

Social Capital and Social Innovation in Peripheral Regions. An Empirical Example of the Middle Pomerania Region in Poland*

Malgorzata CZERWINSKA-JASKIEWICZ

Koszalin University of Technology, Koszalin, Poland

Correspondence should be addressed to: Malgorzata CZERWINSKA-JASKIEWICZ, malgorzata.czerwinska@tu.koszalin.pl

* Presented at the 46th IBIMA International Conference, 26-27 November 2025, Ronda, Spain

Abstract

In this article, the author attempts to assess selected components of social capital in the context of stimulating social innovation in peripheral areas. The Middle Pomerania region serves as an empirical example. It is the region that is specific in terms of history and structure, which, despite the lack of formal delimitation in the administrative division, exhibits relative economic and social cohesion, while at the same time displaying high intra-regional diversity.

The main objective of the article is to diagnose and assess the innovation potential of local communities operating within social organisations, which are main players in the creation of a regional innovation system. The results of the empirical research indicate that the peripherality of the region, although considered rather a dissimulating feature, can in itself be a catalyst for local activity. The inhabitants declare that the Middle Pomerania region, although peripheral, has sufficient social capital resources to create changes and social innovation. In her conclusions, the author suggests constant monitoring of the social capital in peripheral regions and encourages the building of relationships in the region through, among other things, supporting the activities of social organisations. These organisations can and should become stimulators of development for marginalised regions.

Keywords: social capital, social innovation, peripheral region, The Middle Pomerania region.

Introduction

The subject of discussion in this article is an attempt to assess selected elements of social capital in peripheral areas in the context of undertaking and developing social innovation. The region selected for analysis is Middle Pomerania, situated in the north of Poland within the administrative borders of two voivodeships – the West Pomeranian Voivodeship and the Pomeranian Voivodeship. It is a special, peripheral area, with socio-economic characteristics marked by history, culture, demography and specific natural, anthropogenic and human resources. Despite its relative cohesion, this area is not administratively distinct. Currently, it covers part of the former Koszalin and Słupsk provinces. It consists of 15 districts, which include 86 municipalities, including 12 urban municipalities, 22 urban-rural municipalities, 50 rural municipalities and 2 municipalities with city status, which are cities with districts rights (Koszalin and Słupsk).

Cite this Article as: Malgorzata CZERWINSKA-JASKIEWICZ Vol. 2025 (25) “ Social Capital and Social Innovation in Peripheral Regions. An Empirical Example of the Middle Pomerania Region in Poland ” Communications of International Proceedings, Vol. 2025 (25), Article ID 4651325, <https://doi.org/10.5171/2025.4651325>

The Middle Pomerania region is defined as the peripheral area in geographical, social, transport and economic terms. It is characterised by a particularly low level of development and poor access to services. Despite the lack of formal delimitation in the administrative division, this area has relatively consistent economic and social potential. Interestingly, if we look at the Middle Pomerania region from a bottom-up perspective, that is, from the perspective of the municipalities, we can see that despite its relative homogeneity, the region also exhibits strong internal diversity at the municipal level. This also applies to diversity in terms of social capital resources.

The article attempts to diagnose and assess the innovative potential of a peripheral region, taking into account selected elements that make up social capital.

Social capital and social innovation – theoretical approach

Social capital is a multidimensional concept that is difficult to measure. Three concepts formulated over the last few decades (end of the 20th century) were of significant importance for the development of social capital theory. Their authors were prominent representatives of the social sciences, namely P. Bourdieu, J. Coleman and R. Putnam. P. Bourdieu argued that social capital is "the sum of resources, actual and potential, that belong to an individual or group by virtue of their possession of a stable, more or less institutionalised network of relations, acquaintances and mutual recognition" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p.119). According to this view, an individual's ability to exploit the potential of social capital resources depends on the availability and scope of the network of connections and relationships in which they participate.

