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The role and the impacts of social innovation on regional development: study of two European rural regions

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I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Julia, who passed away in March 2022. I miss you terribly but I know you are watching and I know you are proud of me.

Abstract

The thesis studies the role and the impacts of social innovation on the development of rural European regions. Social innovation (SI), as a scientific concept, has entered the academic discourse and the policy arena in recent decades. Simultaneously, SI has been seen as one of the potential responses addressing the issues rural regions are faced with, e.g. demographic, social and environmental challenges. As suggested by both policy and research, SI can offer novel combinations of ideas to tackle challenges by changing the attitudes of actors, challenging existing institutional context, reconfiguring social practices, and providing new ways in addressing unmet needs of communities.

The contribution of the thesis lies in filling the existing gaps in the research of SI in the rural context, placing an emphasis on the role SI initiatives play and the impacts such SI initiatives have on the development of their respective regions. Through a study of two rural regions in Europe and by applying the transformative social innovation (TSI) approach, neo-endogenous rural development theory, as well as the impact chain approach of the Theory of Change (ToC), the thesis analyses how SI initiatives contribute to the development of rural regions of Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) and Mühlviertel (Austria) through establishing new networks of collaboration, enhancing community participation, while addressing unmet needs and providing rural services, ultimately having an impact on rural development. In terms of theoretical contribution, the thesis addresses the potential conceptual and analytical links between SI and neo-endogenous rural development, and the transformative change SI is able to trigger. In the two regions under study, there is a divergence in how SI is approached in development strategies, practice of local development initiatives (LDIs), as well as the perceptions of local communities towards SI. The results show that the promotion of SI is taking on an implicit rather than explicit character alongside the re-orientation towards the opportunity driven SI rather than a problem solving type of the latter. By committing to the sustainable and integrated approach to development in rural regions, SI initiatives in both case studies engage in regional projects on sustainable agriculture and tourism, facilitate local communities' initiatives and create a support infrastructure for rural entrepreneurship to thrive. By (i) triggering bottom-linked governance in rural areas, (ii) reinforcing neo-endogenous development, and (iii) having impacts across scales, sectors, and domains, SI initiatives take a strong stand in contributing to sustainable development of their respective rural communities and regions. Despite this, actors of SI working in the field of regional development face challenges related to their own

sustainability, their operating in multi-stakeholder arenas, operational challenges (including available resources), as well as their having and assessing impacts.
The results of the thesis have important implications for national and European policy-making regarding the promotion and support to SI in European rural regions. It is suggested that policymakers should consider SI more carefully as an important element of rural development, thus adapting the existing policy frameworks and establishing new ones targeting SI as a distinctive category of action. At the same time, future policies should pay greater attention to the processes of impact assessment at the level of SI initiatives, supporting said initiatives with tailored yet flexible tools in order to illuminate and illustrate their actual impacts. Such potential policies should be designed and negotiated with the actors from various scales (local, regional, national), sectors (private, public, non-profit) and account for the diversity and heterogeneity of rural regions across Europe.

Keywords: social innovation, rural development, regional development, social innovation impacts, impact assessment, Austria, Portugal, Baixo Alentejo, Mühlviertel, case study

Resumo

A tese apresenta os resultados da investigação sobre o papel e os impactos da inovação social (IS) no desenvolvimento de regiões rurais europeias. A IS tem vindo a ser proposta nos domínios académico e político em décadas recentes como uma potencial resposta aos desafios regiões rurais em termos sociais, ambientais e demográficos. A IS corresponde a novas combinações de ideias através da mudança das práticas dos atores na resposta às necessidades e problemas das comunidades.

A tese preenche algumas lacunas da investigação sobre IS em contexto rural, enfatizando o papel e o impacto que as iniciativas de IS têm no desenvolvimento dos territórios rurais com problemas estruturais. Através do estudo de duas regiões rurais na Europa, Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) e Mühlviertel (Áustria), e da aplicação de uma abordagem de IS transformativa (IST), da teoria de desenvolvimento rural neo-endógeno, e a abordagem de cadeias de impacto, a tese procura entender como é que a IS contribui para o desenvolvimento dessas regiões, incluindo, nomeadamente, novas redes de colaboração, melhor participação comunitária, e oferta de serviços (p.e educação, saúde), mudanças que, por sua vez, se traduzem no reforço das dinâmicas de desenvolvimento rural. Em termos de contribuição teórica, a tese enfatiza as ligações conceptuais e analíticas entre a IS e o desenvolvimento rural neo-endógeno, bem como a mudança transformativa. Nas duas regiões em estudo, existe uma divergência ~~a~~ no modo como a IS é abordada em termos das estratégias de desenvolvimento, das iniciativas de desenvolvimento local, e da perceção das comunidades. Os resultados mostram que a promoção da IS apresenta um carácter mais implícito do que explícito na reorientação da IS orientada por oportunidades, em vez de se focar em solucionamento de problemas mais específicos. Em ambos os casos as iniciativas de IS dedicam-se a uma abordagem sustentável e integrada do desenvolvimento em regiões rurais. Estas iniciativas envolvem também projetos regionais de agricultura sustentável e turismo e criam infraestruturas de apoio para processos de empreendedorismo rural. Não obstante, os atores que participam em iniciativas de IS confrontam-se com múltiplos desafios relativamente à sua sustentabilidade, à gestão de diversos tipos de stakeholders, aos recursos disponíveis, bem como às dificuldades em medir os impactos.

Os resultados da tese têm assim importantes implicações para o desenvolvimento de políticas públicas acerca da promoção e apoio a IS em regiões rurais. É sugerido que os decisores políticos devem perspetivas a IS como um elemento importante para desenvolvimento rural, adaptando as bases da construção de políticas públicas, e estabelecendo novas políticas,

tomando a IS como uma categoria distintiva de ação. Ao mesmo tempo propõe-se que no futuro as políticas públicas dêem atenção ao processo de avaliação de impactos da IS, apoiando-as em ferramentas construídas especificamente para cada território. Tais políticas deverão ser desenhadas e negociadas com os vários atores em diversas escalas (local, regional, nacional), sectores (privado, público e sem fins lucrativos) e ter em conta a diversidade das regiões rurais europeias.

Palavras-chave: inovação social, desenvolvimento rural, desenvolvimento regional, impactos de inovação social, avaliação de impactos, Áustria, Portugal, Baixo Alentejo, Mühlviertel, caso de estudo

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Glossary of abbreviations

Acronym	Definition/ Name
SI	Social Innovation
TSI	Transformative Social Innovation
ToC	Theory of Change
LDI	Local Development Initiative
EU	European Union
EC	European Commission
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
EAFRD	European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development
LEADER	Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale; Links between the rural economy and development actions
ESF	European Social Fund
CLLD	Community-Led Local Development
SE	Social Entrepreneurship
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
NUTS	Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics
RDCI	Regional Development Composite Index
INE	Instituto Nacional de Estatística; Statistics Portugal
ADCMoura	Associação para o Desenvolvimento do Concelho de Moura; the Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura
Otelo eGen	Die Otelo Genossenschaft; The Otelo cooperative
SES	Socio-Ecological System
LAG	Local Action Group
LDA	Local Development Association

EPAM	Empreender nas Plantas Aromáticas e Medicinais; Entrepreneurship in Aromatic and Medicinal Plants
PAM	Plantas Aromáticas e Medicinais; Aromatic and Medicinal Plants
COOP4PAM	Cooperar para crescer no sector das plantas aromáticas e medicinais; Cooperation for Growth in the Aromatic and Medicinal Plant Sector
MAFDR	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development
CIMBAL	Comunidade Intermunicipal do Baixo Alentejo; Intermunicipal Community of Baixo Alentejo
CCPAM	Centro de Competências das Plantas Aromáticas, Medicinais e Condimentares; Competence Center for Aromatic, Medicinal and Spice Plants
CEDDEM	Centre d'Etude et de Développement Durable Euroméditerranéen; Center for Euro-Mediterranean Studies and Sustainable Development
EUROPAM	European medicinal and aromatic plants international non-profit association
ANIMAR	Associação Portuguesa para o Desenvolvimento Local; Portuguese Association for Local Development
NED	Neo-Endogenous Development
INTERREG	Cooperation programme co-funded by the European Union
EQUAL	Community Initiative financed by the European Social Fund

Chapter 1. Introduction

Context and purpose

According to Eurostat, more than half of the European Union's (EU) land area is within regions classified as being predominantly rural (Eurostat, 2019). According to the EU´s urban-rural typology (Eurostat, 2018) rural regions are classified as predominantly rural if their population density corresponds to less than 300 inhabitants/km² and a lack of urban centres with more than 200,000 residents. Such areas are often characterised by depopulation (Margaras, 2019), weak economic performance (Dax and Fischer, 2018), and large physical distances to end markets (Tregear and Cooper, 2016). Challenges faced by communities such as depopulation, ageing, poverty, social exclusion, and rural exodus, to name a few, require new approaches to regional development and new solutions that should go beyond "strategies for targeting economic growth, but have to address issues of local participation, social innovation and establishing trust as preconditions to effectively impact well-being dimensions" (Dax and Fischer, 2018, p. 297).

Rural regions have been associated with low population density, weakened economic activity and environmental challenges (also new emerging types of employment), which have been only partially addressed. The situation, in which rural regions undergo a challenging transformation and previously existing paradigms to the development of such regions do not manage to solve the challenges, requires seeking out new approaches in economic, demographic, and social domains that would go beyond traditional innovation and economic discourse in regional development. As one of the potential responses, social innovation (SI) has entered the academic discourse and the policy arena in recent decades (e.g. Moulaert et al., 2017). As suggested by both policy and research, SI can offer novel combinations of ideas to tackle challenges by changing the attitudes of actors, challenging existing institutional context, reconfiguring social practices, and providing new ways in addressing unmet needs of communities (e.g. Moulaert et al., 2013; Bock, 2016; Christmann, 2020).

SI is an established concept in urban studies, where its role in addressing the diverse urban problems, such as social exclusion, citizen participation and integration, has been recognised (Gerometta et al., 2005: Angelidou and Psaltoglou, 2017; Nyseth and Hamdouch, 2019). However, with the prominent space of SI in the research on urban contexts, rural SI research is still only emerging. Despite many attempts to move the field of rural SI research forward, the role of SI in the development of rural regions together with the impacts that SI has on such development remain rather underexplored. Having this in mind, the current thesis aims at

analysing the experience of two European rural regions in embracing SI as a promising tool in contributing to the development of rural areas.

In order to pursue more sustainable rural development while also addressing various challenges rural areas are faced with (e.g. ageing, brain drain, and relative economic weakness), rural development policy has sought out novel solutions through many ways, one of which is SI. In light of finding new solutions, SI, both as a concept and as a policy, has entered the discourse and has received a prominent place in both academic research and various policies on innovation and social change (Pol and Ville, 2009; Moulaert, 2010; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016) with the SI literature growing rapidly from 2002 onwards (van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). This interest is related to the turn in innovation studies that strive to look beyond traditional focus on technological and product innovations.

Rural regions have been previously understood to be 'structurally weak', with less attention paid to them when it comes to their innovation potential compared to their urban counterparts and less prompt for innovation in general (Christmann, 2020). However, it has been argued that the potential of rural areas to contribute to sustainable development should not be underestimated (Dax and Fischer, 2018). Rural regions have particular features in terms of innovation and have specific potential to kick off the discussion on the feasibility of post-growth trajectories. Moulaert, et al. (2005) stress three dimensions of interactions, which are of particular relevance in 'social innovation' approaches that go far beyond restrictions of growth perspectives, that is, satisfaction of human needs, changes in social relations, and sociopolitical capability and access to resources. The concepts for rural development have, therefore, turned increasingly towards making use of the specific local assets and presenting diversity of regions as a valuable feature and not an obstacle that future regional activity should seek to overcome.

Despite there being various approaches to SI in various academic fields, few have addressed the phenomenon in a rural context beforehand. However, there has been a growing interest in the rural social entrepreneurship (SE) and SI research (Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2016a; Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos, 2021; Chatzichristos and Hennebry, 2021; Olmedo and O'Shaughnessy, 2022). The main problematic of the current PhD thesis, however, is the fact that, despite the interest in the role of SI in the development of rural regions gaining momentum in academia and practice, the research looking into the interconnections between the role and the impacts of SI in rural areas is still rather underrepresented. With the diversity of contexts, national legislations, political frameworks, and different degrees of SI's institutionalisation, the role of SI in regional development of rural territories and, consequently,

the impact of such innovation is the main focus of the current research. Informed by the above, the main research question of this thesis is formulated as following:

What role does social innovation play in the development of European rural regions and what are its impacts?

In this research, an attempt is made to understand how SI (as a research concept, as a policy and as an action) can contribute to and impact on the development of rural regions. The argument here is that by being a) a practice that is exercised in a given region, b) an important policy tool potentially translated into national, regional and local development strategies and c) a theoretical (analytical) concept, SI can take on different roles and impact the development of regions in different ways. In order to answer the research question presented above, the main objectives of the PhD thesis are: (i) to clarify the concept of SI through the lens of rural research, (ii) to analyse and present particularities and specificity of SI within the rural areas, (iii) to investigate the role of SI in the development of rural regions, focusing on the regional development paradigms under which SI has a potential to flourish and the main actors in the process, and (iv) to identify the impacts of SI in rural regions (types, scales, domains).

Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action: the context of Horizon 2020 RurAction project

Current thesis, focusing on the role and the impacts of SI, has been carried out within the framework of a Horizon 2020 research project "Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action" (in short - RurAction). RurAction, an integrated research and doctorate programme funded by the European Union in the Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions Innovative Training Network focused on problems in structurally weak rural regions in Europe and on the impact of SE regarding the development of innovative solutions to problems in rural regions. According to the project's rationale, rural regions are faced with major social and economic problems. In comparison to 'predominantly urban' or 'intermediate' regions, 'predominantly rural' regions, and particularly structurally weak rural regions, are economically less productive, which finds expression by a low level of gross domestic product, with such providing a less extensive scope of desired goods and services, opportunities for higher education and qualified job offers. Not least, predominantly rural regions are faced with recurring negative discourses on rural problems in public media resulting in negative images. Against this background, the respective regions experience a considerable loss of inhabitants and especially a brain drain of young and highly skilled people. Facing these problems, the European Union has been implementing rural

development programmes such as ERDF, EAFRD (including LEADER and, recently, CLLD). At the same time, the European Commission (EC) has pointed out the deepening of the understanding and knowledge of SI as one of the priorities. By recognising these gaps, as well as the fact that the issues of SI and of rural development have for a long time been dealt with separately - while EC identifies SI in rural regions as one of five desiderata of SI research, RurAction made an attempt to cover the research gap that served as a starting point of the network.

Through recognising a lack of knowledge and cross-sectoral trainings at the intersection of rural development, SI and SE research, RurAction has addressed this gap by systematically integrating the three fields of research, while offering a unique opportunity to 10 Early Stage Researchers to investigate said topics on SI and SEs in rural regions. The 10 Early Stage Researchers also benefited from transnational high quality training, bringing together both academic education and practical skills training provided by social enterprises with great expertise in innovative rural development.

