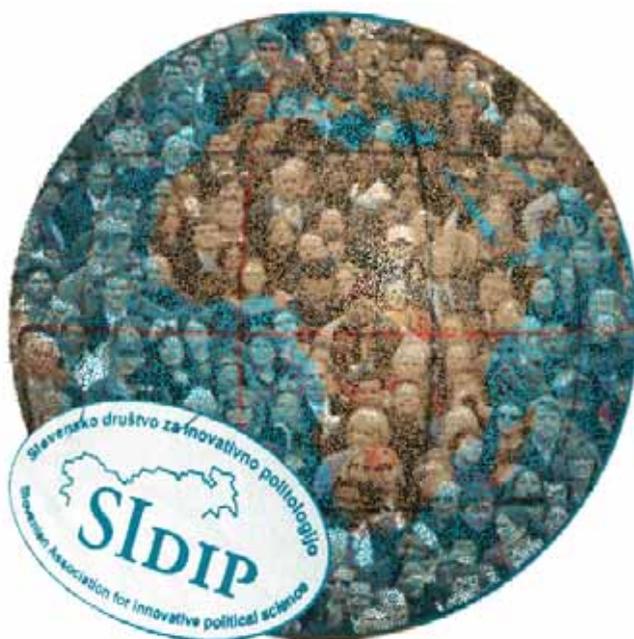


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Impact of Poverty on Social Isolation; Social support networks of the poor in Slovenia

Mojca Novak¹, Mateja Nagode², Polona Dremelj³

Abstract

In order to answer the questions on social support networks of the poor in comparative perspective of the population of Slovenia, the authors frame their analytical interest in theories on poverty and on social support networks. Survey data presents an extensive empirical evidence. The analysis is initiated by the question of whether poverty increases social isolation of people. The sketching of the answer to it is the basis for the examination of empirical data from Slovenia with the estimation of the level of poverty of the population of Slovenia and the characteristics of their social support networks, and the sketching of the answer to the question of the characteristics of poverty impact on social isolation. The authors therefore attempt to answer the question of whether the analysis of the differences as to the scale and structure of social support networks between the poor and between the entire population of Slovenia can also provide an answer to the question on the impact of poverty on social isolation.

Keywords: poverty, social isolation, social support, social networks.

Introduction

Before the popularity and increased empirical examination of theoretic presumptions from the conceptual background of social exclusion, Peter Townsend was among the first to stress various aspects of poverty far

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transcending the mere accessibility of material goods typical of a certain society. He called this complexity and interaction of shortages which may affect people 'relative deprivation' (Townsend, 1979: 1993). Notwithstanding frequent criticism and additions (Mack and Lansley, 1985), his broad range of addressing unprivileged living conditions remains unmatched. Except for conceptual redefinition offered by different approaches to social exclusion, both the latter and the former meet in the field of empirical examination of theoretical presumptions. Their unification meets at the point of operationalisation of theoretical presumptions in appropriate indicators as measuring instruments. This set remains a standard repertory (Novak, 2004), whose facts established by the same method serve as confirmation - or rejection - of different conceptual presumptions. Regardless of whether the conceptual framework of interpretation is relative deprivation or different approaches to subjective poverty or social exclusion, the common point is that poverty is manifested in many forms and only rarely affects individual fields of human life. Thus it depends on the analytic assessment of every individual whether he/she will observe it by its individual forms or try to capture it with his/her measuring instruments to the best possible approximation of its complexity.

However, more recent attempts at exploring poverty reach even further, namely as far as integrated observation and measuring of poverty and social exclusion and social isolation (e.g. Gallie et al, 2003, Scharf and Smith, 2003), where the latter is limited to socialising and emotional support. Namely, people - either poor or those without such problems - are not but isolated individuals and as such the object of empirical observations, but integrated in networks of different scale and structure. These integrations affect their living conditions on one hand and the scale and structure of their relationships with other members of networks on the other. Therefore the very advantage of network analysis is that it helps reveal the support background of individual's living conditions. Or in other words, it reveals how the provision of their living conditions depends on others.

