ana Maria Preoteasa, senior researcher, Research Institute for Quality of Life, Romanian Academy

Dr Ionela Vlase, lecturer, University Lucian Blaga, Sibiu

and four contributors: Sebastian Schief, Cosmina Pop, Laura Tufă and George Zamfir

Period: 1.03.2013-31.07.2016

Budget: CHF439 059

I. Overview of the project:

2. Objectives

Objectives:

The **general** aim of the project was to analyze and compare the patterns of “precarious prosperity” and household strategies in Romania and Switzerland

The **specific** objectives:

1. to identify, define, and characterize the population in precarious prosperity characterized by insecurity of living and working conditions, through means of quantitative analysis of secondary data,
2. to research household strategies dealing with precarious prosperity in the two countries by conducting a two-wave qualitative survey in Romania and a three-wave qualitative survey (of which the first two waves were already available) in Switzerland,
3. to explore the policy implications of precarious prosperity.

I. Overview of the project:

2. Methods

Quantitative analysis of secondary data in order to understand which are the households that live in precarious prosperity and what is the subjective quality of life of individuals living in households in precarious prosperity?

Qualitative two-wave / three-wave survey

Switzerland: a third wave of study was carried out with households in precarious prosperity. 50 interviews were carried out.

Romania: a two wave study was carried out in two different communities (one rural and one urban) based on the Swiss methodology of household selection and interviewing. 88 interviews were carried out.

I. Overview of the project:

2. Results (highlights)

In Romania, an important share of households (38%) live in “precarious prosperity”. This stratum of population is situated right next to the poverty threshold and has incomes between 60% and 100% of median income or higher than 100% of median income while simultaneously being severely deprived (lack 4 or more items that are customary in a society at a certain point in time). (Precupetu, Preoteasa, Vlase, 2015)

Households in precarious prosperity and those in poverty share similar socio-demographic profiles, the analysis revealing that analogous factors (low education, unemployment, presence of children in household, poor health, etc) contribute to maintaining in both poverty and precarious prosperity. Moreover, the majority of people with non-standard jobs belong to households living in poverty or precarious prosperity. (Precupetu, Preoteasa, Vlase, 2015)

I. Overview of the project:

2. Results (highlights)

Individuals in households living in precarious prosperity have a similarly poor subjective quality of life with those in poverty in what regards important spheres of personal life like education, job and health. The poor and the precarious prosperous are different in what regards domains like standard of living, acomodation, family life, and social life but both significantly distance themselves from those in secure prosperity. Belonging to one of the two groups, determines an overall low quality of life. (Precupetu, 2015)

The analysis of employment and work of the precarious prosperous in the rural community in Romania showed that the main strategies of dealing with the threat of slipping into poverty are early retirement, migration and subsistence agriculture, all these being shaped by the particular rural social context. The atypical work adds to this as a particular strategy that is characterized by a very high vulnerability (no working contracts, no health or social insurance). (Preoteasa, 2014)

However, the precarious employment conditions are not always perceived as precarious work by the individuals. These perceptions depend on the household situation and the structural conditions. (Preoteasa, Sieber, Budowski and Suter, submitted)

I. Overview of the project:

2. Results (highlights)

In Romania, people in poverty and those in the vicinity of the poverty threshold systematically experience negative aspects of health in comparison to those in secure prosperity. Moreover, some dimensions of access to health services (especially cost) seem more difficult for the first two groups in comparison to the last one. In Switzerland, health problems significantly influences the quality of life of those living in precarious prosperity. (Precupetu, 2015; Sieber and Simona, 2015)

Access to health care proves to be a key and universal factor influencing self rated health. Whereas inequalities in health status by socioeconomic status are universal and not necessarily inequities, inequalities determined by access to health are avoidable and unfair and can be addressed by policy. However, in Romania, it is likely that inequalities in health emerging from socio-economic conditions and access to health might be unfair and have causes addressable by policy. There is a great potential to improve health status in Romania by focusing on employment, education, redistribution mechanisms as well as on access to therapies and medical services. (Precupetu and Pop, 2015)

I. Overview of the project:

2. Results (highlights)

In general, households' agency heavily depends on opportunity structures, both macro (welfare regimes, economic situation of a country) and micro social conditions (resources and situation of a household). A comparative analysis of Swiss and Spanish households revealed that subjective well being is influenced not only by opportunity structures, but also by households capacity to mobilize resources and efforts in order to improve their quality of life. (Budowski, Schief, Sieber, 2015)

Opportunities for agency in order to overcome precariousness in Romania are contingent on the household's type, its gender composition and the members' interlocking life trajectories. The individuals' life courses have been increasingly de-standardized within the current post-communist context. The transition from a state planned to a market economy, coupled with the minimalistic welfare state and with the low social and institutional trust altering the solidarity of communities, are factors leading to declining opportunities to rely on other resources than those provided by household members. (Preoteasa and Vlase, 2014)

I. Overview of the project:

2. Results (highlights)

The Swiss households perceive a greater scope of agency than the Romanian households, which depend mainly on the labour market and their family. Strategies of adaptation are also visible in both countries, when an active modification of the living conditions is not perceived as possible. In these cases, the welfare state and communities could play an active role to improve the households' quality of life. (Sieber and Vlase, submitted).