The RurAction project was developed upon the European Commission's call for developing an understanding of SI and SE for their role in fostering regional development. Until recently there were only a few research projects that addressed SI as part of the regional development process. In the absence of theoretical and empirical foundations, regional planning and policy-making strategies have only recently begun to incorporate SI in their agendas. The RurAction network tried to fill this research gag by identifying two main research targets, namely by:

- conducting interdisciplinary, comparative and cross-regional research in a neglected research field such as that of SI in rural areas;
- providing knowledge for enhancing action strategies and organising knowledge transfer to support (i) actors of SI and SE initiatives in rural regions, (ii) policy makers in the field of rural development on the regional (regional authorities), the national (ministries) and the EU level (European Commission), and (iii) to raise public awareness on the regional and national level regarding rural development issues.

As a direct outcome of RurAction, the current PhD thesis has been developed, having benefited from (i) the intellectual exchange with scholars from the fields of SE and SI, (ii) organised secondments and placements with the SI initiatives where the research was developed and elaborated, as well as from (iii) the training seminars and workshops, providing extensive knowledge on both theoretical and methodological insights into the fields of SE and SI.

Social innovation in European research and policy

The field of SI has received increased scholarly and policy interest since the early 2000s (Adams and Hess, 2010), with the various conceptualisations of SI understandings as new social relations, new solutions to unmet needs, new ways of addressing complex social and environmental problems (Nicholls and Murdoch, 2012). Such varying understandings of SI were applied in different research fields such as urban development, sociology, management studies, territorial development, and human geography (Moulaert et al., 2005; Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Bock, 2016; van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). As claimed by some authors, depending on the policy area and research field, the concept of SI has taken on a variety of distinct but still related meanings (Grimm et al., 2013).

Additionally, SI has become an important anchor in European policy (European Commission, 2013; BEPA, 2010; TEPSIE, 2014). In the context of contemporary challenges, SI has been suggested as one of the important means by which the emphasis of the development is moved from primarily economic development to more sustainable and integrated development, while also placing a greater emphasis on solutions that go beyond just technological innovation alone (Dax and Fischer, 2018). In this regard, SI is seen as an important tool to be "enhanced at different levels (local, regional, national, and European) and sectors (public, private, and civil) in order to innovate in a different way and to generate primarily social value" (European Commission, 2010, p. 30).

The myriad of SI conceptualisations has resulted in academics trying to distinguish between various streams and approaches, designing typologies and classifications of SI. Moulaert et al. (2013) propose a classification of fields in which SI has been adopted as one of the core concepts. Based on the work carried out, Moulaert et al. (2013) state that there are many possible ways of classifying SI research (e.g. Ayob et al., 2016; Brandsen et al., 2016; Howaldt and Kopp, 2012; Marques et al., 2018; Moulaert et al., 2013; Nicholls et al., 2015; Rüede and Lurtz, 2012). Arguing that, while some research (e.g. Phills et al. 2008, Pol and Ville, 2009) suggests the single, comprehensive definition of SI (an attempt that Moulaert et al. regard as 'somewhat dubious') (2017, p. 24), the authors, instead of proposing the 'universal' definition, identify the core principles that characterise SI approaches across different fields of study and research. First, the authors argue that SI cannot be reduced neither to a field action, nor to a particular sector of the economy; SI is rather a way of understanding a wide range of actions, activities and practices that attempt at addressing social problems or meeting (unmet) needs (Moulaert et al., 2017). Second, it is argued that SI does not separate means from ends, but that it acknowledges the inherent character of needs and problems in social relations. Thus, SI

"involves changing relations through the adoption of new social practices, institutional arrangements and/or forms of participation" (Moulaert et al., 2017, p. 25). Third, it is suggested that the effects of SI go beyond the immediate meeting of needs, where SI aims at "improving long term opportunities for individuals and/or communities, or produce more efficient, effective and/or sustainable means for society to deal with its challenges" (Moulaert et al., 2017, p. 25).

Echoing the above presented classification of SI, Neumeier (2012) suggests that there are three different approaches to defining SI depending on the scientific focus. In the first, an *organisation-centred approach*, SI is understood as new ways of organising the business practices, the workplace or the external relations of an enterprise (Pot and Vaas, 2008). The second approach, *a first sociological approach*, puts a great emphasis on an overall social change triggered by SI. In this approach, SI is regarded as societal achievements that change the direction of social change and provide improved solutions compared to previously existing ones aiming at meeting one or more common goals (Ogburn, 1964; Zapf, 1989; Gillwald, 2000; Adams and Hess, 2008; Pol and Ville, 2009). The third approach, *second sociological approach*, emphasises the change in the common goals of a specific group of people. SI is, therefore, recognised as the generation and implementation of new ideas about the ways in which people organise their interpersonal activities or social interactions to meet one or more common goals. The main focus of this approach is not societal improvements but the improvements in organising, acting and the know-hows of a group of people, measured at the group's horizon of experiences and based on existing knowledge and experience of the people involved (Mumford, 2002; Moulaert et al., 2005).

In further work, Christmann (2020) identifies two streams of SI research that have emerged from the early period of the field's development. According to Christmann's research, the first stream of SI studies assumes the role of SI in addressing existing problems and needs. This is achieved through the "innovation in the context of horizontal collaborative relations between citizens and in a more participatory governance system within urban and regional contexts" (Christmann, 2020, p. 425, citing Nussbaumer and Moulaert, 2007). Therefore, in this research stream, SI can be characterised by aiming at the development of more cohesive social relations, contributing to the empowerment of citizens, promoting the development of bottom-up initiatives and, ultimately, leading to the establishment of more democratic governance systems (Christmann, 2020). The second stream of SI research assumes SI to represent novel social practices, novel ways of organisation and/or novel approaches to solutions arising from dissatisfaction with a specific situation which potentially leads to meeting existing needs and/or offering more effective and efficient solutions (Zapf, 1989; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2010).

Within the existing streams, SI conceptualisations still share some core elements that are rooted in responses to unmet needs, reconfiguration of social practices, and triggering (transformative) social change (Pel et al., 2020). One of the earlier approaches elaborated by Moulaert et al. (2005) distinguishes three dimensions of SI that, as the authors argue, should preferably occur in interaction with each other (Moulaert et al., 2005). The first dimension of SI deals with the satisfaction of human needs that have not been satisfied; such is true either because those needs have 'not yet' been satisfied or because they are 'no longer' perceived as important by either the market or the state. Within this dimension, the emphasis is placed on the satisfaction of unsatisfied basic needs, with such needs varying among societies and communities. The second dimension is concerned with the changes in social relations that enable the satisfaction of the unmet needs, but also increase the level of participation of all actors but especially deprived groups in society (process dimension). The third dimension places greater attention on increasing the socio-political capability and access to resources needed to enhance rights to satisfaction of human needs and participation (empowerment dimension) (Moulaert et al., 2005).

As stated above, SI has been defined in different ways, providing room for various interpretations of the phenomenon. Despite the understanding of SI as 'social in both the ends and the means' (Mulgan, 2012, p. 22), it is still extremely broad and does not set particularly clear boundaries as to what can be classified as such, it manages to capture the dual character of the SI process. On the one hand, SI is about finding better ways to meet (unmet) human needs; on the other, it places an emphasis on strengthening bonds of commitment and solidarity within the community and beyond (Nicholls et al., 2015).

Nicholls et al. (2015) suggest that there are two interlinked conceptualisations of SI, focused on either new social processes or new social outputs and outcomes (Nicholls et al., 2015; Sharra and Nyssens, 2010). The first approach, *'process'* approach in SI, is concerned with the questions of how and under what circumstances SI emerges, how it is adopted and diffused - what in general can be labelled as the 'process' of SI. This stream focuses on the new ways of organising social relations and the new forms of interaction within such systems. As Mumford (2002) suggests:

Social innovation refers to the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organise interpersonal activities, or social interactions, to meet one or more common goals (Mumford, 2002, p. 253).

An important function of SI related to ways in which social relations are organised is changes in attitudes of actors exercising a collaborative action. Neumeier suggests that SI is

concerned with "changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that in relation to the group's horizon of experiences lead to new and improved ways of collaborative action within the group and beyond" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 55). Simultaneously, Cajaiba-Santana (2014) suggests that SI represents new social practices created from collective, intentional, and goal-oriented actions aimed at promoting social change through the reconfiguration of how social goals are accomplished. Elaborating on this idea, Howaldt et al. define SI as a "new combination and/or new configuration of social practices with the goal of better satisfying or answering needs and problems than is possible on the basis of established practices" (Howaldt et al., 2016, p. 27). Such an understanding of SI, rooted in reconfiguration and changes in group's attitudes and relations, has been echoed in more recent work, defining SI as "the reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors" (Polman et al., 2017, p. 32).

The second general approach defining SI that belongs to the so-called *'outcome'* approach adopts a normative standpoint, with respect to its outcome (Sharra and Nyssen, 2010). Phills et al. (2008) suggest defining SI as "a novel solution to a social problem that is more effective, efficient, sustainable, or just than existing solutions and for which the value created accrues primarily to society as a whole rather than private individuals" (Phills et al., 2008, p. 36). This definition clearly emphasises the importance of the outcome of SI with no particular emphasis put on the process which led to this outcome. Outcome dimension, mentioned above, was further discussed in the literature on SI, with SI defined as "societal achievements that, compared with already established solutions, provide improved solutions that are to a lesser extent defined by their absolute novelty more than by their consequences" (Gillwald, 2000, p.1). Here, the focus is also placed on the outcome dimension of SI rather than the process or the necessary absolute novelty of the solutions required. Such outcomes might be manifold, taking the form of new (and/or improved) institutions, new social movements, new social practices, and different structures of collaborative work.

Since the emergence of SI is associated with specific conditions in the socio-economic context of a given society, such contexts usually reveal the market and/or state failures to adequately address peoples' needs and dislocations (Nicholls et al., 2015). From this standpoint, SI is seen as the answer to social market failures in the provision of public goods and services that have been missing (or not delivered) otherwise. OECD (2011) approaches SI as a distinct category to economic innovation due to the fact that it is "not about introducing new types of production or exploiting new markets in itself but is about satisfying new needs not provided

by the market (even if markets intervene later) or creating new, more satisfactory ways of insertion in terms of giving people a place and a role in production" (OECD, 2011, p. 1). Complementary to such understanding of SI, Moulaert et al. (2013) propose to understand SI not necessarily as a 'replacement' for the state and/or market but rather as a more effective response to such failures. In this understanding, SI refers to "innovation aiming at meeting social needs of, or delivering social benefits to, communities, which might include the creation of new products, services, organisational structures or activities that are 'better' or 'more effective' than traditional public sector, philanthropic or market-reliant approaches in responding to social exclusion" (Moulaert et al., 2013, p. 1).

However, such an approach to SI as a response to the market/ state failure has been critically discussed in more recent work. In contrast to the existing definitions on SI being a response to the failures of the state/ market, it is argued that "there are clear concerns of initiators and participants about SI being made subservient to certain political agendas, in particular the dismantling of welfare state arrangements" (Avelino et al., 2019, p. 203). As a result, these concerns challenge the belief of SI to be a 'panacea' for current welfare state reform and they contribute to the discourses seeking to critically engage with the celebrated 'self-reliant' capacities of social entrepreneurs and citizens that sometimes serve as "justification for far-reaching budget-cuts and outsourcing of public services" (Avelino et al., 2019, p. 203).

The focus in the SI field has been also shifting from the understanding that SI is called upon as a 'perfect' solution to unmet needs and/or services and products that have not been delivered otherwise. With previous research identifying SI from the point of view of solution, more recent research points out that the main purpose of SI is not to focus on needs but on asset building and human capabilities development. In 2013, the EC claimed that SI represents the development and implementation of new ideas (products, services and models) that opt to create new social relationships or collaborations (European Commission, 2013). Through such corporations, SI also gives a way for the development of human capabilities. According to Nicholls and Ziegler (2015), SI is seen as the "development and delivery of new ideas and solutions at different socio-structural levels that intentionally seek to change power relations and improve human capabilities, as well as the processes via which these solutions are carried out" (Nicholls and Ziegler, 2015, p. 4).

Summing up, SI evokes many varying understandings and is being approached from a transdisciplinary standpoint. The operationalisation applied in the current PhD thesis will be presented below, highlighting and discussing the important elements and traits of SI initiatives.

Social innovation in rural research

Innovation, often considered as a key driver of regional development (e.g. Pike et al., 2016), has long been approached from the standpoint of technological innovation and economies of agglomeration, where the emphasis has been mostly placed on urban centres as innovation hubs. However, in recent research such an approach has been questioned, claiming that such understanding provides a narrow perspective that leaves out other types of territories and other types of innovation from the discourse (Vercher et al., 2021). Resulting from this, the research looking into the enabling factors, supporting forces, and actors' arrangements in SI in rural contexts has only recently started to emerge.

The need for a deeper study of SI in rural context is rooted in a particularly urgent character of rural challenges due to persistent trends of urbanisation, rural depopulation, segregation, and social exclusion experienced by communities in rural areas (Bock, 2016; Lindberg, 2017; Copus et al., 2017; Dax and Fischer, 2018). At the same time, the importance for SI in rural communities stems from the fact that quite often rural regions are regarded as marginalised (Lombardi et al., 2020) or structurally weak (e.g. Fischer, 2014) due to the combination of social, economic, institutional, and environmental challenges they face (Dinis, 2006; Di Iacovo et al., 2014; Esparcia, 2014; Dax and Fischer, 2018). Additionally, European rural regions have experienced a distortion in age, gender, and socio-economic balances where the number of young, well-educated, and economically active people living in those rural areas is constantly decreasing (Jungsberg et al., 2020).

Despite an initial lag of the research addressing the role of SI for the rural European areas, a growing body of research into SI in rural areas recognises the relevance of SI in developing and sustaining rural communities (Esparcia, 2014; Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2017; Nijnik et al., 2019; Živojinović et al., 2019). Moreover, more recent research has been promoting a shift in the discourse surrounding rural areas, claiming that rural regions have the potential to find new ways of addressing such challenges, "being innovative when they have the necessary space and power to act" (Bosworth et al., 2016b, p. 458) and having the potential "to kick off the discussion on the feasibility of post-growth trajectories" (Dax and Strahl, 2018, p. 299).

In parallel to the research looking into the potential for innovation existing in rural areas, the importance of SI initiatives for rural regions stems from their potential to address the challenges and deficits emerging due to austerity measures and state withdrawal in rural areas (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020). While aiming to fill those gaps, SI initiatives must strike a delicate balance between the civic self-reliance and self-organisation of rural actors, and the promotion of cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations (Bock, 2016), where a multi-level

middle ground for collaboration is of utmost importance in ensuring decision-making be shared and transparent. Establishing such a middle ground that is rooted in social collaboration and social learning where novel practices are developed calls for a multi-stakeholder approach where SI processes would transcend both sectoral and geographical division (idem). While it is true that rural SI is connected to specific geographical areas, SI activities are associated with new social interactions and arrangements that go beyond the geographic areas in which rural communities live (Bosworth et al., 2016a, 2016b; Howaldt and Schwarz, 2017; Noack and Federwisch, 2019). Thus, SI has the potential to shift the perspective from fixed actors in separate rural areas towards a "more fluid image of shifting actors, relations and functional networks operating across different geographical areas, beyond the local and the rural" (Jungsberg et al., 2020, p. 277). As a result, new modes of collaboration and new ways of social interaction that involve actors both from different locations and different sectors elevate the ability of rural communities to address unmet social needs in a more effective and collaborative manner (Bock, 2016; Ziegler, 2017; Howaldt et al., 2018; Richter, 2019). In turn, such new modes of collaboration and interaction have a potential to increase community participation and contribute to the empowerment of communities (Edwards-Schachter and Tams, 2013; Lindberg, 2017) through bringing together actors operating across localities and sectors (Howaldt et al., 2018; Neumeier, 2012; Ziegler, 2017; Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020).