Thus the analytical interest in this article will aim at listing empirical evidence in order to answer the following questions. The analysis will be initiated by the question of whether poverty increases social isolation of people. The sketching of the answer to it will be the basis for the examination of empirical data from Slovenia with the estimation of the level

of poverty of the population of Slovenia and the characteristics of their social support networks, and the sketching of the answer to the question of the characteristics of poverty impact on social isolation. The authors will therefore attempt to answer the question of whether the analysis of the **differences as to the scale and structure of social support networks between the poor and between the entire population of Slovenia** can also provide an answer to the question on the **impact of poverty on social isolation**.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: CONNECTION OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Poverty may be defined in several ways with the use of different concepts and different thresholds as delineation (Novak, 1996). It may be addressed as a significantly reduced access to sources necessary for the fulfilment of basic human needs such as food, clothes and housing. It may be addressed as disposable income significantly lower than the average in a certain society. And finally, it may be addressed as the subjective estimation of the access to vital goods. These approaches are fully summarised in Townsend's definition where the situation of poverty is described as the level of disposable vital goods significantly lower than that typical of a certain social environment (Townsend, 1979). In the background of this definition lies the consideration that measuring poverty from the merely monetary aspect in the form of disposable income is clear and comprehensible but deficient, for the living standard of people is the result of various, not only monetary sources.

The limitation of measuring poverty merely to the monetary aspect should be overcome also by the concept of social exclusion where the loss of employment is of central importance regardless of considering different aspect of deprivation, for this is based on the presumption of a downward spiral where marginality on the labour market leads to poverty and social isolation, which strengthens the long-term unemployment. Therefore the decisive elements of marginalisation in the labour market are not related (only) to the insufficient motivation for (re) employment, but to structural obstacles people encounter in the labour market and to how these elements enhance the experience of unemployment. In this context it is important to note that the unemployed seeking employment encounter different obstacles manifesting as the combination of marginalisation in the

labour market, poverty and social isolation. Namely, some analysts foster the belief that the loss of employment is the beginning of the process of downfall or the downward spiral lowering the living standard level, which continues in obstacles in seeking new employment. At the same time these unemployed encounter obstacles in their social activities. The lack of sources connected with the stigmatising impact of unemployment leads to breaking social bonds and consequently to social isolation. The lack of money in a household may result in family tensions and hindered social contacts with friends and acquaintances; while the increased social isolation reduces the access to information important also when seeking new employment (Gallie et al, 2003).

Thus Gallie, Paugam and Jacobs tried to examine, by means of household panel survey data, the validity of the given findings also in the European Union Member States, namely by seeking answers to the following two questions:

1. what is the impact of unemployment on poverty risk and social isolation, and
2. do poverty and social isolation reduce the re-employment options.

Therefore they analysed how unemployment influenced poverty risk. The results of the analyses revealed that the loss of employment was strongly related to poverty risk increase, but that many unemployed persons had been poor even before the loss of employment. Thus it was revealed that the loss of employment itself did not increase social isolation; however, the poor unemployed had been equally isolated before the loss of employment and spent more time seeking new employment. The analytical findings indicate that the central element of the vicious circle 'unemployment - poverty - social isolation' is not unemployment but poverty, for the poor lose employment faster and have more difficulties finding another (Gallie et al, 2003: 27-28).

The importance of certain socio-demographic characteristics in the phenomenon of social isolation was further revealed by the analysis made a few years ago (1998) in three English cities (Liverpool, Newham - London and Manchester). In this case the analysts researched the forms of social exclusion of the elderly and found that the oldest (over 75) encountered, besides different difficulties - also those of material nature - most problems with social isolation. The limited social contacts thus create an obstacle

also in social life inclusion and civic activities participation and in the access to such basic services as post office, dry cleaner's and public transport (Scharf and Smith, 2003).

The findings as well as the limitations of both given examples may yield a challenge for the planned analysis, namely:

1. the experience of poverty is an important restrictive factor in participation of people in social and civic activities - as well as in the labour market, and
2. the correlation between social exclusion and poverty and social isolation may be different in different social categories of population.