The second author, J. Coleman, defined social capital as "the ability to cooperate with others within groups and organisations of common interest" (Fukuyama 1997, p. 21). In this theory, the researcher emphasised the importance of building strong relationships between people (also in local communities), which is the main key for the creation of certain shared values and gives the group an opportunity for development.

The third researcher, R. Putnam, added that social capital "consists of (...) networks, norms and trust that enable community members to increase the effectiveness of collective action and achieve their goals more efficiently" (Putnam 1995, p. 56). In this approach, he attributed a special role in shaping social capital to a category that is extremely difficult to grasp, namely mutual trust. He also pointed out how this factor can be measured so that it provides relatively objective knowledge about the quality of social capital.

The theory of social capital was developed mainly in the 20th century, both by sociologists and economists. At the end of the last century, M.E. Porter (Porter 2000) provided not only theoretical constructs, but also concrete, real arguments indicating that the competitive advantage of a particular entity shapes its ability to add new value to its production chain. A smaller role in this process can be attributed to physical or financial capital, and a much greater role to social capital. Social capital makes it possible to combine all production factors in a unique and unprecedented way, providing a solid foundation for development.

In addition to research on social capital, the concept of social innovation is also becoming increasingly important in the literature on the subject. The term innovation was introduced into economic literature by J.A. Schumpeter in 1911. According to him, innovation should be treated as a product, service or production and organisational improvement. It can be a kind of lever for the socio-economic development of the world's economies, provided that it meets the relevant criteria and is properly implemented in the real world. In practice, all new products are considered innovative, i.e. technologically better, more useful and more durable, which does not always allow them to be assessed in terms of innovation. Demand and consumption are prerequisites for innovation (See: Schumpeter 1934).

Social innovation is a specific form of activity that meets social needs, integrates potential and knowledge, and thus results in the development of new products, new areas of cooperation, better use of resources, and provides a basis for creating stronger integrative relationships. Numerous scientific studies emphasise that social innovation arises from creativity, entrepreneurship and the use of local resources, contributing to the satisfaction of social needs, improving the quality of life of society and, in the longer term, to the development of the region where it is undertaken.

An analysis of sociological and economic literature in this field indicates a diversity of approaches to defining social innovation and the role attributed to it (Wyrwa 2015). Sociologists focus mainly on the social consequences of innovation in their work. They emphasise the need for innovation to meet specific social needs and the possibility of solving social problems (Phills et al. 2008). Economists, on the other hand (Arthur D. Little report 2006;

Hoffman et al. 1998, pp. 39-55), point out that social innovation uses people's social, environmental and sustainable motivations to develop and introduce new ways of working, new products, new processes and new markets. Local social organisations are particularly well suited to such activities. They operate at the grassroots level, bringing people together around socially important issues and at the same time acting as catalysts for social innovation, triggering innovative processes¹. There is therefore a correlation between the quality of social capital and the ability to initiate and implement development processes. This seems to be particularly true for peripheral regions.

The Middle Pomerania region as a peripheral area

Based on literature studies and author's research experience, the Middle Pomerania region in Poland was selected as an example of a peripheral area for analysis. The Middle Pomerania region has clearly defined, specific characteristics and structural problems (Jasiulewicz 1998; Jasiulewicz 1999; Rydz 2006; Rydz 2009; Zawadzka 2009; Stanny 2009, pp. 227-240; Jasiulewicz and Suszyński 2016, pp. 39–56; Czerwińska-Jaśkiewicz and Zarębski 2021; Zarębski et al. 2022; Zawadzka 2022; Wasilewski 2024). The key factor determining its peripheral nature is its geographical location. The region stretches across northern Poland, along the Baltic Sea coast, at the junction of two voivodeships: West Pomeranian and Pomeranian. It is located between two dominant metropolises: Szczecin and the Tri-City (Gdańsk, Sopot, Gdynia). The key subregional centres of the Middle Pomerania region are Koszalin and Słupsk (cities with a population of approximately 100,000 inhabitants). The administrative reform carried out in Poland in 1999 resulted in these cities losing their status, which contributed to a significant weakening of their decision-making functions and political and economic importance (Żuber 2010). One of the effects of the reform was a gradual decline in interest in the region on the part of external investors.