Additionally, SI is assumed to support rural communities and contribute to their development in several ways. SI can support sustainable rural development through building upon neo-endogenous strategies (Neumeier, 2012) that mobilise local resources to satisfy local public needs, while creating economic value at the same time (Di Iacovo et al., 2014). SI initiatives, by developing actors' context-sensitive arrangements, can support rural communities by contributing to reducing social inequalities and disproportionate resource allocation (Živojinović et al., 2019). Through creating and sustaining networks among actors (Neumeier, 2012; Gobattoni et al., 2015) and advancing more efficient collaboration between them (Grinberga-Zalite et al., 2015), SI contributes to rethinking social and spatial solidarity among actors involved (Bock, 2016). By the adaptation of innovative solutions in the form of changed attitudes and practices (Richter, 2019), SI can encourage local linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al., 2018) as well as change unsustainable behaviours and remove structural constraints (Gobattoni et al., 2015). Applied thusly, SI has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas through collective action and community self-advocacy.

In summary, SI is seen as an important and uptaking tool for rural communities, since, due to the gaps in service and product delivery and the overall compromised wellbeing of many rural areas, SI should be seen as "desirable for the public and voluntary sectors to attempt bottom-up solutions" (Slee and Polman, 2021, p. 268), while also being "not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern" (Bock, 2016, p. 570).

Understanding of social innovation in the context of the thesis

Despite the diversity of approaches to SI coming from urban studies (Moulaert et al., 2013), economics (Pol and Ville, 2009), sociology (Gillwald, 2002; Christmann, 2020), some key aspects that are of essence across various approaches and conceptualisations in studying SI can be identified.

Firstly, SI should be studied as a phenomenon that is path dependent and context-sensitive. Complex environments and territories where SI is introduced, as well as the political frameworks, institutional environments, cultural norms and values of a place where a certain SI project is embedded/ is happening should be taken into account due to context-sensitivity being a systemic characteristic of SI (Oeij et al., 2018). Secondly, SI is not just about finding new solutions, it is about the change it brings. Through providing solutions that are more relevant to the specific context and to the specific time, SI finds responses that, in turn, activate the process of social change. Thirdly, often SI is understood in terms of 'novel' and 'new' solutions and approaches to unmet needs and societal challenges; however, such novelty has been talked about as 'relative' novelty, meaning that sometimes SI is a novel combination of pre-existing solutions and/ or ideas that were combined in an unexpected way. Most SI is not about absolute novelty but rather 'relative novelty' (Gillwald, 2000, p. 10). As such, the research should also acknowledge the fact that what is considered to be socially innovative in one context and for particular groups of actors, might not be considered SI in other settings. Fourthly, SI is not an absolute when it comes to desirability - this underlines a subjective character of SI perception where SI is "perceived as an improvement by a group and as a regression by others" (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014, p. 44). Therefore, studying SI in rural areas should be concerned with various perceptions/ attitudes towards (innovative) change and how such a change is enabled/ disabled in the process of creation and promotion. Fifthly, SI is also not an absolute good in itself. It has been argued that the research should carefully consider the 'dark sides' SI might have (Nicholls et al., 2015; Larsson and Brandsen, 2016; Fougère and Meriläinen, 2021). Due to potentially having socially divisive or destructive objectives and intentions, SI might also have deviant or unintended consequences that achieve negative social effects (e.g. widened social exclusion of

some groups from its focus). The central issue of empowerment that SI brings with it has also been questioned in the literature since by empowering some it might neglect the others (Avelino et al., 2019). Lastly, SI, being a process that triggers change and contributes to the reconfiguration of practices, always involves conflicting interests - what is 'socially desirable' varies for different groups. Such conflictual nature of SI should be acknowledged, with the potential for conflict to arise due to competing new ideas, where "the competition and even conflicts can emerge between top-down actors, but also between bottom-up actors, as well as between top-down and bottom-up actors" (Christmann, 2020, p. 427). Such can be due to the lack of support structures, communicative structures or financial means that tend to hinder the implementation of novel ideas, practices and, consequently, SI. However, conflict must be perceived as a dimension that pervades the entire innovation process and often leads to progress (idem).

Drawing on existing definitions and approaches discussed above, and keeping in mind the focus of the current research on the role of SI in the development of rural regions, a provisional understanding of SI has been developed. In this research, SI is understood to combine both the outcome dimension (provision of goods and services that have not been provided and addressing the needs that have not been satisfied otherwise) and the process dimension. Since the organisations working in promoting SI in rural regions not only have to (sometimes) be the alternative/ the complementary force to the failed provision by the market/ the state, but also strive to promote more participatory, bottom-up culture, they have to balance both dimensions of SI (from the research) in their daily routine (from the practice). Therefore, in this research SI is understood as an action/ activity/ project that:

- aims at more participatory nature of the projects, engages local communities and beyond;
- builds on the idea of novelty, either of an idea or of an idea for a specific context ('relative' novelty);
- aims at improving long term opportunities for individuals and/or communities;
- supports and promotes the capacity building among the communities;
- builds upon the goal of asset building rather than just the needs satisfaction;
- contributes to social change that can result in an improved access to the decision-making for the communities.

Thus, such understanding provides a framework to investigate and analyse the initiatives established and promoted in different contexts, with the specific focus of current research on such initiatives in the European rural regions. Despite rural regions being regarded in both

research and policy as 'lagging behind' or trapped in a 'circle of rural decline' (OECD, 2006), more recently a significant body of research unfolding the potential of rural regions for sustainable, integrated development has been gaining momentum (e.g. Vasta et al., 2019; Köhler et al., 2019). In light of this research, SI has been also discussed as a way to contribute to unlocking the potential of rural areas and bringing about positive change. In the situation of the state withdrawal, lack of services and products, and demographic change SI has been seen as a way to change the perspective of actors (both internal and external), promote empowerment and (more) participatory practices, help in building capacity and assets for the local communities.

For the purposes of the current research, however, it is important to address the connection between SI and the role it plays in the development of rural regions. The link between SI and the regional development (MacCallum, 2009; Moulaert and Mehmood, 2011; Thomas and Pugh, 2020), with the specific focus on rural areas (Rover et al., 2016; Sánchez-Martínez et al., 2020; Noack and Federwisch, 2020), has been addressed in the research and policy, however, only to a certain extent. Within the evolution of rural development paradigms, discussing rural development through the lenses of exogenous, endogenous, and neo-endogenous (and even exogenous) approaches, it is important to both present the understanding of regional development as well as rural development approaches utilised within the context of the thesis - and their interrelation to the concept of SI.

Understanding regional development within the context of the thesis

Traditionally, the economic dimensions such as growth, employment as well as incomes have been at the forefront of defining local and regional development (Armstrong and Taylor, 2000; Pike et al., 2016), approaching regional development as "a set of activities aimed at improving the economic wellbeing of an area" (Beer et al., 2003, p. 5). Defined by OECD in a rather broad way, regional development has been said to represent a general effort to reduce regional disparities by supporting (employment and wealth-generating) economic activities in regions. Defining regional development in a cohesive, standardised way is a rather difficult task as there are many definitions of local and regional development.

However, despite the said absence of a unified definition, over recent years local and regional development strategies tend to resort to outlining the basic features of the approach prior to specifying its particular content (Pike et al., 2016), with the dominant economic focus in local and regional development concepts and definitions has broadened since the early 2000s (idem). White and Gasser (2001) establish four features that characterise local and regional

development strategies, wherein such strategies (i) require participation and social dialogue, (ii) are based on territory, (iii) entail the mobilisation of local resources and competitive advantages, and (iv) are locally owned and managed. Argued by some authors, regional (economic) development has also been known for its quantitative and qualitative attributes (e.g. Johannson et al., 2011), with attention typically paid to the quantitative measures of the issues such as wealth and income levels, job creation or employment levels, the availability of services etc. In the meantime, the concerns with the qualitative attributes of regional development started to gain momentum, with qualitative considerations such as generating creative capital, promoting sustainable development, creating social and financial equity, creating the manifold of various types of employment as well as improving quality of life being of great concern in the processes of regional development. Such turn towards a more holistic approach, not solely focusing on the economic underpinnings of regional development, has been reflected in the understanding of regional development as "a process of positively oriented changes in all elements of a given spatial system, that is—in the economic potential and structure, the natural environment, the infrastructural equipment, the living levels of the inhabitants, as well as the spatial order and organisation" (Komornicki and Czapiewski, 2020, p. 80).

The failure of strong economic focus in regional development, together with the traditional top-down policies and the challenges posed by globalisation, has led to a serious rethinking of local and regional development by practitioners and academics. Resulting from this, a series of innovative, bottom-up local and regional development policies have emerged since 1990 (Stöhr, 1990; Amin, 2000). According to Pike et al. (2016), despite the shift from centralised, top-down policies towards more bottom-up local and regional development approaches, that is not based on a single or clearly defined theoretical underpinning of regional development, "this model of tailor-made approaches to the development of territories has progressively been gaining ground as the foundation for new development strategies" (Pike et al., 2016, p. 16, referencing Vázquez Barquero, 2002), Simultaneously, globalisation, alongside the increased interconnectivity of places, has changed the discourse around (regional) development, with some parts of the world benefitting from it and some falling behind. Such change requires new approaches to the development that calls for not just support to those regions falling behind but activating and utilising the regional resources in order to support their own sustainability (endogenous development). Such discourse becomes especially important for rural regions due to the contrasting views as to the experiences of rural areas. Some suggest that rural regions have been regarded as the lagging regions (Psaltopoulos et al., 2004; Ilbery et al., 2004), "left behind" places (MacKinnon et al., 2022), or regions being structurally weak (Neumeier and Pollermann,

2014; Mayer and Habersetzer, 2019); at the same time, despite - or even because of - the myriad of challenges that rural regions face, those areas are the ones where the creative and innovative solutions have been found as a way of overcoming such challenges (Bock, 2012; Noack and Federwisch, 2019).

Despite the fact that scholars (e.g. Moulaert et al., 2013) see regional development as one of the four most relevant fields in SI research, rural regions are still left out of focus to a large extent (see Christmann, 2020). Regions evolve and change over time in ways that affect local and regional development definitions, practice and policies, with regions being seen as evolving economic, social, political, ecological, and cultural constructs (MacKinnon et al., 2022). As such, "recognising the limitations of conventional regional policy approaches, fresh ways of understanding and explaining the economic, social, environmental and political circumstances and problems of 'left behind' places are sorely needed, alongside the exploration of new ideas and policy approaches" (MacKinnon et al., 2022, p. 39). Thus, as one of such "fresh" approaches to the development of rural regions, neo-endogenous development (discussed against exogenous and endogenous approaches in regional development) is of a particular importance within the context of this thesis.

The paradigm shift in rural development: neo-endogenous development approach within the context of the thesis

In recent decades, rural development has been undergoing a shift from exogenous development (understood as the development driven from outside) towards the endogenous approaches (the development driven from within). Despite the fact that the endogenous approach has regarded local actors and their knowledge and experience as essential for the respective area's development, some criticism has still been levelled. It has been pointed out that the idea of rural areas striving for a sustainable socio-economic development in an independent manner without being considered a part of a wider context/ environment can be regarded as 'ideal' (Galdeano-Gómez et al., 2011). Therefore, the idea of (purely) endogenous development has been challenged by the neo-endogenous approach where the development of any locality - influenced by and dependent on the wider contexts, - can only be based on a mix of exogenous and endogenous forces, and the local level must come into interaction with the extra-local stakeholders and contexts. Thus, rural development approaches, rather than being based in the old endogenous doctrine, have been moving towards the neo-endogenous approach where a great emphasis is put on creating general conditions for stimulating inner endogenous development in specific regions (ibid).

As neo-endogenous, Ray regards the development 'in which extra-local factors are recognised and regarded as essential but which retains a belief in the potential of local areas to shape their future' (Ray, 2001b, p. 4). Neumeier (2012) underpins neo-endogenous rural development to be rooted in the connectivity between the resources available within the region (endogenous) coupled together with the extra local knowledge and resources required at the regional level (exogenous) (Neumeier, 2012). The importance of the neo-endogenous approach to rural development has been pointed out in his work due to the shift from sectoral to territorial rural development strategies resulting from the socioeconomic structural change in rural areas (Neumeier, 2012, p. 49). Such territorial development based on the neo-endogenous strategies should strive to keep a delicate balance between innovation and stability. As put by Magel (2000), what is necessary is "the development of sustainable structures and establishing a form of balance that, on the one hand, enables innovation, creativity, new ideas and visions in action; and, on the other hand, maintains the necessary stability" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 49, citing Magel, 2000, p. 7). In addition to that, some scholars believe that for the successful development of rural regions it is necessary to mobilise endogenous potentials to "outweigh different interests and to strengthen regional identity as a central precondition for both regional development and the success of neo-endogenous regional development" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 59, translated from Laschewski and Neu, 2004).

Such an approach has been argued for due to the fact that differences experienced by regions in their development can no longer be explained by physical distance and availability of financial resources only. Instead, such differences have to be approached as a "result of the different organisational and technical abilities of regional actors to apply practical and technical know-how to the regional resources available" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 59, citing Cooke, in after Klich, 2003, p. 37).

Bock (2016) has argued that the neo-endogenous approach acknowledges the importance of external links and connections between communities in order to contribute to local development, but that this approach, in contrast to the exogenous model, does not consider development as imported from outside. Without disregarding the bottom-up character of the development as supported by endogenous approach, neo-endogenous approach places a greater emphasis on the interconnectivity between local and extra-local actors and stakeholders in the political and administrative ecosystem (from regional up to European level) are seen as part of the extra-local environment that can potentially be recruited by/ partnered with by localities in support of their regeneration strategies (Ray, 2006).

Both research and practice also indicate towards a significant link between SI and neo-endogenous development (Chapter 3), since both ideas strongly focus on the local resources and assets, supporting bottom-up initiative, establishing links and urban-rural partnerships (Noack and Federwisch, 2019). In light of the neo-endogenous development approach, SI can be supported and promoted through the focus on local assets, resources and potential embedded within the extra-local (regional, national, transnational) collaboration. At the same time, NED supports and promotes SI by moving beyond the dependency of rural areas from their urban counterparts through harvesting and nourishing local assets that, in turn, are seen as opportunities rather than obstacles. At the same time, SI is promoted through NED at the balance point of of exogenous and endogenous actors, with the primary role taken by the endogenous stakeholders.

Simultaneosly, SI also triggers and encourages NED through building on citizens´ and enterprises´ capacity and approaching them as self-reliant development actors. Additionally, SI is supporting the neo-endogenous developemtn by implementing innovative solutions to address the needs and interests of local communities through the capacity building for local communities, while ultimately promoting shift towards asset-based development, utilising unique local knowledge and connecting it to wider environments.