Insofar as we agree with the finding that the relation 'poverty - unemployment and social isolation' is more likely than the relation 'unemployment - poverty - social isolation', it is sensible to ask whether the poor are more socially isolated than the part of the population without material problems. Thus it turns out that the consideration of the limitations of the available empirical material for the case of Slovenia makes it reasonable to stress the part of the relation including poverty and social exclusion. This will place in the focus of the analytical interest precisely the part of the equation less researched in both given examples (Gallie et al,2003; Scharf and Smith, 2003), namely **the impact of poverty on social exclusion of people**. The advantage of this perspective of the analysis is in that the authors focus on the presumption that **social isolation is the result of the lack of access to different forms of social support**, where the limited access to social life (socialising and emotional support) and to the participation in civic activities are but two forms of such deprivation.

IMPACT OF POVERTY ON SOCIAL ISOLATION; EXAMPLE OF SLOVENIA

The basic analytical starting point that the situation of social isolation is the result of the limited access to different social supports was examined by means of five different forms of social support helping individuals in fulfilling their everyday life needs. Furthermore, the information on the poverty situation in Slovenia helped the authors form the **hypothesis that the access to social supports of the poor is more limited than that of other population**, which hinders them in fulfilling their everyday life needs. In brief, **the access to social supports** is therefore defined as **the source**

important in ensuring everyday living conditions. Those without a sufficient access to this source are therefore limited in ensuring their living conditions - i.e. they are poor or affected by poverty risk.

The integrated consideration of both aspects of the problem - poverty and social isolation - is enabled by empirical data gathered in a comprehensive survey "Social Support Networks of the Population of Slovenia" (Ferligoj et al, 2002).

Social support networks

The subject of research in a comprehensive survey "Social Support Networks of the Population of Slovenia" (Ferligoj et al, 2002) was not social isolation in general but its different forms most appropriately measured by different forms of social supports. For the needs of the survey, Hlebec and Kogovšek defined social support as **a complex interaction and communication process among people**, which is reasonably observed in the framework of **network approach** (Hlebec et al, 2004: 17, 27). The consideration of this integrated approach, i.e. the social support network, allows the research of the structure and the behaviour of people in terms of who they turn to when in distress and in need of different forms of help. And furthermore of the consequences of such interactions for their living conditions and physical and mental state.

The mentioned research, which offered empirical data for the planned analysis, focused on personal networks formed by people in order to ensure:

- socialising (visits, spending spare time together);
- financial support (borrowing money);
- minor (help with housework) or major material support (help with building or renovation of a house or an apartment, major works in the garden);
- emotional support (solving personal problems), and
- sickness support, e.g. shopping (Dremelj et al, 2004: 55).

The data were collected by phone survey in 2002 on the basis of random sampling from the telephone registry of Slovenia. The sample is representative of the population of Slovenia over 18 years of age and

covers 5013 respondents (ego) who named the total number of 32400 members of their networks (alter) (Dremelj et al, 2004: 52).

In need of help - regardless of its aim -, the population of Slovenia turns to slightly more than six persons on average. When choosing between the formal (offered by different organisations) and informal support (offered by individuals with whom the respondent is in touch in more or less close terms), the population much more often choose the support offered by informal networks. Thus formal sources are most frequently chosen when in need of a greater material support and least frequently in the case of disease, which is still less frequently than in case of relying on informal supports (Dremelj, 2002).

When comparing the scale and structure of networks by different forms of support, the image becomes very varied. This variety is significantly increased by social and demographic characteristics of support receivers (ego) and support providers (alter). Thus the networks of population are broadest in terms of socialising - such network averagely consists of four persons - and narrowest in terms of financial and major material support - averagely consisting of only one person. The networks of women are generally broader than those of men, except in the case of major material support. Thus the factors hindering individuals (ego) in ensuring individual supports are the following socio-demographic characteristics:

- old age and low education level in terms of socialising;
- old age, poor material conditions and single marital status in terms of minor material supports;
- age (both young and old) in terms of major material support, and
- middle age and life with a partner in terms of emotional support.

Support providers (alter) also differ by individual types of support:

- the support of socialising, minor and major material and financial supports are most often provided by **friends**;
- the main source of emotional support are **partners**;
- while the main source of sickness support are **close relatives** (Dremelj, 2002: 56).