Another argument for treating the Middle Pomerania as a peripheral region is its transport exclusion (Stanny et al. 2022). Its distance from the western border of the country and the main north-south transport corridor (the A1 motorway) has exacerbated its isolation over the years (See Szlachta 1997; Rydz 2015). It was only the recent construction of the S6 expressway that provided a real impetus for integrating this area with the rest of the country.

The specific nature of the peripherality of the analysed area also includes the relatively sparse railway network and the still relatively poor quality of the infrastructure connecting smaller towns with the main trunk lines (See, e.g., Komornicki 2019; Rosik et al. 2017). In demographic terms, the region of the Middle Pomerania is struggling with the phenomenon of young and educated human capital draining to metropolitan centres (Zdrojewski and Sasin 2016; Śleszyński 2018; Klonowska-Matynia 2021). As a result, this accelerates the ageing process of local communities.

The internal socio-economic structure of the Middle Pomerania region also testifies to the peripheral nature of this area (Suszyński 2009). It is characterised by a clear dichotomy, manifested in the polarisation between the dynamically developing area of municipalities located in the coastal belt and rural areas located away from the sea. Centres such as Kołobrzeg, Mielno, Sarbinowo and Ustka, thanks to their well-developed tourist infrastructure, are examples of strong and developing municipalities (type 3 – tourist municipalities). These municipalities are counterbalanced by areas located in the interior of the region, several dozen kilometres away from the coastline (type 1: peripheral municipalities). These are typically agricultural and forestry municipalities, which struggle with difficult access to public services and a low-quality modern labour market, which exacerbates their peripheral nature in functional and social terms (Klonowska-Matynia et al. 2021).

The selected problems and barriers for the Middle Pomerania region presented above constitute its peripheral nature. It seems, therefore, that the attempt to diagnose and assess social capital and, on this basis, to consider launching innovative processes, may be an interesting and important pro-development goal for this region.

Methodology

The research process used CAPI and CAWI methods, with a proprietary survey questionnaire. Empirical research was conducted in randomly selected towns and municipalities of the Middle Pomerania, in five identified types of municipalities, on a sample of 1,120 adult inhabitants. The selection of units for the study was carried out using stratified random sampling in the following three stages:

Stage 1 – typology of towns and municipalities in the Middle Pomerania region. For this purpose, the k-means taxonomic method was used. This method belongs to the so-called cluster analysis, which involves searching for and isolating groups of similar objects (clusters). It represents a group of non-hierarchical algorithms. The algorithm involves moving objects from cluster to cluster until the variability within and between clusters is optimised.

It is obvious that the similarity within a cluster should be as high as possible, while separate clusters should differ from each other as much as possible. Therefore, it should be assumed that the areas (types) selected in the research process are diverse among themselves and relatively consistent internally.

In stage 1, the following types of municipalities were identified for the Middle Pomerania region:

- Type 1. Peripheral municipalities – the most numerous group of municipalities in the region with low population density. Characterised by high long-term unemployment and a large number of people receiving social assistance. Predominantly agricultural function. Relatively lowest share of industry and other economic activities.
- Type 2. Transitional functional municipalities – the second largest group of municipalities in the region. Characterised by a large number of people receiving social assistance. Predominantly agricultural. Industrial processing (agri-food) (section C) and agriculture play an important role in the economy of these municipalities².
- Type 3. Tourist municipalities – municipalities located in the coastal belt with a dominant tourist function and a high share of entities related to tourism. The economic structure of these municipalities is characterised by a very low share of agriculture, industrial processing and warehousing.
- Type 4. Functional-urban municipalities – municipalities located in the immediate vicinity of large and medium-sized cities and functionally linked to them. These municipalities are often “bedroom communities” of large agglomerations. Similar to urban municipalities, they are characterised by a high share of business environment institutions from section M. There is a relatively large share of section H Transport and warehousing.
- Type 5. Large and medium-sized cities - a group of municipalities with the highest degree of urbanisation. It includes two large former provincial capitals and medium-sized cities that are the socio-economic centres of other areas. This group has a high share of services and business environment institutions from section M.