In Switzerland, despite precarious prosperity, many households report a high subjective well-being. Adaptation as a strategy of getting by came to the fore during the inductive analyses. In depth analysis of the narratives of Swiss interviewees allows to understand what is happening in adaptation and what social experiences are linked to these processes. (Sieber, to be submitted)

II. Cooperation between teams: aspects

Swiss methodology of researching precarious prosperity enriched with the Romanian approach of quality of life

The methodology of the project have been designed by the Swiss team and previously applied in Switzerland and countries like Spain, Chile and Costa Rica. The project allowed the application of the innovative approach for the first time in Romania and the addition of a new, quality of life component, that data allowed us to expand the meaning of prosperity by including social components. The common methodology allowed comparison between Romania and Switzerland along a few lines. Also, the longitudinal approach, in the both countries made possible to study the change in standard of living of the precarious households.

Training of Romanian researchers in new software for data analysis

Qualitative analysis of data was possible on both sides with the help of new software that allows coordination of both teams and new methods of analysis. Three papers using comparative qualitative data were written in Romanian-Swiss co-authoring.

II. Cooperation between teams: aspects

Visits and exchange of knowledge

Access to wider research networks: The organisation of an international workshop within the project, in Switzerland, as well as the short stays in this country, allowed Romanian researchers to have access to information on similar and wider preoccupations in the field of vulnerability, deprivation analysis, poverty and to share the research results with a larger scientific community.

An invitation to an international workshop in Switzerland for one of the Romanian team members, an invitation for one of the team members to teach as invited lecturer at the University of Neuchatel.

Dissemination of results to the larger scientific research community: Swiss PI invited as keynote speaker in international conference in Bucharest, organization of conference sessions (5), organization of the final meeting in Vienna Forum of Sociology 2016.

Involving three more Romanian researchers who contributed to the project in terms of publications and participation in conferences by only funding 1-2 participations each in conferences.

II. Cooperation between teams: aspects

Research outputs: 9 articles (published or under review), 4 discussion papers, 28 presentations in conferences

Published peer reviewed articles

Precupetu, Iuliana, Ana Maria Preoteasa and Ionela Vlase (2015). Beyond Poverty in Romania: An Analysis of Household-level Factors of Poverty and Precarious Prosperity, in *Sociológia / Slovak Sociological Review*, 47(3) 2015: 253-271.

Budowski, Monica, Sebastian Schief and Rebekka Sieber (2015). Precariousness and quality of life - A qualitative perspective on determinants of quality of life of households in precarious prosperity in Switzerland and Spain, in *Applied Research in Quality of Life*, online first

Preoteasa, Ana Maria (2015). Munca precară, soluție pentru populația vulnerabilă din mediul rural. Rezultate dintr-o cercetare calitativă (Precarious work, a strategy for vulnerable population in a rural community. Evidence from qualitative research), in *Calitatea Vietii* 1/2015.

Vlase, Ionela and Rebekka Sieber (2015). Narrating well-being in the context of precarious prosperity: An account of agency framed by culturally embedded happiness and gender beliefs, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, online first

Vlase, Ionela (2015): Romanian households dealing with precariousness. A life course approach in *European Societies*, online first

III. Challenges met

Data

Difficulties for comparative quantitative analysis as Switzerland is not included in the European datasets.

Comparison

By employing a “most different design” regarding the opportunity structures (Switzerland and Romania), the project has to overcome a series of difficulties in balancing diversity (variation of structural contexts) and homogeneity (comparable socioeconomic groups, characterized by the same conditions of “precarious prosperity”).

Working with different datasets requires careful examination of common indicators to be used in theoretical models and data analysis.

Culturally influenced ways of reading the qualitative data and the different contextual links we tended to make, made intensive exchange necessary for writing common articles and allowed to better understand the links between the individual/household data and their structural context (Romania or Switzerland).

Difficulties in addressing the objective 3 (policy implications) with the time and resources available, taking into account the time and resources needed to address cultural differences, especially in qualitative analysis.

IV. Lessons learnt

1. Plan publications early
2. Plan for publications fees
3. Plan all important scientific events well in advance
4. Narrow objectives

V. Follow up

Rebekka Sieber will continue to work on the data for her PhD.

Monica Budowski and Rebekka Sieber will continue the comparative analyses including Latin America again.

Comparative projects on precarious prosperity should continue and discussions are ongoing between Switzerland and other countries, unfortunately there is no funding to continue the collaboration with Romania.

The really potential of longitudinal research unfolds beyond three consecutive waves of research.

Two waves of field research produced an important amount of data that cannot be analysed within the time span of the project. There is need for finding resources in order to carry out a third wave, to continue analysis and report all research results. Swiss-Romanian co-authorship of publications could be taken one step further.

as a conclusion...

the project went well

----from the Romanian point of view because

Adequate funding (field research)

Good coordination from the Swiss side

Good balance of young and experienced researchers in the team

Flexibility of the programme

... from the Swiss point of view, collaboration between Swiss and Romanian researchers functioned particularly well (compared to former international projects on precarious prosperity) and it was probably linked to the very good common preparation and application of the methodology by the Romanian researchers.

Muğumim!

Thank you!