However, the socio-demographic characteristics of support receivers (ego) and support providers (alter) differ also by individual supports. Thus women generally seek support with relatives more often than men, which applies

especially in terms of major material support, while men in such cases mostly turn to friends. The elderly more frequently turn to their children and neighbours, while education level does not play a significant role in the network structure. Married people generally turn to their relatives while single people turn to parents, brothers and sisters and friends. Thus the individuals from materially well provided households generally turn to relatives, which is much less frequent in individuals from poor households (Dremelj, 2002: 56-57).

Poor

The latest official data on the poverty level in Slovenia are available for 2002 when the poverty risk level calculated in terms of monetary income was 11,9 per cent. The socio-demographic structure of those exposed to the poverty risk offers the following phenotype: poverty risk affected slightly more women than men, more elderly (over 65) than young, the unemployed and the elderly and single households. In the same year, about 50.000 households in Slovenia received monetary social assistance. In terms of the number of persons eligible to monetary social assistance as the official poverty reduction strategy, the delineation between the more and less poor Slovenian regions is between the poorer Eastern part and the richer Western part (Novak et al, 2004).

The data on the poor collected with the survey on social support networks of the population of Slovenia (Ferligoj et al, 2002) cannot be compared with the official data without reservations. Disposable household income was not measured in a manner allowing a fully reliable calculation of income per member of individual households. Since a more precise measure to separate all respondents in poor and not poor is not available, the only available separation measure will be used, i. e. the total monthly income per household lower than 130.000 SIT (€ 500). This measure will separate the poor respondents from all respondents. A significant limit to this measure is in that it applies to the household as a whole and not to its individual member. Furthermore, it has to be observed that two fifths of thus determined category of the poor live on this income alone, i.e. on the income lower than 130.000 SIT (€ 500).

Since the central aim of the analysis is to compare the scope and structure of social support networks of the poor and of the entire population and not their living standard, we have to be satisfied with this measure while considering the given limitations. In accordance with this decision on separating the respondents we may establish that almost two fifths of the households do not reach the border income, which is more than indicated by the official data for 2002. The structure of the poor, however, reveals more similarities at least at some measuring points such as gender and age. The survey data (Table 1) thus indicate that the poor live in the country more often than in cities - even when compared with all respondents: almost a half of all poor live in the country in comparison with two fifths of all respondents. Women rank among the poor twice as often as men. The same applies to people over 55, where the share of especially those over 65 is twice as high among the poor as in the entire population. Low education level - especially unfinished or finished elementary school - is a good indicator of too low income, for the share of the persons with such education level among the poor is twice as high as in the entire population. The poor most often include single persons, but to a lesser extent also married and widowed persons, persons living in a single household, in the family or unemployed or retired persons.

Table 1: Social structure of the poor in Slovenia in 2002 (in per cent)

	Survey "Social Support Networks of the Population of Slovenia"		Data of the Statistics Office of the Republic of Slovenia
	Poor	All	Poor
Structural characteristics			
Living in the country	48	42	n. a.
Women	66	51	n. a.
Over 65 years of age	32	14	38
Finished primary school or less	40	18	n. .
Widowed	27	7	n. a.
Divorced	10	4	n. .
Single households	42	11	36
Single-parent families	9	5	15
Self/Employed	24	48	n. a.
Retired	42	24	n. a.
Unemployed	20	6	n. a.

* Poverty threshold is determined on the basis of 60 per cent of median of monetary income equivalent.

If we tried to create a phenotype of a poor respondent, this would have the following characteristics: a widowed elderly housewife living alone in the country. Does this phenotype differ from those established by other analysts in Slovenia at other time points or even abroad? The comparison is merely illustrative, but nevertheless revealing. Townsend discovered that it was possible to talk about social minority in the UK most often consisting of immigrants, elderly women, widows and handicapped (Townsend, 1979). The socially deprived population of Slovenia in 1994 most often included the elderly whose children had left home - to which the term 'empty nest syndrome' often applies - and the poor (Trbanc, 1996). A few years later - in 2002 - the persons most affected by poverty risk according to official statistical data were women, elderly, unemployed and elderly and single households (Novak et al, 2004). Regardless of different sets of measures, the given comparative observations of the poor revealed that poverty is conditioned by gender and age. Some other analysts (e.g. Novak, 1998) do not agree with such conclusion for they find that the categories of women and the elderly indicate the persons with low education level, and hence their situation is conditioned especially by low education level and the corresponding profession and low income. All findings contain also the following important element - the form of family or household in which the poor often live. This is single household and the widowed status. Thus some of the given elements closely connected with poverty risk, such as old age, unemployment and living alone, correspond to the measures stressed also by other analysts (Gallie et al, 2003; Scharf and Smith, 2003).