Stage 2 – random selection of cities and municipalities from each type. According to social research theory, including economic research, the basic condition for ensuring the representativeness of a sample is the random selection of its elements. For this reason, a stratified random sample of municipalities was selected for the purposes of this study.

Stage 3 – drawing sample units within each research group. At this stage, random draws were made for individual research groups. For this purpose, research plans were developed in accordance with the specific characteristics of the population under study and the possibilities for obtaining data. In order to select specific research units (for each group), a stratified sampling method and/or an alternative "random route" method was used.

It is worth noting that the number of municipalities/cities was proportional to the size of the classes that these municipalities represent. According to the calculations, the study was conducted in 22 randomly selected cities/municipalities of the Middle Pomerania region. For all inhabitants, the total probability of a municipality and then an individual adult from that municipality being selected for the study was the same. The sample taken meets the condition of representativeness for the entire adult population of the Middle Pomerania region (Klonowska-Matynia et al., pp. 234–245).

Selected elements of social capital - empirical findings

Based on literature studies, there is a correlation between the quality of social capital and the dynamics of development processes, which is particularly important in the context of peripheral areas. It seems that a main aspect to consider in assessing social capital is the involvement and potential of local organisations, which operate at the grassroots level, are key links in initiating social innovation.

In order to determine the extent to which social organisations operating in the Middle Pomerania region are assessed by their members as entities with innovative potential, the author decided to ask respondents (inhabitants of the region active in social organisations) questions on this issue. As a result, she received answers that made it possible to group social organisations from the Middle Pomerania region according to their members' assessments. The analyses were carried out from two perspectives. On the one hand, the author sought evidence of the existence of so-called development potential in the region under study, expressed by the ability of social organisations to obtain funds for their activities and diversify their financial sources. On the other hand, she wanted to determine the so-called organisational potential of local organisations, expressed by the way work is organised within the unit. The summary results are presented below.

Assessment of the development potential of local social organisations

According to the research, the most common source of funding for social organisations in the Middle Pomerania region is their own funds obtained from membership fees or from business activities (66.8%). The inhabitants indicated subsidies from public authorities (47.3%) and external funds (37%) as the second most common sources of funding.

Analysis of the data using the chi-square test showed that the sources of funding for the Middle Pomeranian organisations are not statistically significantly related to the type of municipality. In order to verify whether the type of organisation (field of activity) is statistically significantly related to the type of funding sources obtained chi-square test was used (it was performed only for selected types of organisations). Only those types of organisations that were indicated by at least 20 residents were analysed, i.e.: organisations for local development and community activation (43), charitable/aid organisations (36), senior citizens' organisations (26) and sports clubs and organisations (20). Analysis for other types of organisations was not statistically justified.