Understanding of impacts and the impact assessment in the field of social innovation

Alongside the theories on SI and neo-endogenous rural development, the thesis builds upon the result-chain model corresponding to the Theory of Change (ToC). The issue of impact is a cornerstone of the notion of SI, with scholars arguing that an impact as such is a central part of the SI process, with an implicit emphasis on the SI impacts on individuals and society (Baturina and Bežovan, 2015). At the same time, scholars argue that core elements of successful SI are durability and broad impact (Westley and Antadze, 2010). Within the field of SI, the issue of impacts has been addressed to a certain extent, with the scholars exploring said SI impacts in the context of energy transitions (Selvakkumaran and Ahlgren, 2020), spatial and mountain research (Perlik, 2021), forestry research (Ludvig et al., 2021), and sustainable tourism (Castro-Spila et al., 2018), to name a few. Simultaneously, the questions on assessment of the impacts of SI have been gaining momentum, aiming to answer questions of cause-and-effect (Gertler et al., 2016) and to identify changes that are directly attributable to a SI initiative. Various methods have been proposed to assess the impacts of SI initiatives (e.g. see Antadze and Westley, 2012; Krlev et al., 2014; Mildenberger et al., 2020), however, without producing commonly established tools. At the same time, despite its relevance, the SI impacts, alongside their

assessment and evaluation, are important issues addressed in the study of SI only to a certain extent (Portales, 2019). Thus, both the understanding (as well as the core elements) of SI impacts, as well as the ways in which such impacts can be assessed, are considered in the thesis.

Within the field of economics, impacts can be understood as the value created as a consequence of someone's activity (Roberts Enterprise Development Fund, 2001) and the value experienced by beneficiaries and all others affected (Kolodinsky et al., 2010). Therefore, the impact represents the "effect at the final level of the causal chain that connects the action to the eventual impact on society" (Maas and Grieco, 2017, p. 114). According to Maas and Grieco (2017), such a causal chain, often referred to as impact value chain, makes a distinction between the initial resources used by the organisation to introduce an action (input); the action undertaken (project or activity); the immediate quantitative result of the action (output); the direct changes in the community, people, organisations, systems, and institutions (outcome) followed by the highest order effects of the initial action undertaken (impact) (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014; Liket et al., 2014; Maas and Grieco, 2017).

In the field of SI research, some further elaborations have been made to distinguish along the result-chain model according to the Theory of Change (ToC). The ToC is typically based on the analysis of a results chain "detaining the causal sequence beginning with inputs, moving through activities and outputs, and culminating in outcomes, impacts and feedback and learning processes" (Morra-Imas and Rist, 2009, p. 167). According to the ToC with relation to the SI research, outcomes derive from the use of the outputs by the direct beneficiaries of the action/intervention and represent "behavioural changes that produce new routines, decisions, rules and institutions" (Secco et al., 2019a, p. 60). According to Ravazzoli et al. (2021), SI impacts represent "[long-term] changes that affect different dimensions of territorial capital (i.e., economy, society, environment, and institutions) for the territory in which SI occurs" (Ravazzoli et al., 2021, p. 1). As proposed by Camagni and Capello (2013), territorial capital may be seen as "a set of localised assets—natural, human, artificial, organisational, relational and cognitive—that constitute the competitive potential of a given territory" (Camagni and Capello, 2013, p. 1387). The outcomes can be both intended and unintended, as well as positive and negative. Simultaneously, impacts derive from an accumulation of outcomes and usually have broader effects, including those effects on direct and indirect beneficiaries of an SI initiative. Impacts are changes, both intended and unintended, positive and negative, that produce "new routines, rules and institutions in the whole local community and society" (idem).

At the same time, the question of assessing, evaluating and/or measuring the impacts of SI is closely linked to the understanding of impacts as such, as well as the obstacles and hurdles

in their assessment. Firstly, in both research and practice, there is no agreement on what kind of indicators or metrics might capture the SI impacts or allow for the evaluation of SI to be carried out (Nicholls, 2015; Cunha and Benneworth, 2020). Being cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional by its nature, SI impacts are difficult to measure since SI involves actors at a range of spatial scales, focusing on creating social value and community development (Baturina and Bežovan, 2015), the dimensions that do not easily translate into the numerical form. As such, said absence of a unified approach to SI impact assessment is perceived as one of the most pressing challenges wherein SI initiatives find it difficult to navigate through the overwhelming diversity of approaches and identify (or design new and suitable) applicable tools that would capture the complexity of SI projects.

Secondly, the SI itself and the SI impacts quite often take on an intangible character. SI entails the development of new ideas, changes in attitudes, re-establishing practices, and does not necessarily result in the development of a product (Krlev et al., 2014). It most often brings about an improvement in communities' well-being, altering and changing the existing practices, triggering more empowerment, eventually contributing to a more dynamic and productive society (BEPA, 2010). In addition to that, quite often SI produces intangible impacts, such as a principle, an idea, a piece of legislation, a social movement, or a civic intervention, rather than tangible output (e.g. a product, process or technology) (Phills et al., 2008). Thus, the SI impacts are considered to be much more intangible than those of technical innovations, particularly those leading to the creation of new products or services. This helps explain the relative paucity of approaches measuring SI impacts (Nicholls, 2015).

Thirdly, the complex, non-linear nature of SI processes - and the issue of causality, - should be taken into account. SI is a change that comes about as a result of linkages between complex phenomena, social processes, and involves differentiated outcomes (Nicholls and Dees, 2015). SI is not a static process, rather SI projects happen under constant development, always needing to be changed and adapted. Additionally, since most of the time SI emerges within complex systems, the dynamics of the challenges and the innovation are nonlinear, uncertain, and unpredictable (Hazy et al., 2010; Westley and Antadze, 2010) and the "cause-and-effect" means of IA are not easily applicable to SI projects (European Commission, 2014).

The causal relationship between the action taken and impacts that have been observed cannot always be attributed to a specific project implemented, with other (contextual) factors coming into play. The importance of taking into account the context is due to the high embeddedness of SI and its impacts. SI is advocated to emerge in a local, bottom-up process, where such initiatives are highly contextualised and respond to pressing needs of a specific

group embedded in a specific territory. As such, any SI assessment has to account for a multitude of various (unique) features and factors corresponding to the needs specific to both community and territory, with SI processes being regarded as complex and socially embedded (Bund et al., 2015).

Fourthly, a strong focus on output and outcome reporting over the impact assessment is a persisting challenge. While trying to implement the impact assessment strategies, the said initiatives face overall difficulties in delineating output and outcome reporting and the impact assessment. The main challenge here manifests itself through the reporting on the outcomes and development of a set of impact indicators that should establish a causal link to a particular project and/or intervention, as well as its outputs and outcomes.

Lastly, SI initiatives are faced with a myriad of practical challenges and bureaucratic burdens concerning the IA. Firstly, the complexity of tools and methods of IA that exist in academia and practice impose difficulties on meaningful selection and implementation of IA. Having limited resources, actors in both cases pointed out the need for additional training and support to actually engage in a meaningful assessment of the SI projects' impacts. Secondly, limited data availability on the SI projects further leads to the challenges of ex-post evaluation. Such limited data availability is perceived as a great challenge since there is no structured way to gather the data needed for evaluation (Preskill and Beer, 2012). Furthermore, the lack of necessary time required to execute such assessments is seen as one of the pressing challenges, imposing ever-increasing restrictions on SI initiatives. In addition to that, there is a lack of other resources required to carry out IA, e.g. specialised knowledge and the know-how required to implement and carry out IA.

Based on the above, current thesis takes into account both the ToC, focusing on types, scales and domains of the SI impacts, and the SI impact assessment stream of research (e.g. Nicholls et al., 2019), highlighting the complex nature of the SI impact assessment – and the need to account for the multi-facet, cross-sectoral nature of SI and its impacts.

Research design and methodology

Case study as a methodology selected

In order to understand complex issues in their full potential, while taking into account the contextual factors, a methodology allowing in-depth analysis of a phenomenon is needed. The thesis employed a case study approach, as case studies provide a rich empirical instance of some phenomenon, typically using multiple data sources (Yin, 1994). Current research is based on

the cases of two regions looking at the experience of the organisations working on SI projects in the field of regional and local development. Allowing the researcher to collect and analyse rich data providing the context, the connection between the actors in the field, deeper understanding of if and how SI produces the impacts and what factors have an influence in these processes, case study methodology proves to be a suitable design for current study. As Baxter and Jack put is, case study

> is an approach to research that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. This ensures that the issue is not explored through one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood (Baxter and Jack, 2008, p.544)

According to Yin (2003), the choice in favour of a case study approach can be justified by several reasons. A case study approach should be considered when (a) the study focuses on answering "how" and "why" questions; (b) a researcher cannot manipulate the behaviour of the actors involved in the study; (c) a researcher attempts to cover the context and contextual factors based on their relevance for the phenomenon under study; or (d) there are no clear boundaries between the phenomenon and context.

One of the crucial steps while designing the methodological approach is to decide on what exactly is the case of the study, in other words, what a researcher is striving to analyse. In the current study of the role and the impacts of SI in the development of rural regions of Mühlviertel (AT) and Baixo Alentejo (PT) themselves represent two cases under study. With the differences in demographic and economic development in two regions, the complexity of relationships among actors, various approaches to regional and local development, two regions represent the ground where SI initiatives operate at (see Case study selection subsection).

One of the main pitfalls of the case study design lies in the tendency of a researcher to pose the questions that are too broad or choosing a phenomenon for the study that has too many objectives for one study. Therefore, some authors suggest setting the boundaries for the case study to be based on. Some of the suggestions include the boundaries for the cases based on time and place (Creswell, 2003), time and activity (Stake, 1995) and on definition and context (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Such boundaries could provide a clear distinction on what will and will not be included in the scope of the research and also indicate the depth of the study (Baxter and Jack, 2008). For the current research, keeping in mind the research question, the cases under study will focus on the role and the impacts of SI initiatives in the contexts of two respective regions. Simultaneously, the focus of the thesis is placed on the role of SI in rural

development, as well as on the impacts produced by the projects of SI initiatives in question, the types of impacts, as well as the challenges and opportunities faced while working in SI field and while assessing the impacts.

Among various comparative research designs, current research employs a few-country comparison approach based on a case study. Depending on a comparative research design chosen, the strategy of comparison could be either case oriented, variable oriented or the combination of two (see Figure 1.2). In this particular study, the research relies on a few-country case study comparison design that enables a researcher to investigate and explore the differences within and between cases (see Figure 1.2). The goal of this design is to understand the similarities and differences between the cases while taking into account different contexts within cases. Additionally, such design allows the researcher to conduct analysis and draw conclusions for each setting but also across settings.

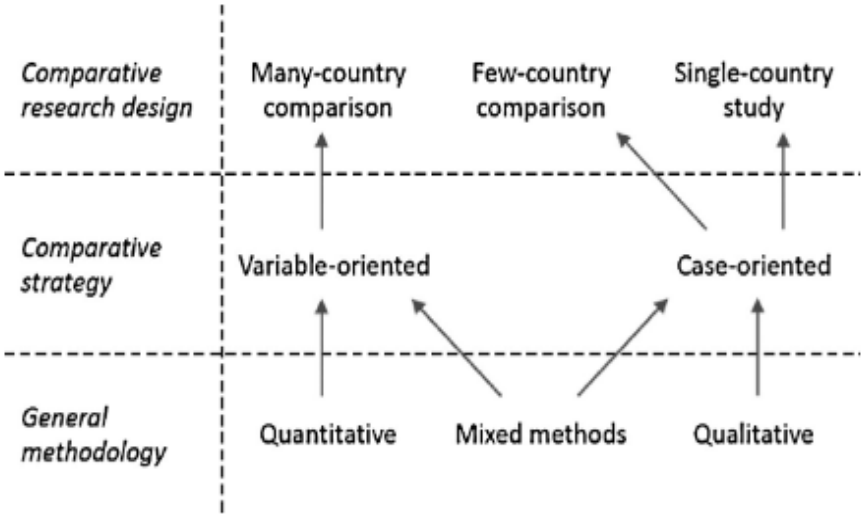

Figure 1.2. Relationship of comparative research design to methods. Source: Cacace et al., 2013, p. 159

Following the identification of the cases, it is suggested to identify the type of a case study design based on the overall study purpose depending on whether a researcher is looking to describe a case, explore a case, or compare between two or more cases. In this regard, Baxter and Jack (2008) have presented a typology of approaches to case study design - including explanatory and exploratory, single and multiple case design - depending on the aim and the research questions of a study (see Baxter and Jack, 2008).

Case studies selection

Within the framework of Horizon 2020 RurAction project, the focus was placed on the rural European regions and the work of local and regional actors done in addressing the challenges faced by said territories through SE and SI. For the selection of the case study regions, the RurAction team relied on the EU definition of a region on the NUTS III level[1]. The NUTS classification (Nomenclature of territorial units for statistics) is a hierarchical system for dividing up the economic territory of the EU for the purposes of i) the collection, development and harmonisation of European regional statistics, ii) socio-economic analyses of the regions, and iii) framing of EU regional policies. The classification consists of three levels where NUTS I are the major socio-economic regions, NUTS II represent basic regions for the application of regional policies, and NUTS III are small regions for specific diagnoses. These territorial units are the smallest units of the territorial nomenclature of the EU with a population size between 150,000 and 800,000 inhabitants. The following specific criteria were used for the selection of the RurAction study regions:

(i) According to the urban-rural typology of the EU the regions are predominantly rural, i.e. they have a low population density of less than 300 inhabitants/km2 and lack urban centres with more than 200,000 residents. Additionally, predominantly rural regions represent a part of the urban-rural typology, they are NUTS III level regions where at least 50 % of the population live in rural grid cells.

(ii) According to the RurAction proposal, rural regions are regarded as being structurally weak in their respective countries, in terms of economic, social, and demographic development, having negative consequences for the quality of life. Additionally, compared to other regions within their countries, the selected regions are faced with significant deficits in the provision of desirable goods and services due to the decline in infrastructure.

(iii) At the same time, the selected regions show activities of social entrepreneurship and are implementing SI projects that, along various axes of intervention, act in the domain of regional development as one of the foci of their activities.

Against this background, in order to investigate the role and the impact of SI on the development of rural areas, two cases were selected during the conceptual stage of the research. The territories under study are two NUTS III regions: Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) and Mühlviertel (Austria) (Figure 1.3).