Social Support Networks of the Poor

The analysis so far has separately offered some information on socio-demographic characteristics of social support receivers (ego) and on the poor. The following level of analysis includes integrated consideration of both elements - social support reception and poverty, i.e. **of poor social support receivers** in comparison with the entire adult population of Slovenia. This will form the basis to answer the question of **poverty impact on social isolation**. A number of socio-demographic data (gender, age, marital status, place of residence, education level, professional status and type of family) and especially comprehensive data on different social support networks enable a precise analysis of the scale and structure of networks of individual types of social support of the poor in comparison with

those of the entire population. The basic presumption the authors attempt to prove is that **the access of the poor to social supports, too, is reduced in comparison with that of the entire population.** This brings us closer to the conceptual presumptions of relative deprivation and social exclusion. Both concepts may be understood also in the sense that poverty is the result of the interaction of different types of deprivation and thus of different obstacles in the access to vital sources. If social support is understood as a vital source, which is an important tool of fulfilling everyday life needs, the concept of social exclusion and relative deprivation may be extended accordingly. The provision of a certain level of living conditions does therefore not entail but monetary and non-monetary income, employment, education and basic services, but also social contacts or supports enabling or increasing the access to these sources.

Scale of Social Support Networks of the Poor

It is reasonable to begin the analysis of social support networks by analysing their scale - therefore by answering the question of the number of people an individual may turn to when in need of a certain form of help or support (see average number of supporting members of network in Tables 2 and Table 3). The share of the poor who cannot turn to any person in terms of socialisation is relatively small, amounting to 3,3 per cent, which is, however, almost two per cent more than in the entire population. The share of poor persons who cannot turn to any person for emotional support is 10,5 per cent (7,8 per cent in the entire population), while the share in terms of sickness support is 9,8 per cent, which is more than two per cent more than in the entire population. The share of the poor turning to only one person for emotional support is 61,7 per cent, while the share in terms of sickness support is slightly less than a half. The share of the persons in the entire population turning to only one person for both emotional and sickness support is slightly more than a half. The share of the poor who cannot turn to any person when in need of material support is rather high. The share of the poor who cannot turn to any person for minor material support is as high as 23,3 per cent (the share of such persons in the entire population is 16,5 per cent); the share of the poor unable to borrow a larger sum of money is 31,3 per cent, which is 8 per cent more than in the entire population; the share of the poor unable to turn to any person for major material support is 31 per cent, which is the same as in the entire population. The share of the poor turning to one person to borrow money is

45,6 per cent, the share of the poor turning to one person for minor material support is 40 per cent, while it is 36 per cent in case of major material support. The situation in the entire population is similar.

The main difference in the scale of networks is that between the support of socialising and other supports - the scale is reduced by almost two thirds - although other supports, too, reveal a noticeable tendency of reduced scale, which decreases from emotional to financial support. We may conclude that the more demanding a support - demanding in terms of involvement of support providers - the smaller the number of support providers or the scale of support (which is apparent from Tables 2 and Table 3). This reduction applies both to the poor and to the entire population. However, the comparison of the scale of networks of individual supports between both groups reveals that the scale of the network of the poor is significantly smaller than that of the entire population although the differences are smallest in the networks of support described as 'non-material' supports. Therefore we may conclude that **the level of demand of social supports increases also the difference in the scale of networks between the poor and the entire population**. The poor are thus obviously poor not merely due to the reduced access to material goods but also due to less broad social support networks, which reduces their access to other vital sources. This conclusion is indirectly confirmed also by the findings of the English example proving the importance of social bonds to the elderly (Scharf and Smith, 2003). At the same time this conclusion overcomes the interpretative reach of clarifying the links between poverty and social isolation of the unemployed (Gallie et al, 2003), for the analysts, regardless of their finding on stability, failed to compare this form of social support also between the unemployed or the poor and the entire population. To be poor therefore means also to be surrounded by less people to whom an individual may turn for help when in need. This undermines the empirical basis of the belief that the poor substitute the lack of material sources with more intense bonds with friends and relatives.