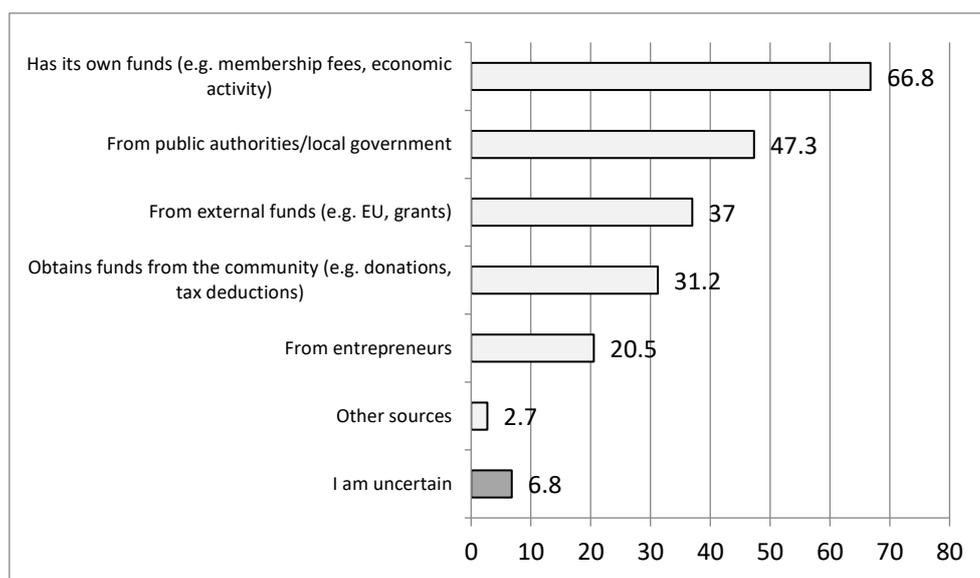


Figure 1. Where does the organisation you belong to get the money for its activities? (%)

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

Multiple choice question, N=292 (people who are members of an organisation).

The data show that an organisation's possession of its own financial resources is not statistically significantly related to the type of organisation, but other sources of funding do show such a relationship. What is more, these correlations are at least moderate in strength. Fundraising from the community (donations, gifts) is by far the most common among charitable organisations (58.3%), while it is rare among senior citizens' organisations and local development organisations (less than 20%). External funding is most often obtained by regional development organisations (67.4%) and charities (55.6%), while senior citizens' organisations rarely resort to it (19.2%). Funds from public authorities, in turn, are obtained much more often by sports organisations (85%) than other types of organisations analysed (around 50%). Funds from businesses are also most often obtained by sports clubs (70%) and are rather unpopular in other organisations – they are used by about 14% of charities and regional development organisations, while senior citizens' organisations do not use them at all.

Table 1. Sources of funding and type of organisation
 (% of organisations of a given type declaring the use of a specific source of funding)

Source of funding	Significance chi ²	Type of organisation				Total
		Clubs, sports organisations	Charitable and aid organisations	Senior organisations (councils and clubs)	Organisations for local development and commu- nity activation	
The organisation has its own funds (contributions, economic activity)	p=0.082	55.0	52.8	46.2	74.4	59.2
The organisation obtains funds from the community (contributions, donations)	p=0.000 C=0.375	30.0	58.3	11.5	18.6	30.4
The organisation obtains funds from ex- ternal sources (EU, grants)	p=0.000 C=0.360	30.0	55.6	19.2	67.4	48.0
The organisation receives funding from public authorities, local government	p=0.031 C=0.257	85.0	52.8	50.0	46.5	55.2
The organisation receives funds from businesses	p=0.000 C=0.490	70.0	13.9	0.0	14.0	20.0

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

According to their members' declarations, the largest group of organisations in the Middle Pomerania has only one source of funding (38.3%), but a quarter of organisations have two sources of funding, and slightly fewer (23.1%) have three sources of funding. More than three types of sources were declared by 13.7% of organisations.

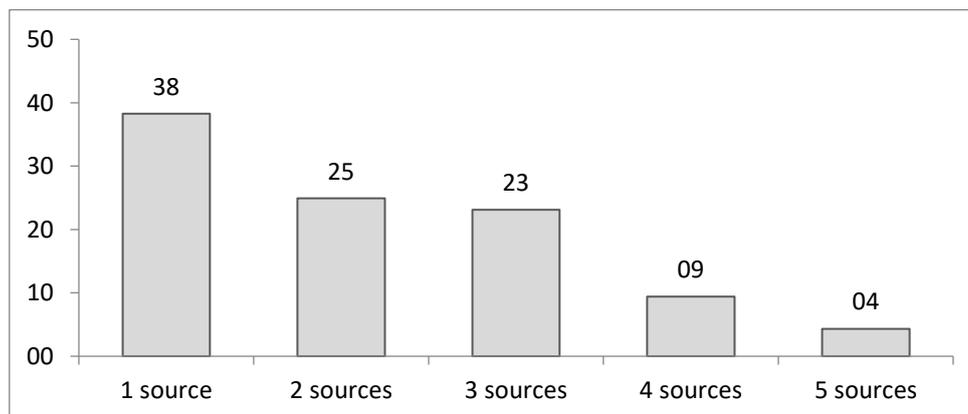


Figure 2. Number of sources of funding held by an organisation (%)

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

Multiple choice question, N=277 (people who are members of the organisation and know the sources of funding).