[1] https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/nuts/background

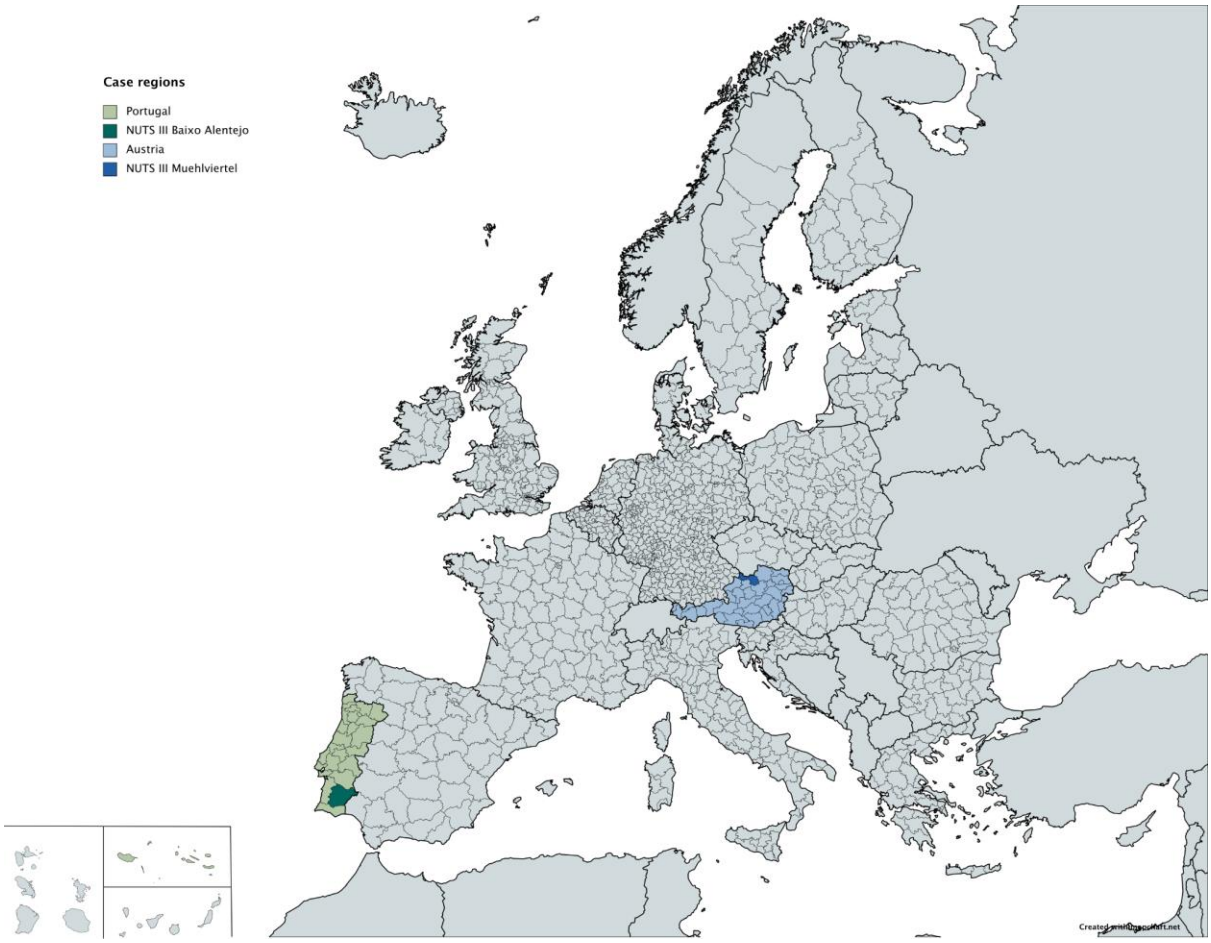

Figure 1.3. Map of Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel case regions in Portugal and Austria. Source: author's own elaboration on the NUTS III map based on https://mapchart.net/europe-nuts3.html

The interest in choosing two case regions was caused by their advanced levels of rural marginalisation: both regions are identified as predominantly rural regions under the EU urban-rural typology (European Commission, 2013). At the same time, both Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel are regarded as being structurally weak in their respective countries. As claimed in rural research, differences between "well-to-do and marginal rural areas have been increasing both across and within countries" (Bock, 2016, p. 552). Thus, compared to other regions in the respective countries, the selected regions faced significant deficits in the provision of desirable goods and services, population decline, and weakened economic activity. When it comes to the geographies of NUTS III regions in question, both Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel are border regions, thus representing the physical and cultural border between their respective countries and neighbouring states.

At the same time, there are significant differences in the development of both regions and their respective countries. Firstly, two regions represent contrasting economic, social and institutional terrains for the SI initiatives to unfold in. Secondly, the tradition of local development and rural policy are quite different in two said contexts, where Austria is considered to have been among the pioneering countries in terms of local development and the implementation of the rural and local development programs (Stöhr, 1990), such as LEADER, with the Portuguese local development catching up at a later stage. Thirdly, also confirmed through the data collected, the implementation and promotion of innovation - and SI respectively, - has been approached differently, with higher degree of acceptance in Mühlviertel compared to Baixo Alentejo.

Despite the fact that regions under study are quite different in their territories, population, economic and social development, they were chosen as study areas based on both their similarities and their differences, specifically their backgrounds in regional development (where Austria is considered among the pioneering countries). Moreover, both regions, despite falling under the same categories of predominantly rural and structurally weak regions, are not experiencing challenges such as low economic activity, rural exodus, ageing of population etc. to the same extent. Despite all, the activities attempting at SI promotion are undertaken in both cases through the work of local development initiatives (LDIs) which makes an interesting ground for finding the commonalities and divergences surrounding the role and the potential impacts SI could have on the development of respective case studies.

Summing up, two cases under study represent the arenas for analysing the process, actors and impacts of SI in rural European areas, with the background information on the selected cases presented below.

The Portuguese case: Baixo Alentejo region

Baixo Alentejo, a part of the larger Alentejo region (NUTS II), is bordered to the north by the District of Évora, to the east by Spain, and to the south by the District of Faro. The NUTS III region consists of 13 municipalities: Aljustrel, Almodôvar, Alvito, Barrancos, Beja, Castro Verde, and Cuba, Ferreira do Alentejo, Mértola, Moura, Ourique, Serpa, and Vidigueira (Figure 1.4). The region covers an area of 8,544.6 km², corresponding to 10.8% of the national territory, with a total population of 117, 868 inhabitants (INE, 2019).

The region is one of the most sparsely populated Portuguese regions with a population density of 13, 9 inhabitants/ km² in 2018 (Eurostat), lowering further to 13, 8 inhabitants/ km² in 2019 (Eurostat, 2019). Over the past decades, the region has undergone an average negative

population growth due to rural exodus, which especially concerns younger population, and ageing of the population (Margaras, 2019). As such, the demographic data shows some signs of negative population development and the overall loss of population.

Figure 1.4. Map of the NUTS II region Alentejo with NUTS III regions. Source: INE, 2019

INE Regional Development Composite Index (RDCI) provides additional contextual information, compiling the RDCI along three dimensions of competitiveness, cohesion and environmental quality of NUTS III Portuguese regions. In 2019, the competitiveness index for Baixo Alentejo was approx. 90 (Portugal = 100), placing it in the 3rd quintile (INE, 2021). The cohesion index result for Baixo Alentejo in 2019 was registered at 86 (Portugal = 100), meaning that, alongside several other regions, Baixo Alentejo scored the lowest cohesion index in the south (INE, 2021) in terms of regional development. Within the environmental domain, analysing the environmental quality of the Portuguese NUTS III regions, Baixo Alentejo scored higher above the national average (102 against 100), thus, being placed in the 4th quintile and

suggesting high regional environmental quality. At the same time, the result of the composite index of regional development shows that Baixo Alentejo scored below the national average, with the overall index of regional development for Portugal registering at 100, thus, being considered as a NUTS III region in the 4th quintile. All of the above suggests that, compared to the national level, Baixo Alentejo represents a rural region with certain developmental challenges.

The employment structure of Baixo Alentejo region, based on the National Institute of Statistics data (INE), conveys that the biggest share of people in employment in 2017 were employed in services (tertiary sector), followed by the agricultural and forestry (primary sector) and the secondary sector (see Table 1.1).

	Gross value added (millions of euros)		Total employment (thousands of people)
Sectors	2017	2018 (Po)	2017
Agriculture, livestock production, hunting, forestry and fishing	226,900	229,007	15,142
Mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; water abstraction, purification and supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities; construction	618,091	635,345	8,430
Services	1 061,170	1 093,644	28,736

Table 1.1. Gross value added and total employment and economic activity by sectors for Baixo Alentejo. Source: INE, 2018

As such, the brief introduction of the region suggests that Baixo Alentejo, NUTS III region, follows a trend that can be also observed at the level of the NUTS II region of Alentejo, where the regions had to undergo the changes in the economic, demographic and social domains, faced with the challenges of economic diversification, weakened infrastructures, demographic challenges such as shrinking and ageing population. However, such an outlook on the regional development of Baixo Alentejo has been challenged with the recent development, where the

interior south of the country is becoming more active in the areas of ecological tourism, alternative farming approaches, sustainable development etc. (e.g. Dinis et al., 2019).

The Austrian case: Mühlviertel region

Mühlviertel, a part of the larger Upper Austria region (NUTS II), borders Bavaria and Bohemia to the north, and Lower Austria to the south and east. The NUTS III region of Mühlviertel consists of 4 political districts (*politische Bezirke*) of Freistadt, Perg, Rohrbach, and Urfahr-Umgebung, and 120 municipalities (*Gemeinde*) (see Figure 1.5). The region covers an area of 2,660.17 km^2 with a total population of 209,304 (Eurostat, 2019). The region is a moderately populated region, with a population density registered at 79,4 inhabitants/km² (2018), increasing to 79,7 inhabitants/km² in 2019 (Eurostat, 2019). Despite being a low population density region according to the OECD/ Eurostat classification, Mühlviertel has been experiencing a steady growth in terms of population density.

According to the previous research, the Mühlviertel region has experienced an accumulated growth in the GDP adjusted for market prices of 50% from 2007 to 2017, with the population remaining stable around 200 thousand, and the unemployment rate remaining low, estimated at 4.8% (RurAction Network, 2020).

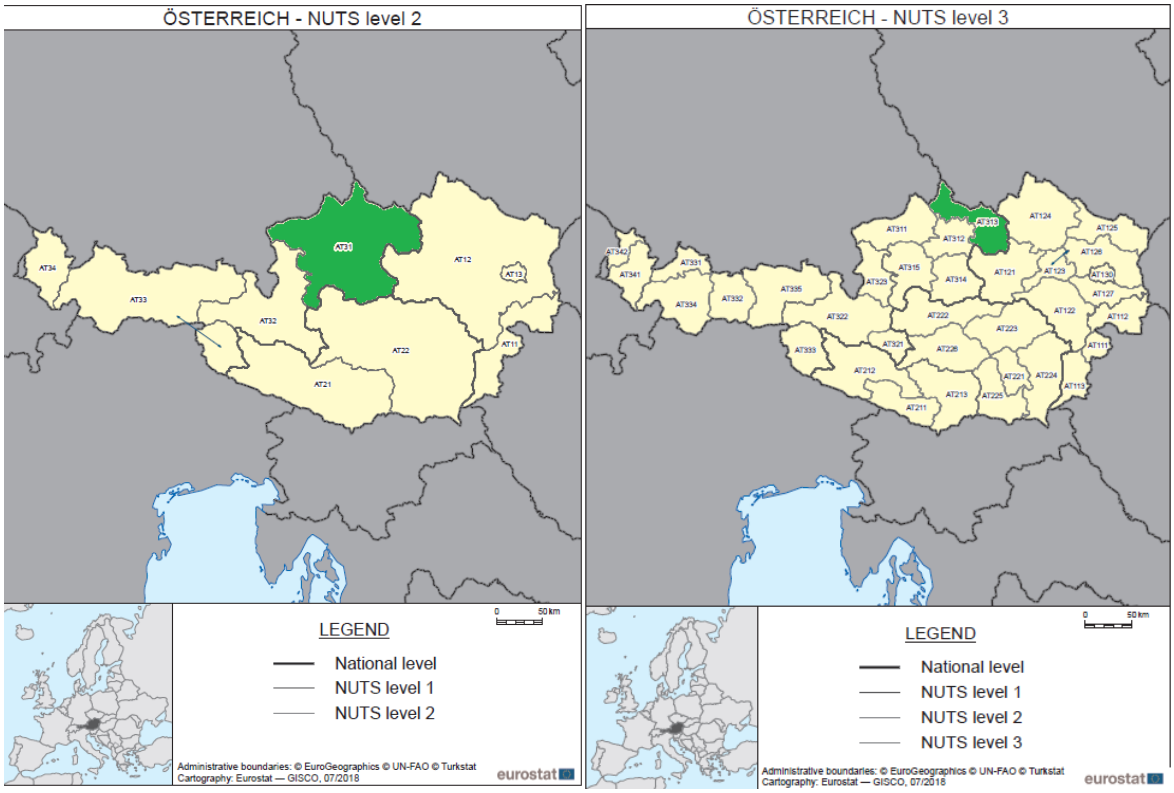

Figure 1.5. NUTS II Upper Austria region and NUTS III Mühlviertel region

Source: Eurostat

In previous research, the Mühlviertel region has been classified as a geographically unfavourable and structurally weak area, including a weak industrial sector, a rather low purchasing power, a lack of infrastructure concerning mobility like railroad networks and rural migration, especially of young people. Simultaneously, rural depopulation has a significant influence on the economic and social development of rural areas due to rural exodus leading to the lack of critical mass in the regions, availability of fewer services and job opportunities and the increase of urban-rural divide. However, the data by OECD for Austria (OECD, 2011) illustrates that only 23% of the population lived in predominantly urban regions that correspond to less than 5% of land area followed by 30% of the population residing in the intermediate regions covering 20% of the land. Thus, the highest share of population accounting for 46% lived in predominantly rural areas that also represent the biggest share of land area in Austria (79%).

Data presented above allows for some conclusions to be drawn that shed light on the demographic, social and economic development of the respective NUTS III region. In terms of demographic and economic development, Mühlviertel represents a rather prosperous rural area, where the trends of economic growth and population development are reflecting the NUTS II and national trends. Additionally, further statistical outlook indicates that case studies represent two different regions with significantly different development patterns reflecting on their structural weakness and structural vulnerability (RurAction Network, 2020). Some further investigation provided the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the regional and rural development processes:

i. Both regions under study belong to the counties with significantly varying levels of decentralisation in economic terms. According to OECD (2016), Austria was the 14th most decentralised country with 34% of public expenditures attributable to subnational governments (OECD, 2016), while Portugal ranked as the 32nd most decentralised country with only 11.8% public expenditures attributable to subnational governments.

ii. The NUTS II regions, Alentejo and Baixo Alentejo respectively, were attributed to different groups in terms of regional competitiveness and development. In particular, for the 2014-2020 programming period Upper Austria belonged to the group of “more developed regions”, while Alentejo was placed under the category of “less developed regions” (Chatzichristos & Hennebry, 2021).

iii. At the NUTS III level, two regions differ significantly in terms of the economic outlook. The Mühlviertel GDP per inhabitant (adjusted for current market prices) lies at 93% of the EU average, while the GDP) at current market prices for Baixo Alentejo is at 62%. With regards to the employment structure, Baixo Alentejo's employment is registered at 52.73 thosands for all economic activities, with Mühlviertel's employment registering at 76 thousands employed persons. At the same time, the unemployment rates for both NUTS III are below EU's average, registering at 7, 9% and 4, 8% respectively (see Table 1.2).

Indicators	Baixo Alentejo, Portugal	Mühlviertel, Austria	EU (28)
Gross domestic product (GDP) at current market prices (mln euro)	2,202.29	5,802.56	13,963,897.26
GDP per inhabitant in percentage of the EU average	62%	93%	100%
Employed persons (thousands, all NACE[2]) (2018)	52.73	76.4	207,145.57
Unemployment rate	7,9%	4,8% (estimated)	8,2 %
Population density per square kilometre (2018)	13.9	79.4	108.8

Table 1.2. Indicators of economic development and employment. Source: author's own elaboration based on https://www.pordata.pt/, https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/, https://www.statistik.at/web_de/statistiken/index.html , https://data.oecd.org/

As such, Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel provide two outstanding (and quite different) case studies for the current research, as based on their similarities and differences. Based on the formal similarities, both regions qualify as predominantly rural, structurally weak rural regions within their respective countries. Such regions quite often are associated with the weakened economies, demographic challenges, rural deprivation and marginalisation. However, falling (only formally) under the same category, both Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel also provide two

[2] Statistical Classification of Economic Activities in the European Community, commonly referred to as NACE.

quite contrasting examples in terms of regional development. According to the "circle of declining rural region" (OECD, 2006), while Baixo Alentejo could be described in terms of a certain decline, Mühlviertel does not necessarily fall under the category of a declining rural region.