The next question we may ask is whether individual socio-demographic characteristics of an individual such as gender, age, education level, profession, place of residence, marital status, family type and employment status influence the scale of the network of an individual social support in the poor and in the entire population.

While the frequency of **socialising** with others in the entire population significantly depends on gender, education level and marital status, none of the socio-demographic characteristics determines the scale of this social support in the poor. The fact of who socialises with whom therefore does not depend on his or her financial capacities but on the socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, education level, marital status and place of residence. Thus:

- the network of women is broader than that of men;
- the scale of a network increases parallel with education level;
- the broadest network is that of single and married people while the narrowest is that of the widowed;
- the networks of people living in cities are broader by a fourth than those of people living in the country.

In seeking **emotional support** the factor equally important for the scale of the network both in the poor and in the entire population is gender, for the network of women is broader than that of men. While age and education level significantly determine the scale of the network in the entire population - advancing age reduces the scale of the network and vice versa, while it significantly increases parallel with education level -the factor significant in the poor is marital status with single people having a significantly broader network than married ones.

In seeking **sickness support**, financial income is not significant. The scale of the network of this support in the entire population is significantly determined by gender (the network of women being broader than that of men), age (the broadest network being that of the middle-aged), education level and marital status (the broadest network being that of single people).

While socio-demographic characteristics of the poor do not influence the scale of their financial support network these are significant for the scale of minor and major material support. However, the network of **financial support** in the entire population is broader in men compared to women, in the elderly compared to the young (the broadest being that of the middle-aged), in more educated compared to less educated, and in single, married and cohabiting people compared to divorced or separated and widowed people.

The scale of **minor material support network** is influenced by age and marital status both in the poor and in the entire population, while an additional important factor is place of residence in the former and education level in the latter. The broadest network in the poor is that of the youngest, single and living in the country, while the narrowest is that of the oldest (over 65), divorced and those living in suburbs. In the entire population the network of the older, too, is narrower than that of the younger, the network of those with lower education level is narrower than in those with higher education level and the network of the divorced or separated is narrower than that of the single and married.

Socio-demographic characteristics of people determine the scale of **major material support** networks differently in the poor and in the entire population. The scale of this network in the poor is significantly determined by marital status - the broadest network is that of the married and the narrowest that of the divorced; by family type - the broadest network being that of families and the narrowest that of people living alone - and by place of residence where the network of those living in the country is significantly broader than the network of those living in cities. The scale of network in the entire population is determined differently: the important factors are gender, age and education level; thus the network of men is broader than that of women, the network of the middle-aged is broader than that of younger and older people, and the network of people with higher education level is broader than that of people with lower education level. An equally important factor is marital status with single and cohabiting people having the broadest networks.

Last but not least, we may ask whether there are differences in the choice of support providers (alters)? Do people prefer to turn to persons or to institutions (different organisations)? People generally combine the help from both sources although they more often turn to informal sources (persons). There are furthermore no significant differences between both categories. Or in other words, the poor do not place a significantly different stress to informal or formal sources in comparison with the entire population. The differences between both groups are insignificant also as to the level of satisfaction with the available social support network, for a great majority in both groups (approximately nine tenths) is satisfied with it. An indirect conclusion applying especially to the poor is that they do not see

the conditions of their less favourable situation, at least in material terms, in their social support networks.

The scale of non-material support networks (Table 2) may lead to the conclusion that it does not depend on whether an individual is poor or not but on other characteristics, where an especially important fact is that the networks of women are broader than those of men and the networks of people with higher education levels are broader than those of people with lower education levels. However, significant differences may be observed in considering the dependence of material support networks on socio-demographic characteristics (Table 3). The factors still significant are education level - the broadest networks being those of the highly educated, age - the broadest network being that of the middle generation, and gender where the network of men is broader than that of women. The networks of single, divorced or separated and widowed people are less broad than in other marital status categories.

Therefore the social isolation in terms of non-material supports is greater in men and less educated people while persons more socially isolated in terms of material supports are women, the youngest and the oldest and people living without a partner.