Data analysis using the chi-square test showed that the number of sources of funding for organisations in the Middle Pomerania region is not statistically significantly related to the type of municipality. However, the number of sources of funding is statistically significantly related to the types of organisations analysed, and the strength of this relationship is high (p=0.000, C=0.500). The least diversified sources of funding are those of senior citizens' organisations (65.2% of them obtain funds from only one source, and in no case were more than three sources declared). Charitable organisations, on the other hand, are highly diverse, as on the one hand, a significant proportion of them have only one source of funding, while on the other hand, more than a quarter declare more than three sources. Sports organisations have the most diversified sources of funding, with as many as 73.7% of them having at least three sources of funding.

Table 2. Number of sources of funding for organisations and type of municipality (%)

Number of sources of funding	Type of organisation				Total
	Clubs, Sports organisations	Charities, aid organisations	Senior citizens' organisations (councils and clubs)	Organisations for local development and activation	
1 source	15.8	35.3	65.2	17.1	31.6
2 sources	10.5	8.8	21.7	46.3	24.8
3 sources	52.6	29.4	13.0	26.8	29.1
4 or more sources	21.1	26.5	0.0	9.8	14.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

According to the respondents, the number of funding sources affects the organisational potential of social organisations (See Figure 4 along with the author's commentary, which provides an explanation of the adopted understanding of the organization's organizational potential). Entities with three or more funding sources are much more likely to have high organisational potential (over 35% of organisations) than organisations with one or two funding sources (less than 12% of organisations). This relationship is statistically significant and moderately strong ($p=0.000$, $C=0.334$).

Table 3. Number of sources of funding for an organisation and its organisational potential (%)

Organisational potential	Number of funding sources				Total
	1 source	2 sources	3 sources	4 or more sources	
Low	74.3	68.7	45.3	43.2	61.7
Average	17.8	19.4	15.6	21.6	18.2
High	7.9	11.9	39.1	35.1	20.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

The results of the study indicate that social organisations with high organisational potential are also active in seeking multiple sources of funding for their activities. Over 90% of respondents assessed that these entities are able to raise money from two or more sources. This may indicate the resourcefulness of the people involved in them or their declared ability to raise funds from external sources, including European funds. In the author's opinion, this situation may suggest that local organisations have the potential to seek funding for, among other things, the implementation of innovative activities or projects.

Assessment of the organisational potential of local social organisations

The organisations to which the respondents belong are mostly (72.9%) entities based exclusively on voluntary work (not employing any staff), and therefore have low organisational potential. Only 24.3% of respondents indicated that they employ at least one permanent employee in their organisation, and in 18.5% of cases, organisations employ employees on an occasional basis.