Thus, the investigation into the role and impacts of SI could provide an interesting outlook into how and in which ways, taking into account very different contexts, said SI initiatives address the challenges, navigate their work and activities, and in how far they are successful in acieving (positive) impacts in terms of moving the development of a region forward. The roles of SI initiatives in contributing to the regions' development would also be different, focusing on the most pressing regional issues. Based on the brief outlook of the two NUTS III regions, the ambition of the thesis is to identify in what ways - through taking on the various roles of service providers, network enablers, knowledge and resource brokers, among many, - SI might play a significant role in the development of rural areas and impact upon it.

Gaining the access to the field

Field access was acquired through the research secondments taking place in Mühlviertel region between September and November 2018 and in Baixo Alentejo region between March and May 2019. During the secondments, the research team was based in two hosting organisations working in the field of social and community development (Figure 1.6).

The first host organisation, Otelo eGen (*Die Otelo Genossenschaft*, the Otelo cooperative), is a cooperative that was founded in early 2014 as Austria's first cooperative. The cooperative currently consists of around ten salaried members, several project employees and three associations. Otelo's initial aim was to organise employment through a shared company space so that the individuals could make a living and implement meaningful, economically viable projects together. At the company level, the innovative thing about Otelo eGen is that the salaried members are employees and company owners at the same time. The latter not only because they hold shares as members of the cooperative, but also because they actively take on the structural tasks of the organisation in working groups. Since 2014, the cooperative has been offering a common and explicitly transparent development framework on several levels for the handling of projects, the development of potential, the sharing of resources, knowledge and experience through mutual support. The Otelo's mission is to create a simple, transparent and secure regulatory framework for employees who implement projects in an entrepreneurial manner and who can get by with them, through passing on experience and inspiring others to become a cooperative entrepreneur.

Since its foundation, the cooperative's focus was placed on the prevention of emigration and the creation of spaces to promote innovation for young people - mainly in technical and scientific areas. Since then, it has from the first locations and focal points a network with now 26 active Otelo locations and currently 10 groups that are in the process of being established. The cooperative went further to implement projects targeting local communities through technology workshops, bio-economy projects etc. The cooperative has held a prominent position within the network of Austria's and Mühlviertel's organisations working towards more innovative, inclusive, and fair local community development.

The second organisation, ADCMoura (*A Associação para o Desenvolvimento do Concelho de Moura*, the Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura), is a non-governmental regional development association based in the rural region of Baixo Alentejo in Portugal, with the main objective of supporting and promoting the sustainable development of the municipality of Moura and other areas of the region. Created in 1993, ADCMoura has been involved, as a promoter, an interlocutor and a partner, in various projects in areas related to i) education for entrepreneurship, ii) participation in territory's projects, and iii) support for the creation of companies in multi-institutional networks. Established through the initiative of a group of citizens from the municipality of Moura, ADCMoura's work has been inspired by the principles of local development, social and solidarity economy and equal opportunities. Throughout the years of work, ADCMoura has developed a wide range of initiatives that have greatly contributed to the strengthening of the local economic and social fabric, namely through professional training, support for business initiative and job creation and the strengthening of associations in the municipality, especially in rural parishes, always guided by a perspective of empowerment of the people and organisations involved. With the staff constituted by 10 permanent employees and 11 non-permanent employees, ADCMoura has been actively involved in a myriad of projects under five axes of intervention, namely (1) institutional and organisational development; (2) social and community development; (3) rural and environmental development; (4) education and formation; (5) support for the initiative. According to ADCMoura's Strategic Plan (Plano Estratégico 2020-2021), ADCMoura has been acting as a promoter, an interlocutor and as a partner in various projects and initiatives related to the different dimensions of development at the local, regional, national, and international level. The projects initiated by and supported through ADCMoura's work are guided by a concern to meet the aspirations and needs of the people and territories in which they operate.

As such, ADCMoura seeks to contribute to lessening the effects of structural weaknesses[3], within the framework of integrated, participatory, solidary and sustainable development.

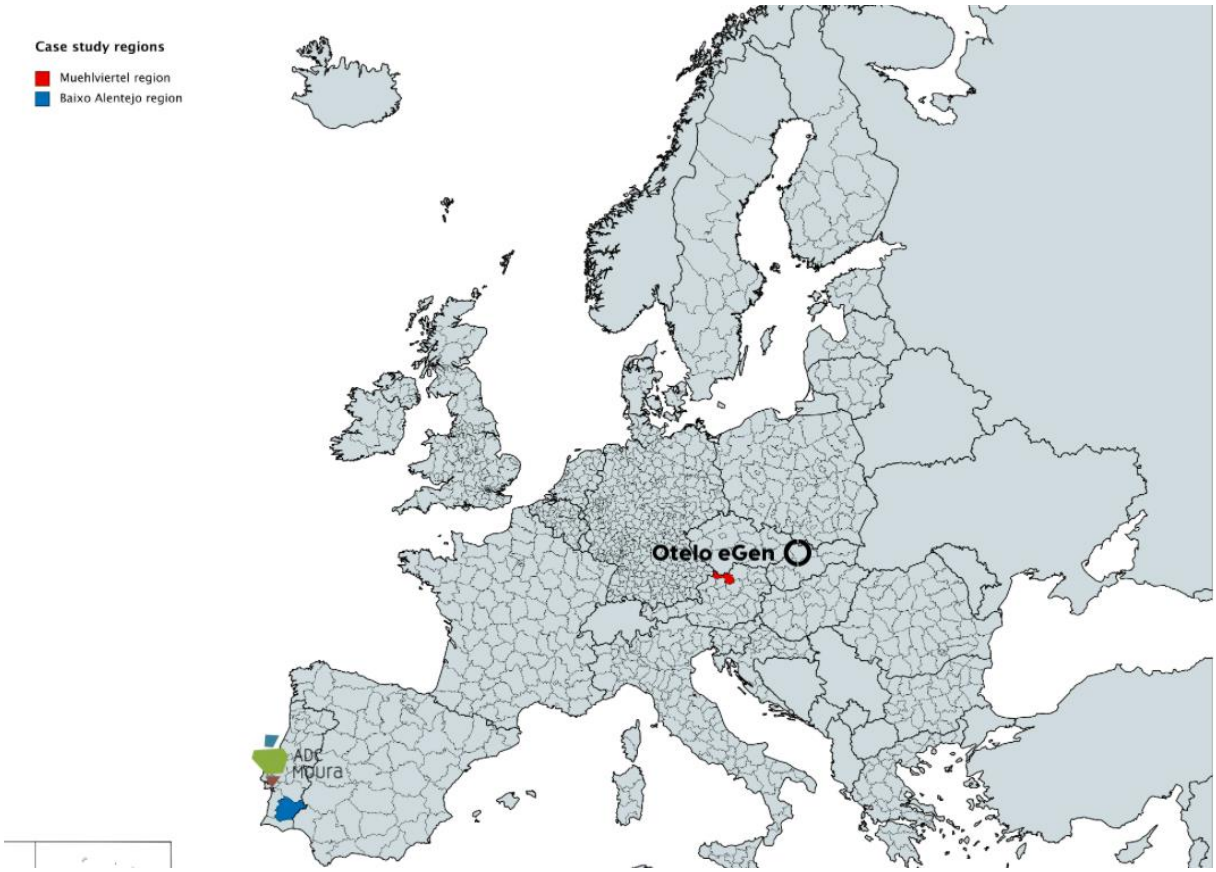

Figure 1.6. RurAction secondment organisations. Source: author's own elaboration on the NUTS III map based on https://mapchart.net/europe-nuts3.html

In the framework of the secondments, contact with the actors and stakeholders and the basis for the comparative research were established. The secondments at Otelo eGen (September - November 2018) and in ADCMoura (March - May 2019) provided opportunities for both understanding the inner workings of the organisations and further designing and carrying out the research. Firstly, the researchers had a chance to be a part of the daily life of an organisation running the SI projects, working with the local communities and being an intermediary between different levels (local, national, and international). While being a part of the daily routine of the SI initiatives, a deeper understanding of the operations, as well as the process of designing, implementing and running the SI projects was acquired. At the same time, the research benefited from the close proximity to the research field, resulting in an exchange between the

[3] Structural weakness here is reflected upon by the ADCMoura members and is understood in terms of combination of lack of services, distance from markets, low population density, ageing population, and unemployment.

researcher and the practitioners concerning their expertise, knowledge and experience of running the initiatives. Secondly, being placed in the regions provided the researchers with the insights into the (rural) reality of two regions under study. Such proximity to the field also resulted in the rich data collected during the secondments, namely i) the document analysis of internal reports and relevant docuemtn (e.g. strategic development plans), ii) through the expert interviews with the stakeholders in SI and SE, as well as regional and rural development. Despite the data collected beforehand through secondary sources (e.g. statistical profiles of the regions), the secondments provided the researchers with an opportunity to get first-hand experience of living in the regions, therefore, providing a more detailed experience of rural challenges experienced by local communities. Thirdly, the support of the organisations allowed the researchers to gain access to the field through the gatekeeping assured by the employees and members of Otelo eGen and ADCMoura, both allowing an easier and a wider access to the field, but also giving the legitimacy to the researchers through the said support. The combination of sources, as well as different methods of data collection, thus, allowed for a more detailed, nuanced, and informed data collection and analysis.

Research methods and data collection

The thesis is based on four research articles published in various peer-reviewed scientific journals and addresses the research question through different methodologies, applying various research methods (see Table 1.3).

	Research method	Data collection
Chapter 2	Single case study (organisation)	Expert interviews (14) Internal reports Secondary data (e.g. Eurostat, OECD)
Chapter 3	Single case study (region)	Expert interviews (15) Publicly available documents (e.g. Local development strategies) Secondary data (e.g. Eurostat, OECD)
Chapter 4	Cross country comparative case study	Expert interviews (28) Local development strategies (Lokale Agenda 21 for the Austrian case) Material on LAGs and LDAs web pages

Chapter 5	Single case study (organisation)	Publicly available sources (e.g. web-pages Local Development Strategies) Internal (yearly) reports Online questionnaire (N=31)

Table 1.3. Overview of research and data collection techniques for individual chapters

Outline and explanation of chapters

This thesis includes 4 chapters, an introduction as Chapter 1 and a conclusion as Chapter 6 (see Table 1.4). The chapters are organised in two groups. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 address the role of SI in rural development, analysing i) the case of a specific SI initiative from the Portuguese context (micro perspective), ii) the case of a regional effort in promoting SI (meso perspective), and iii) a cross-regional comparison of experiences of LDIs in promoting SI. The last chapter focuses on the issues surrounding the impacts of SI solutions, addressing i) the types, scales and domains of said impact (see Figure 1.7). The table presents a synthesis of the papers, namely its title, topic, and conceptual stream.

Chapter	Title and authors	Topic	Theoretical/ analytical framework
Chapter 2	Novikova, M. (2021). Transformative social innovation in rural areas: insights from a rural development initiative in the Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo. Published in: *European Countryside*, 13(1), 71-90, DOI: 10.2478/euco-2021-0005	SI in rural development	Transformative social innovation theory (Avelino et al., 2019; Castro-Arche and Vanclay, 2020)
Chapter 3	Novikova, M. (2021). Promoting social innovation through neo-endogenous development: the case of the Austrian region of Mühlviertel. Published in: *Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Regionais* (59), 7-21.	SI in rural development	Neo-endogenous development theory (Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Ray, 2006; Bosworth, 2020)
Chapter 4	Novikova, M., de Fátima Ferreiro, M., Stryjakiewicz, T. (2020). Local Development Initiatives as Promoters	Promoting SI in rural areas	Social innovation in local development (Stöhr, 1990; Bock, 2016; Christmann,

	of Social Innovation: Evidence from Two European Rural Regions. Published in: *Quaestiones Geographicae, 39*(2), 43-53. DOI: 10.2478/quageo-2020-0012		2020)
Chapter 5	Novikova, M. (2022). Social Innovation Impacts and Their Assessment: An Exploratory Study of a Social Innovation Initiative from a Portuguese Rural Region. Published in: *Social Sciences, 11(3), 122.* DOI: https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci11030122	Impacts of SI	Impact result chain (Secco et al., 2019a, b)

Table 1.4. Outline of chapters and relevant information

Chapter 2 *"Transformative social innovation in rural areas: insights from a rural development initiative in the Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo"* discusses the role of SI initiatives in contributing to sustainable rural development. The assumption of this chapter is that, rather than delivering solely on unmet needs and services, SI should have a broader transformative impact. By applying Castro-Arce and Vanclay's analytical framework for TSI (2020), the chapter analyses the experience of a rural development initiative, ADCMoura. The results indicate that, in triggering bottom-linked governance, ADCMoura has taken on the bridging roles of knowledge broker, resource broker, shared vision champion, transparency and conflict resolution agent, and network enabler. Alongside taking on these bridging roles, the initiative under study, while promoting cooperation and knowledge exchange, has encountered some challenges in cooperation at the local level, a degree of parochial thinking towards the initiative's intervention, as well as overall difficulties related to the implementation of SI projects in rural contexts. Based on the results, the chapter makes some suggestions on how the applied conceptual framework could be enriched, thus, acknowledging not only critical success factors for TSI but also the disabling factors for SI implementation.

Chapter 3 "*Promoting social innovation through neo-endogenous development: the case of the Austrian region of Mühlviertel*" focuses on the interconnection between SI and neo-endogenous development that builds upon local resources and knowledge while connecting

them to wider contexts. By investigating the case of the Austrian region of Mühlviertel, the chapter analyses how SI can be promoted in a region exercising neo-endogenous rural development. Drawing from the empirical data, the chapter concludes that the processes of SI are rooted in a neo-endogenous approach to the region's development, creating region-wide multi-stakeholder networks, in which bottom-up activities are supported and nourished. At the same time, some pitfalls that the regional actors face when implementing SI are pointed out, ranging from bureaucratic burdens to resistance towards innovation.

Chapter 4 *"Local development initiatives as promoters of social innovation: evidence from two European rural regions"* analyses the role of local action groups (LAGs) and local development associations (LDAs) as promoters of social innovation in rural areas in Austria and Portugal and the challenges faced by the latter in promoting SI. Despite the fact that SI entered the academic discourse several decades ago and has since been seen as a way of tackling existing problems in various contexts, there is still a gap when it comes to studying its role in the development of rural areas. As such, the current chapter takes into account the rural context of the initiatives in question, analysing and presenting the results conducted with the representatives of local and regional development, SI promoters, as well as their wider networks. Such was done in order to analyse the experience of rural actors in designing, implementing and promoting SI. Current chapter discusses both the opportunities and challenges faced by LDIs and their multi-faceted nature, highlighting the need for a more tailored, detailed approach within the various rural development framework and strategies for promoting and supporting SI initiatives operating in rural regions.