Does social exclusion or poverty as its material aspect increase the social isolation also in Slovenia? The answer to this question is not uniform. An especially important fact is that **the networks of different social supports of the poor are without exception narrower than those of the entire population**, although the poor are satisfied with supports themselves. On the other hand, there are no significant differences in the influence of the socio-demographic characteristics of poor individuals on the scale of their support networks in comparison with the entire population, except in terms of major material support. The general form of the relation between the scale of the networks (social isolation level) and socio-demographic characteristics is that the scale of a network depends on gender, age, education level and marital status rather than on poverty situation. Or in other words, poverty situation is the result of the first three factors - especially the third, the level of completed education - and therefore the intermediary factor between demographic characteristics and the level of social isolation.

Structure of Social Support Networks of the Poor

Structural characteristics of social support networks help us answer the question whether the social support networks of the poor are different than those available to the entire population of Slovenia. In other words, whether the poor have different support providers than the entire population.

The most important support provider (alter) of all support networks, except in case of emotional and sickness support - is **a friend**. This is especially uniformly named in terms of material supports without differences both in the poor and in the entire population, while he/she is uniformly significant in terms of socialisation and in the poor also in terms of emotional support. In every case the set of the first three support providers is, regardless of support, limited to a friend, a partner, a close relative (parents, child and brother or sister) rather than distant one, and occasionally also to a neighbour, especially in terms of minor material supports, but also in terms of major material supports in the poor. Regardless of the convincing leading position of friends in the significance of support the network structure targets close and distant family members, which confirms the decisive importance of ties with close relatives, and therefore the structure of social support networks may be characterised as **family-focused**.

Table 2: Networks of non-material social support

Form of support	Socialising		Emotional support		Sickness support	
	Poor	All	Poor	All	Poor	All
Respondents						
Average number of supporting members of network	3,9	4,4	1,6	1,7	1,63	1,66
Most common sources of support in share (%)	Friend - 33	Friend -30	Friend - 30	Partner – 32	Child -28	Partner - 34
	Relative - 17	Relative - 13	Child -18	Friend -27	Partner - 16	Child -18
	Child -13	Partner - 12	Partner - 16	Brother* -9	Friend - 15	Parents - 15
Total (%)	63	55	64	68	59	67

* Brother, sister; half-brother, half-sister.

While the structure of non-material support networks (Table 2) still reveals some overlapping of different network support providers in the indicated framework, this variety becomes much more uniform in the case of material supports (Table 3), revealing almost no difference between the poor and the entire population. The transition from the support structure of restricted variety to the more monolithic patterns does not necessarily indicate the preferences in the choice of providers but may be the consequence of restricted choice. Or put differently, the capacities of a support network (alters) are approximately the same as those of a respondent (ego) although this picture is slightly distorted in the case of seeking financial support where close family members become important as the second or third options. The information on networks structure also reveals that the support network structure is not directly connected with the material situation of an individual, but obviously with other factors; some of these may be described also as 'cultural characteristic of household organisation' (Gallie et al, 2003).

Table 3: Networks of material social support

Form of support	Minor material support		Major material support		Financial support	
	Poor	All	Poor	All	Poor	All
Respondents						
Average number of supporting members of network	1,42	1,77	1,36	1,45	1,1	1,31
Most common sources of support in share (%)	Friend - 24	Friend -26	Friend -20	Friend -22	Friend - 24	Friend - 26
	Neighbour - 23	Neighbour - 17	Relative - 18	Relative - 16	Child - 20	Parents - 23
	Relative - 14	Relative -14	Neighbour - 15	Parents - 13	Brother* - 15	Brother* -14
Total (%)	61	57	53	51	59	63

* Brother, sister; half-brother, half-sister.

Especially in more demanding non-material supports such as emotional support and sickness support the relation between the poor and the entire population most often reveals the triangle consisting of a friend, a partner

and a child; in terms of socialising, an important source of support is also a relative. Therefore there is no basis for stating that the typical support patterns are important for the observed categories. We may largely presume the very contrary, namely that the characteristics of a support are those determining the structure of a support network or the choice of support providers (alters).