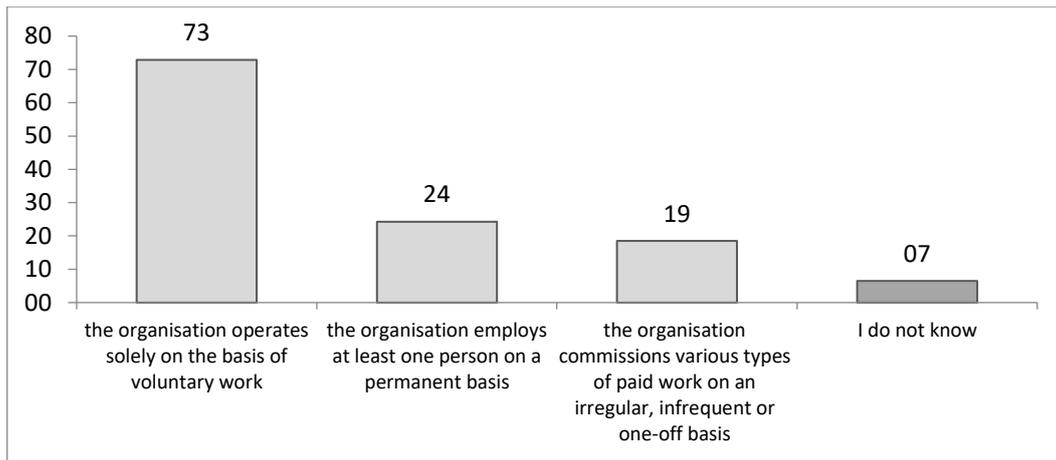


Figure 3. How is work organised in the selected organisation to which you belong? (%)

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %). Multiple choice question, N=292 (people who are members of an organisation).

Given that the question concerning the assessment of the organisation's potential allowed for more than one answer, it was recoded to obtain three separate categories: high organisational potential (permanent employment), medium organisational potential (at least occasional employment) and low organisational potential (voluntary work only). After eliminating ambiguous answers and decoding them, the following characteristics of the surveyed organisations were obtained: 62% have low organisational potential, 19.7% have high potential, and 18.3% have medium potential.

Although the results suggest that local organisations have relatively low organisational potential, they also indicate that nearly 40% of organisations have medium and high organisational potential. It is worth noting the nearly 20% declarative indicator suggesting their high potential for creating and implementing social innovations. In the author's opinion, considering the specific nature of the Middle Pomerania region, such results, despite its relatively lower value, may be a source of optimism, suggesting the existence of innovative potential in this area.

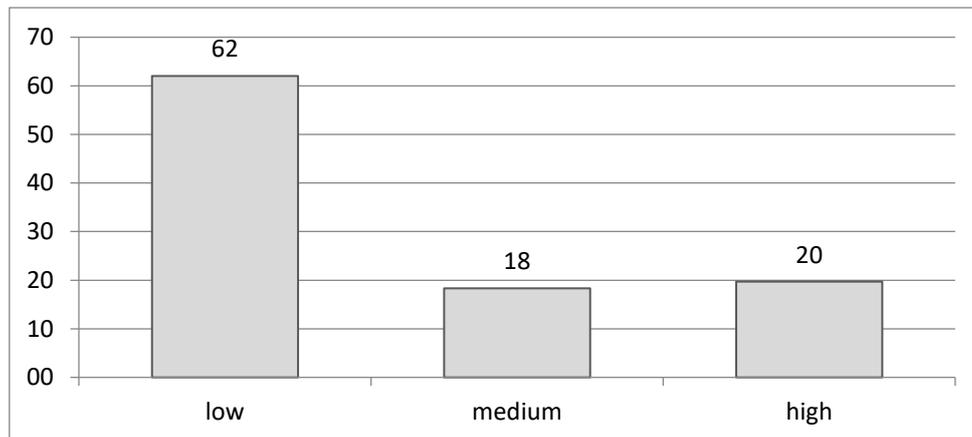


Figure 4. Organisational potential of social entities (%)

Source: own study based on the author's questionnaire survey (data in %). Multiple choice question, N=274 (people who are members of an organisation and who gave a clear answer to the question).

Organisational potential broken down by type of organisation was verified only for the four types of organisations that were represented by at least 20 people.

Table 4. Type of organisation and its organisational potential (%)

Organisational potential	Type of organisation				Total
	Clubs, sports organisations	Charitable and aid organisations	Senior citizens' organisations (councils and clubs)	Organisations for local development and activation	
Low	36.8	48.6	59.1	57.1	51.7
Average	15.8	22.9	18.2	19.0	19.5
High	47.4	28.6	22.7	23.8	28.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: own study based on an original questionnaire survey (data in %).