Chapter 5 *"Social Innovation Impacts and Their Assessment: An Exploratory Study of a Social Innovation Initiative from a Portuguese Rural Region"* makes an attempt to assess the impacts of the SI initiative operating in a Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo. With the various approaches to SI being developed – and the rising discussion about the role of SI for the development of rural areas, - the question on how SI can impact the development of rural regions still remains only partially answered. Current chapter is based on a study conducted with the local development associations and local action groups of Baixo Alentejo (PT). The chapter elaborates on the analytical framework of SI impact assessment, organising the impacts into the scales (spatial and social), domains, and types. Additioanlly, the chapter focuses on the Theory of Change approach, elaborating on and highlighting the understanding of impacts according to the result chain approach, with impacts understood as changes that affect the development of the territorial capital of a given region. The results show that the impacts of said SI initiatives have multi-sectoral and multi-durational nature that transcend sectors and

address multiple domains (social, economic, political, and environmental). At the same time, the chapter concludes that there is a rather high awareness regarding the positive impacts of SI initiative's work among the stakeholders, while the recognition of and awareness about the negative impacts still rather falling behind and the perception of negative impacts not being fully elaborated. Simultaneously, for the four domains of intervention—environmental, economic, social, and institutional—the SI initiative is said to have achieved positive impacts, with the responses, however, suggesting that the positive impacts are rather ambiguous in the domains of the environmental and institutional development. From the geographical scale, the results show that the positive impacts are mostly present at the local level of the municipality, with the sub-regional NUTS III and regional NUTS II levels perceived to be positively impacted the second and third most. According to the results, the positive effects created particularly in the territory of Baixo Alentejo through SI initiative's work could have been obtained thorugh SI's intervention due to the fact that both the municipality and other similar initiatives were only partially able to address the needs of the territory. Thus, it can be concluded that the SI initiative is perceived as an important actor of transformative change in the rural area of Baixo Alentejo but not as the sole actor of change.

Chapter 6 discusses the theoretical, practical, and policy implications of each of the previous chapters. It discusses the results of individual chapters, providing a comparison of the SI initiatives' experiences from Portugal (Baixo Alentejo) and Austria (Mühlviertel) regions. It discusses the role of SI in the development of two respective regions and how either individual initiatives or wider networks and collaborations supported and implemented SI, which, in turn, contributed to the further development of their respective territories. It also highlights the dimension of impacts concerning SI, elaborating on the results by suggesting some policy implications on how the SI impact assessment can be improved. It also provides a discussion of limitations, a future research agenda and other policy implications to be able to contribute to a more effective and efficient policymaking aiming at addressing SI as an important tool for European rural development.

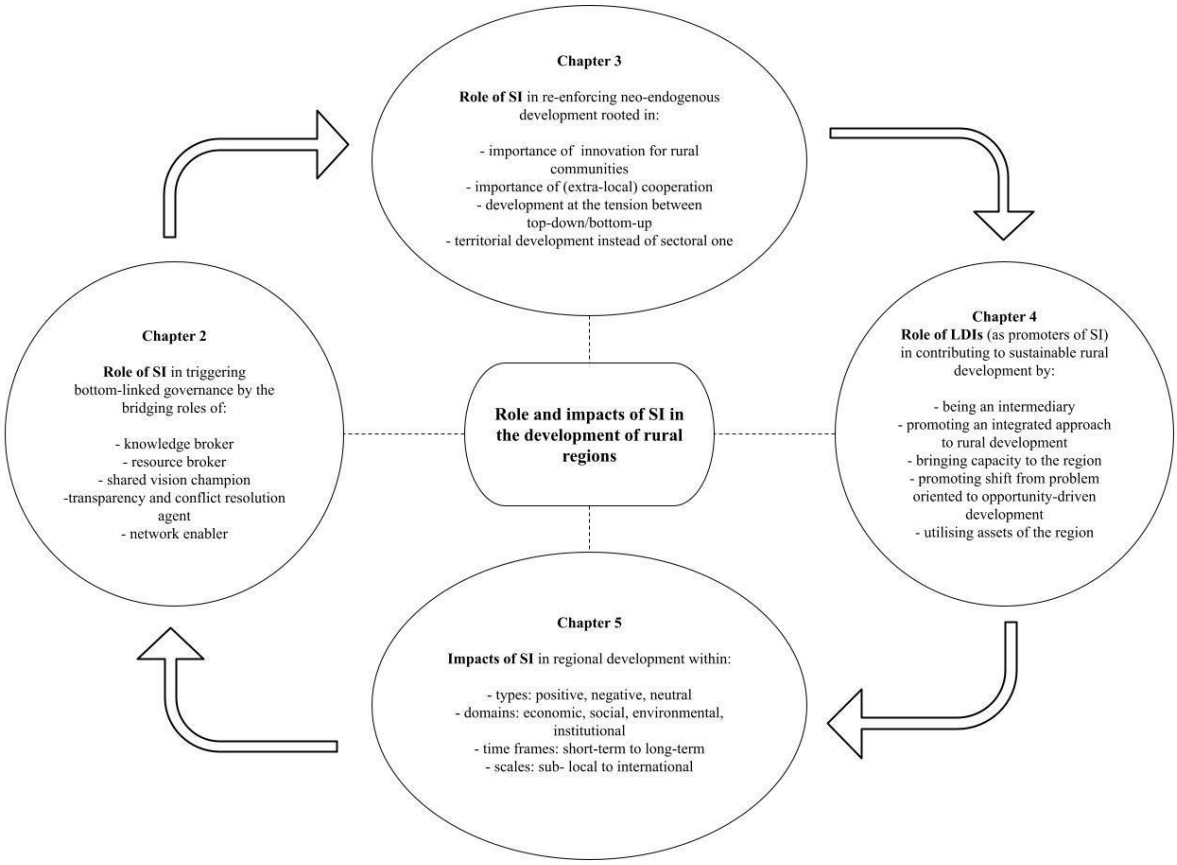

Figure 1.7. Overview of the chapters and linkages between them

The current thesis, consisting of 6 chapters - of which 4 chapters correspond to the scientific articles that have been published, - addresses the main research question of the role and the impact of SI in the development of rural regions (see Figure 1.7). Each individual paper, addressing (i) the role of SI in triggering bottom-linked governance in rural Portugal, (ii) the role of SI in reinforcing the neo-endogenous rural development in rural Austria, (iii) the role of SI in contributing to sustainable rural development (Portugal and Austria), and (iv) the impacts of SI on a development of rural areas in Portugal.

Chapter 2. Transformative social innovation in rural areas: insights from a rural development initiative in the Portuguese region of Baixo Alentejo

Abstract

The role of social innovation initiatives in contributing to sustainable rural development has been discussed in both academia and practice. Some scholars argue that, rather than delivering solely on unmet needs and services, social innovation should have a broader transformative impact. By applying Castro-Arce and Vanclay's analytical framework for transformative social innovation (2020), the paper seeks to analyse the experience of a rural development initiative based in Portugal. The results of this exploratory study indicate that, in triggering bottom-linked governance, the initiative has taken on the bridging roles of knowledge broker, resource broker, shared vision champion, transparency and conflict resolution agent, and network enabler. Alongside taking on these bridging roles, the initiative under study, while promoting cooperation and knowledge exchange, has encountered some challenges further discussed in the paper. Finally, the paper makes some suggestions on how the proposed framework could be enriched.

Keywords: transformative social innovation, rural development, bridging roles, bottom-linked governance, Portugal

Highlights

1. The development of rural regions requires social innovation to have a transformative potential.
2. Bridging roles taken on by social innovation initiatives serve as enabling factors for bottom-linked governance.
3. Social innovation initiatives must acknowledge critical success factors in triggering bottom-linked governance.
4. Actors of rural development encounter certain challenges while promoting transformative social innovation.
5. Regional development can be associated with potential hindering factors for promoting transformative social innovation.

Introduction

The role of social innovation (SI) in the development of urban areas has been widely discussed in the literature and is recognized as a tool for establishing more participatory decision-making

and transforming social relations (Moulaert et al., 2009; Mieg and Töpfer, 2013; Angelidou and Psaltoglou, 2017; Christmann, 2020). At the same time, despite an initial lag, the research done into the processes underlying the emergence, spread and promotion of SI in rural regions has begun to catch up (e.g. Neumeier, 2017; Bock, 2016; Katonáné Kovács et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2018; Sept, 2020), with SI being recognised as 'not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern' (Bock, 2016, p. 570).

Within the growing interest in SI for rural development, the relationship between top-down and bottom-up approaches to rural and regional development has been investigated (e.g. see Flora and Bregendahl, 2012; Maye, 2018), raising questions on how SI processes take place within the top-down/ bottom-up logics. Despite the presence of both research suggesting the need for top-down centralised support for innovation (e.g. Gifford and McKelvey, 2019) and research advocating for more attention towards the bottom-up character of SI, recent inquiries generally agree on the importance of the combination of approaches (Melnykovych et al., 2018) and the need for establishing 'meso' level of activity (e.g. Eizaguirre and Parés, 2019). The research suggests that this 'meso' level can provide a space for actors from various sectors and at different scales to meet and implement policy objectives through programmatic activity' (Courtney and Powell, 2020, p. 18-19). In the process of establishing and through the functioning of this 'meso' level, 'enablers', 'embedded intermediaries' and 'brokers' play an important role (Neumeier, 2012; Richter, 2019; Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020). They focus on building networks among actors and providing space for collaborative action in order to contribute to dialogue between the different levels involved and facilitate projects operating on the ground (Courtney and Powell, 2020).

The collaborative middle ground where actors share decision-making is understood as bottom-linked governance that 'aspires to become adaptive, enabling more inclusive and effective planning' (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020, p. 53). The aim of such governance, therefore, should not only be in linking bottom-up and top-down logics, but in creating the space for collaboration essential for establishing planning practices designed to address major sustainability challenges. As such, SI initiatives play a crucial role in enabling the bottom-linked governance through building bridges between various sectors and (geographical) contexts, enabling the knowledge and information transfer, acquiring resources, and building a shared vision for regional development.

Thus, current research aims at exploring how SI initiatives can contribute to and promote sustainable rural development by triggering bottom-linked governance. By applying the analytical TSI framework by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020) and by looking at how SI in rural

areas can trigger sustainable change by establishing new and/or re-establishing practices of cooperation, networking and participation in rural areas, this paper seeks to analyse the case of a rural initiative based in the Baixo Alentejo region of Portugal. As such, the contribution of the paper lies in applying the framework to an initiative operating in a European rural context, providing empirical evidence on how the SI initiative had triggered bottom-linked governance, and addressing some of the potential improvements to the TSI framework applied.

In order to address the proposed research gap, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 provides the theoretical outlook on the concepts of SI in rural studies and transformative SI as well as presenting the analytical framework applied. In Section 3, the methodology of the paper is explained in more detail. Section 4 presents the case under study with some background information. In Section 5, the analytical framework is applied to the case of a local development association based in rural Portugal, focusing on the bridging roles of the association and the critical success factors for the bottom-linked governance. Section 6 makes some conclusions resulting from the analysis. Finally, Section 7 elaborates on both the potential additions to the framework and makes some suggestions for further research.

(Transformative) social innovation for rural regions

Social innovation in rural studies

Innovation, considered to be a key driver of regional development (e.g. Tomaney et al., 2011), has long been approached from the standpoint of technological innovation and economies of agglomeration, placing an emphasis on urban centres. However, such an approach provides a narrow perspective, leaving out other types of territories and other types of innovation (Vercher et al., 2021). As a consequence, the processes underlying SI (e.g. enabling factors, supporting forces, actors' arrangements) in rural contexts are still rather understudied.

In an attempt to address this gap, a growing body of research into SI in rural areas recognises the relevance of SI in developing and sustaining rural communities (Neumeier, 2017; Bock, 2016; Esparcia, 2014; Katonáné Kovács, Varga and Nemes, 2016; Nijnik et al., 2019; Živojinović et al., 2019). The need for SI in rural communities stems from the fact that quite often rural regions are regarded as marginalised (Lombardi et al., 2020) or structurally weak (e.g. Fischer, 2014) due to the combination of social, economic and environmental challenges they face (Dinis, 2006; Di Iacovo et al., 2014; Esparcia, 2014; Dax and Fischer, 2018). However, such an image of rural areas has been challenged since such regions have the potential to find new ways of addressing such challenges, 'being innovative when they have the

necessary space and power to act' (Bosworth et al. 2016, p. 458). Some research argues that rural regions have particular features in terms of innovation and have the potential 'to kick off the discussion on the feasibility of post-growth trajectories' (Dax and Strahl 2018, p. 299). By creating more participatory practices (Moulaert et al., 2005), turning towards utilising local resources and recognising their crucial importance for rural development (Neumeier, 2012), as well as by creating new practices that lead to more resilience in rural areas (Knickel et al., 2018), SI is thought to represent an important tool in helping regions overcome existing challenges.

The importance of SI initiatives for rural regions stems from their ability to address the gaps that such areas have suffered due to austerity measures and state withdrawal (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020). While filling such gaps (e.g. absence of rural services, neglect of cultural and environmental heritage), SI initiatives must strike a delicate balance between the civic self-reliance and self-organisation, and cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations (Bock, 2016, p. 552), where a multi-level middle ground for collaboration is of utmost importance in ensuring decision-making be shared and transparent. This middle ground, being rooted in social collaboration and social learning where novel practices are developed (Bock, 2016), calls for a multi-stakeholder approach where SI processes would transcend both sectoral and geographical division.

Within the literature on SI in rural areas, SI is assumed to support rural communities and contribute to their development in several ways. SI can support sustainable rural development through building upon neo-endogenous strategies (Neumeier, 2012) that mobilise local resources to satisfy local public needs and creating economic value at the same time (Di Iacovo et al., 2014). SI initiatives, by developing actors' context-sensitive arrangements, can support rural communities by contributing to reducing social inequalities and disproportionate resource allocation (Živojinović et al., 2019). Through creating and sustaining networks among actors (Neumeier, 2012; Gobattoni et al., 2015) and advancing more efficient collaboration between them (Grinberga-Zalite et al., 2015), SI contributes to rethinking social and spatial solidarity among actors involved (Bock, 2016). By the adaptation of innovative solutions in the form of changed attitudes and practices (Richter, 2019), SI can encourage local linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al., 2018) as well as change unsustainable behaviours and remove structural constraints (Gobattoni et al., 2015). Applied thusly, SI has the potential to contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas through collective action and community self-advocacy.

Analytical framework of transformative social innovation

SI has been understood to be gaining importance over technological innovation as the latter has become seen as unable to tackle societal challenges in their full complexity (Howaldt and Kopp, 2012). However, viewing SI as a 'perfect tool' or 'panacea' in meeting major societal challenges underestimates the complexity of these challenges, understood as 'wicked' (e,g, Rayner, 2006; Nicholls et al., 2015) and 'persistent' (Schuitmaker, 2012). As such, systemic change is seen as necessary in tackling such challenges (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010; Avelino et al., 2019), consequently requiring SI to have a transformative potential. Such transformative social innovation (TSI) has entered the discourse (Haxeltine et al., 2016) as SI that 'challenges, alters or replaces dominant institutions in the social context' (Avelino et al. 2019, p. 198).

Building upon the ideas of TSI, Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020) designed an analytical framework in order to explore how SI initiatives promote transformation in a social-ecological system (SES) by fostering bottom-linked governance, understood as a collaborative middle ground where actors from diverse geographical arenas, political levels and sectors meet in order to share decision-making (Pradel Miquel et al., 2013). The connection between bottom-linked governance and SI is particularly interesting since bottom-linked governance can be seen as 'both an outcome of SI and as a socially-innovative space of action' (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020, p. 46) (see Figure 2.1).