Thus it is obvious that original characteristics of material supports are those monolithically influencing the structure of networks or the providers of such support (alters). The most important source of minor material support are friends followed by neighbours and other (distant) relatives. Half of major material support is provided by the same source both in the poor and in the entire population - these are friends and relatives followed by neighbours in the poor and parents in the whole sample. However, the most important sources of financial support may be classified as two dominant sources, namely friends and members of close relatives (child, parents and brother and sister or half-brother and half-sister). In other words, the increasing level of demand in material support makes a network more and more focused and limited to the family or close relatives; the network may be therefore characterised as 'family-focused'.

Which reasons have a decisive impact on the presented structure of networks? The reason of financial income level was rejected as a significant reason. The next presumption may be examined within cultural characteristics of organisation of households and the operation of family in Slovenia. And finally, the reason may lie in the characteristics and level of demand of the support itself, where the importance of the source of an expected support (significantly) determines the set of supported persons. The results of the completed analysis but indicated the directions where more precise and empirically supported answers to the set questions may be sought.

CONCLUSION: DIFFERENCES IN THE SCALE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT NETWORKS

The data reveal that the **structure** of individual networks is presumably determined by the intention of a network regardless of the target category. With the consideration of the primary role of **friends**, the networks are largely focused on closer and more distant relatives, which allows for the

belief that support networks are **'family focused'**. Therefore it is appropriate to state that the problem does not lie in the structure but in the scale of networks. **The scale** of networks in the poor is, regardless of the original characteristics of a support, essentially smaller than the scale of those available to the entire population. Even individual networks of the entire population cannot be considered broad, for the help is generally expected from the same sources of support, which is unambiguous in the case of partner or parents. Compared to the entire population, the scale of the networks in the poor is even narrower, which makes them more burdened. Thus we may deduce the relation between poverty and social isolation in Slovenia, more in terms of the scale of the latter than in terms of its structure. Furthermore, the completed analysis could not provide the direction of the impact, for the scale and structure of social support were not measured before the poverty situation had developed. In this respect the completed analysis represents an initial reaction to the challenges of the given problems but not to providing any final findings and solutions. The problems of scale and structure of social support networks of the population of Slovenia remain a rich source of further research by means of more precise methods on one hand and by means of examining the level of inter-lapping of providers (alter) as members of networks.

Regardless of the limitations of the completed analyses the findings provided open many challenges to Slovenian **social policy** actors.

Social policy measures targeting the assistance to and protection of vulnerable social groups (poor, elderly, children, handicapped) are derived from two different principles where financial benefits and assistances (one-off, repeated) assist the eligible persons in covering the costs of their everyday life needs: from their needs and their disposable income. Especially disposable income is the category considering the income of all family members, and therefore the consideration does not focus only on the eligible person and his/her needs but also on financial capacities of his/her family. In this sense a large part of social policy measures is based both on the needs of the eligible person **and** on the financial capacities of his/her family, so it cannot be maintained that family is excluded from the framework of consideration and from granting of financial assistances.

Thus the arena of challenges left to social policy is the field of different forms of **non-financial assistances** or services where different measures

may strengthen the capacities for the inclusion of the poor as a vulnerable social group in the central society and thus help overcome their marginalisation and social exclusion. These measures may focus on counselling or education, being modelled after different activation strategies such as those conceived for seeking new employment. Such strategies may provide an individual with skills and knowledge to facilitate his/her social inclusion.

It is definitely unrealistic to expect social policy strategies to strengthen networks of friends as the most important support source, but this may, however, become a challenge of different non-profit and volunteer organisations and groups within local communities. These strategies may also include neighbourhoods. Therefore the niche for developing appropriate measures within social policy for strengthening an individual (ego) in his/her capacities to overcome social exclusion and thus social isolation is **strengthening of such capacities of his/her family members**. Therefore the strengthening of an individual by means of social inclusion strategies or overcoming his/her social isolation directly depends on the corresponding strengthening of his/her family. In the case of people living alone, in elderly or single-parent and single-member households, or in the case where a family cannot offer support, non-profit and volunteer organisations are still those which may help in overcoming social isolation.

Therefore the future **social inclusion strategies planning** should consider that appropriate social supports are an important element of living standard and quality of life of the population, especially in vulnerable social groups, which also include the poor. It is the capacity generally enabling an individual's access to vital sources or significantly increasing this access. In this sense social supports are an integral part of strategies to overcome social isolation and social exclusion, and hence an integral part of social inclusion strategies.

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