As shown in Table 4, these are organisations for local development and community activation (43), charitable/aid organisations (36), senior citizens' organisations (26) and sports clubs and organisations (20). The chi-square tests and two-tailed column proportion test did not show any correlation between the type of organisation and its organisational potential. However, the percentage distribution for sports organisations is different from the distributions for other types of organisations (significantly higher). Therefore, it was decided to present the results in the analysis, assuming that with a larger sample, the relationship between sports clubs and other types of organisations could be verified positively.

Summary

In today's dynamically changing reality, innovation in its broadest sense, due to its specific nature and dimension, goes beyond the sphere of business and is rapidly entering the social sphere. Society is becoming not only a recipient of innovation, but also its source, creator and promoter. The potential embodied in people, together with the sum of these potentials accumulated in the community (in the form of norms of trust or social engagement), has a significant impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of shaping economic development. Social organisations very often become the initiators of these processes in the region. Today, they are becoming fundamental elements in regional innovation systems.

Empirical research on the innovative potential of social organisations in the Middle Pomerania region has provided grounds for the assertion that, despite objective difficulties and problems, the region currently has (according to its inhabitants) sufficient and satisfactory social capital resources on the basis of which a regional innovation ecosystem can and must be shaped.

According to the respondents, the organisational potential of social organisations in the Middle Pomerania, revealed, among other things, by their financing possibilities, shows that the most common source of financing for social organisations in the Middle Pomerania is their own funds obtained from membership fees or business activities (66.8%). In second place, the respondents indicated subsidies from public authorities (47.3%), followed by external funds (37%). What is more, the social organisations in the Middle Pomerania to which the respondents belong, are mostly (as many as 72.9%) entities operating on the basis of the social involvement of their members (organisations that do not employ staff). 24.3% of respondents indicated that they employ at least one permanent employee in their organisation, and in 18.5% of cases, organisations employ workers on an occasional basis (short-term civil law contracts). All this proves that local organisations have the potential to create and develop innovation.

This assessment of social resources may result from the fact that the peripheral nature of the region (its specificity, problems) may be treated by a certain group of residents as a feature that triggers social activity (similar attitudes emerged during the pandemic – "the more difficult it is for us, the more we become active in finding a solution to the difficult situation"). Of course, this process takes place at different speeds and with varying intensity in different regions.

Although the responses obtained from inhabitants in the course of the research are purely declarative in nature, the trends outlined in them, in the author's opinion, give cause for optimism about the future. Local communities are beginning to see more clearly, more boldly and more frequently the need to have a say in decisions affecting their place of residence. Through their activities in local social organisations, they are becoming precursors of development and innovation processes. It is therefore worth supporting and stimulating the process of knowledge and innovation diffusion in the Middle Pomerania region. Constant monitoring of regional social capital is also essential.

It also seems reasonable that when considering innovations, including social innovations, we should take a closer look at people and the relationships, norms and principles that they create together and on which they rely. It is also worth diagnosing and evaluating the activities of social organisations that fulfil their social mission. In the author's opinion, these factors will increasingly and more strongly determine the success, development and innovation of residents, groups, organisations, enterprises, products and regions. This also applies to those with a peripheral character.

Acknowledgment

The empirical research was financed under the programme of Ministry of Education and Science in Poland under the name "Dialog" (contract number: 0131/DLG/2019/10) in years 2020–2022. The research results presented in this article constitute only partial material prepared as part of the project.

¹ See, e.g., <https://stocznia.org.pl/projekty/katalizator-innowacji-spoecznych/>, 10.10.2025.

² The sections indicated in the article (Methodology section) stem from the Polish Classification of Activities (PKD) currently in force in Poland. This coding system is used to group and identify types of economic activities conducted in the country. It is essential for public statistics, business records, and accounting, allowing for data standardization and defining a company's area of operation. From January the 1st in 2025, the updated version of PKD 2025 has been in effect, adapted to new market realities, technologies, and the EU NACE classification. See: <https://stat.gov.pl/aktualnosci/nowa-polska-klasyfikacja-dzialalnosci-pkd-2025,570,1.html>, 10.10.2025.

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