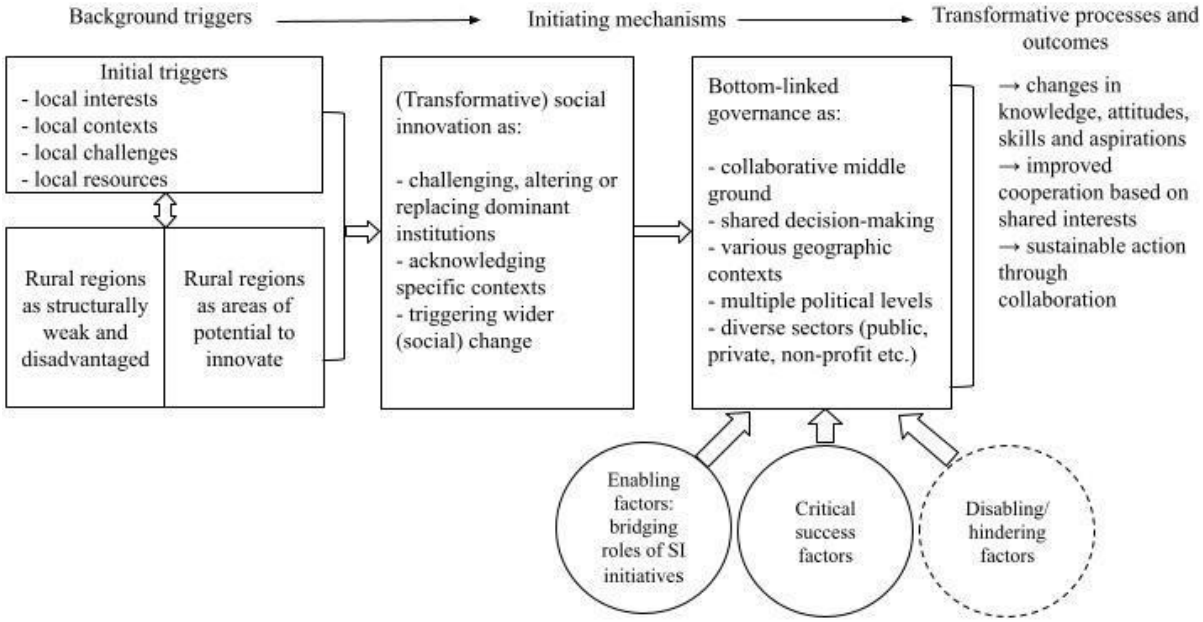

Figure 2.1. Framework for transformative social innovation. Source: authors, elaborated based on Avelino et al., (2019), Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020)

SI has evoked many varying approaches and understandings. Notwithstanding, some scholars agree that SI has to have a broader transformative impact (Westley et al., 2016; Novy, 2017; Parés et al., 2017). Such impact, however, cannot be achieved by disconnected local initiatives and actors (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020). Serving as an intermediary, SI initiatives, therefore, have to take on a role of bridging various sectors of industry, scales and social groups. This capacity to take on bridging roles is central for bridging organisations, understood as those using collaborative mechanisms in order to bring together diverse actors (Crona and Parker, 2012; Kowalski and Jenkins, 2015) and bridge local actors and communities with other organisational levels (Olsson et al., 2004). Due to the fact that bridging organisations are of a formal nature, Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020) suggest applying the term bridging institutions (ibid). Such bridging institutions, due to the varied functions they exercise, have the potential to influence other institutions, governance systems, and the degree of empowerment of local communities through increased participation in and access to decision-making. Additionally, bridging institutions play an important role in crisis management, conflict resolution and the construction of a shared vision among the stakeholders. As such, the five bridging roles, understood as enabling factors of bottom-linked governance, are the roles that must be undertaken by actors involved in SI initiatives for the process of transformation to occur (Table 2.1).

Bridging roles	Objectives of SI initiatives in triggering bottom-linked governance
Network enabler	- developing networks and interconnecting existing ones - better addressing regional challenges through cooperation at vertical and horizontal levels - creating awareness of and empathy for the needs of all actors involved
Knowledge broker	- providing a forum for sharing, translation and creation of knowledge - promoting and connecting local knowledge and expertise to the extra-local know-how
Resource broker	- serving as arenas for shared decision-making - bridging the resources (financial, human, social, etc.) leading to win-win outcomes

	- contributing to reduction of transaction costs (in monetary, political and social terms)
Transparency and conflict resolution agent	- facilitating participation and collaboration of actors around common agendas - serving as an intermediary in resolving the conflicts arising around conflicting interests - contributing to establishing the trust among the actors in the networks
Shared vision champion	- enacting a process of creating a shared vision of sustainable regional development - aligning visions and missions through collaboration and resources sharing - acknowledging and addressing different aspirations and needs

Table 2.1. Bridging roles of SI initiatives. Source: author's own elaboration, based on Castro and Vanclay (2020).

Alongside the bridging roles described in their work, Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020) place an emphasis on success factors that need to be taken into account when discussing the potential of SI to trigger a transformative change and bottom-linked governance. As such, the first success factor is the acknowledgment of the fact that both the interests of local communities and the social-ecological context will change over time. The process, in which local communities actively advocate for the satisfaction of their needs, may potentially lead to the satisfaction of such needs but also to a change in their (future) needs and concerns. Thus, the authors argue that TSI is an ongoing, 'iterative process that reveals opportunities to change, while inspiring and initiating change' (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020, p. 49).

The second success factor that needs to be acknowledged is that the local action delivers better sustainability outcomes only when it aims to scale-up at multiple levels, including geographical scales as well as political levels of cooperation. It stems from the fact that, despite innovative initiatives being important at the local level, in order to contribute to sustainability and to be truly transformative, such initiatives have to operate at wider levels. Such local initiatives can have a broader scope of influence, consequently leading to a greater scope of outcomes, when accompanied by resources and support from formal institutions.

The acknowledgement of the necessity for cooperation with formal institutions in order to enable and sustain transformation is the third success factor. Formal institutions, especially when they are characterised by flexibility, open-mindedness, and a willingness to take risks, as well as when such formal organisations trust in community engagement, play a key role in developing policies and regulations to guide enhanced regional development and future SI (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020). Being supported by such institutions, SI initiatives can gain the resources needed for the innovation process to be continuous.

Lastly, the fourth success factor for the transformative potential of SI is the acknowledgement of the need for power and decision making to be shared in the governance system. As outlined before, SI has to act on and between different sectors (both public and private), political levels and geographical scales (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020). Through tasks and resources being distributed among actors as well as through knowledge and decision-making being shared, socially innovative initiatives promote cooperation, contribute to conflict resolution and aim at the empowerment of actors.

By taking on these bridging roles and acknowledging the critical success factors presented previously, SI initiatives play an important role in mediating between the top-down and bottom-up forces and actors. As such, the TSI framework serves as an analytical tool to be applied to rural SI in order to analyse how such SI can trigger the processes of transformation through bottom-linked governance, promoting multi-scale and multi-level cooperation, contributing to empowerment, knowledge transfer, resource acquisition and mediation between stakeholders.

Methodology

In the current paper, an SI initiative from Baixo Alentejo, Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura (Associação para o Desenvolvimento do Concelho de Moura, in the text - ADCMoura), has been used as a case study, selected as the exemplar based on its rural focus and its active involvement in the community over the last two decades of intervention promoting training, entrepreneurship and business creation, as well as institutional and strategic cooperation.

The research undertaken was a qualitative case study. Data was collected through document analysis (e.g. internal reports) as well as analysis of other related sources (e.g. web-page of ADCMoura,). Such analysis was applied to identify the organisation's aims and objectives as well as to gain a systematic overview of the projects implemented and the stakeholders involved. Narrative data was collected through expert interviews with key stakeholders recruited by the means of snowballing sampling (e.g. Noy, 2008) with key experts identifying

and recommending further contacts. This technique was applied since the expertise in the field of SI is not a robust, clearly defined quality (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos, 2020). During a secondment with ADCMoura between March and May 2019, 16 interviews were collected. The actors interviewed were ADCMoura's staff, members of the local government and regional agencies dealing with regional and rural development, as well as members of local action groups (LAGs). Additionally, the actors interviewed represented the partners of ADCMoura in implementing and running projects. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on: 1) the challenges rural areas face (initial triggers) and the responses aimed at solving those challenges (responses provided); 2) projects and activities initiated; 3) the constellations of actors and/or networks that the association is actively collaborating with; 4) enabling and constraining factors in the organisation's work, including those challenges concerning cooperation and collaboration while promoting SI. In order to comply with the ethical concerns of the research (e.g. Vanclay et al., 2013), informed consent was obtained for all interviews, elaborating both on the research procedures and the possibility for the interviewees to withdraw at any time. The interviews were conducted in both English and Portuguese, with the latter being translated into English.

Following that, the interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 79) constituted by several stages (ibid). After the first stage of initial coding, the produced initial codes were used in order to identify emerging patterns and their potential to be allocated to certain themes. As the themes that were identified as a result of coding were covering many domains, current paper focuses mostly on those themes that can be identified as i) SI addressing local needs and/ or providing response to local challenges, ii) constellations of actors while designing, implementing and running SI projects, iii) the roles that the initiative has taken on while promoting SI, and iv) potential challenges and difficulties faced while working on SI projects for overall rural development.

Based on the analysis of the empirical data collected, following sections discuss the case under study in more detail and draw on some findings discussing the role of ADCMoura, a rural SI initiative, in the process of Baixo Alentejo's development.

Case study of ADCMoura: a local development association from rural Portugal

According to the literature, over recent decades Portugal has been suffering from unemployment and migration of populations towards urban areas (especially with regards to younger generations) due to various factors such as rural land abandonment and land

desertification, absence of employment alongside ageing population combined with low population density (Pinto-Correia et al., 2010; Figueiredo and Pereira, 2011; Campos et al., 2016; Oliveira and Penha-Lopes, 2020; Pato, 2020).

Baixo Alentejo region, the core intervention area of ADCMoura, is no exception. Being classified as a predominantly rural region (Eurostat, 2016) and identified as a 'moderately weak' rural region (Hennebry and Stryjakiewicz, 2020), the region is dealing with one of the lowest population densities among Portuguese regions (Eurostat, 2019), coming to 14,1 inhabitants/ km². The combination of low population density, population decline and high levels of age dependency, might have a strong influence on business development, outmigration and ageing population potentially leading to a deepening of the disparities between regions and furthering the 'littoralisation' process understood as disparities between the coastal and the more in-land regions of Portugal where wealth is concentrated in coastal regions 'while the inland regions have remained neglected and underdeveloped' (Hennebry and Stryjakiewicz, 2020, p. 6).

However, despite some authors suggesting that such a situation 'is a constant' in the Portuguese countryside (e.g. Pato, 2020, p. 213) - and although this has been the trend in recent decades, - 'a new countryside is beginning to shift towards more diverse neo-rural expressions' (Oliveira and Penha-Lopes, 2020, p. 34). Such a shift occurring in rural areas requires a change in future approaches to regional development that would go beyond targeting economic growth and would focus on 'local participation, social innovation and establishing trust as preconditions to effectively impact well-being dimensions' (Dax and Fischer, 2018, p. 297).

In order to overcome said challenges, ADCMoura has been a pioneer in the region with regards to such work. Established in 1993 through the initiative of a group of citizens from the municipality of Moura, ADCMoura's work has been inspired by the principles of local development, social and solidarity economy and equal opportunities. As put by a member of the association:

The reason why ADCMoura was founded was because they [initial members] thought this kind of organisation was needed in the territory to help people develop the new initiatives, to help develop territory. In fact, there was no such an organisation that had an integrated view on the territory and that is what ADCMoura does. (Member of ADCMoura, March 2019)

According to ADCMoura's Strategic Plan (Plano Estratégico 2020-2021), over the years, ADCMoura has been acting as a promoter, an interlocutor and as a partner in various projects and initiatives related to the different dimensions of development at the local, regional, national, and international level. The projects initiated by and supported through ADCMoura's work are

guided by a concern to meet the aspirations and needs of the people and territories in which they operate. As such, ADCMoura seeks to contribute to lessening the effects of structural weaknesses, within the framework of integrated, participatory, solidary and sustainable development. Such contribution is further explored by applying the idea of the bridging roles taken on by the SI initiative.

Findings

Bridging roles of ADCMoura as enabling factors for bottom-linked governance

In order to enable bottom-linked governance and work towards shared decision-making between top-down and bottom-up actors, as well as across different sectors and different geographical contexts, SI initiatives have to take on several bridging roles. The bridging roles that focus on promoting networks, acquiring resources, sharing knowledge, and working towards conflict resolution are further discussed drawing from the analysis of ADCMoura's projects and interventions.

ADCMoura as a promoter and enabler of multi-level networks

One of the flagship projects facilitated by ADCMoura is EPAM (Business development in the aromatic and medicinal plant sector in Portugal). Since the beginning of the initiative in 2011, it has aimed at i) fostering the development of a national network related to the production and sale of aromatic and medicinal plants (PAM), ii) supporting entrepreneurship within the sector and developing the capacity of its agents as well as at iii) disseminating knowledge within and beyond the sector. Due to the ADCMoura's in focusing on needs of the PAM sector in Portugal, EPAM has grown over time to become a nation-wide collaboration (and an 'umbrella' platform for many other projects such as Cooperation to grow the aromatic and medicinal plants sector, COOP4PAM) bringing together PAM producers and farmers, distributors, various development associations and entrepreneurs as well as research entities. One of the main elements of the network was the digital platform and the forum created by ADCMoura as a cooperation and dissemination tool for actors involved in the PAM sector. The creation of this digital platform triggering the process of documenting innovation and 'best practice' was followed by the creation of a database of producers and other agents in the sector. Creation of the database led to the emergence of strong support infrastructure and knowledge exchange through the digital platform ('relative' technological/ digital innovation). As a result, it helped establish the network involving the PAM producers from disconnected rural areas where they

can exchange their ideas, propose collaboration projects, seek advice in both horizontal (producer to producer) and vertical (producers to research entities, regional development agencies etc.) manner. Through collaborating towards their common interest - developing the PAM sector in Portugal and beyond -, all the actors involved, at the same time, acknowledge different interests of the parties involved.

ADCMoura as an agent in the transfer of knowledge

Regarding the transfer of knowledge, ADCMoura established the Centro de Competencias das Plantas Aromaticas, Medicinais e Condimentares (Competence Center for Aromatic, Medicinal and Spice Plants, CCPAM) within the EPAM network. First established in 2015 as a response to the call by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development (MAFDR), CCPAM brought together producers, industry, associations, national scientific and research entities and municipalities. Such knowledge transfer between actors acknowledges i) the constraints and needs of economic agents along the chain; ii) importance of applied research and experimentation along the value chain, iii) transfer of knowledge and technologies to companies in the sector; iv) marketing, strengthening skills and seeking innovative solutions that reinforce the sector's competitiveness throughout its value chain; v) promotion of the Portuguese PAM sector's competitiveness, and vi) dissemination of knowledge on potential international partnerships that can leverage the national development of the sector. With the growth of and rising interest in the PAM sector in Portugal, ADCMoura recognised the necessity to create conditions for the development of integrated, collective and strategic action within the sector. Due to the relative novelty of the PAM sector, the space for strategic action based on the knowledge exchange and sharing the expertise was missing. Recognising this, CCPAM serves as a platform for improving the production and dissemination of knowledge by interconnecting research to practice and vice versa. As an outcome, through CCPAM, ADCMoura encourages both sharing of information and knowledge between the bottom-up and top-down levels (vertically) and across sectors, e.g. from research entities to producers (horizontally).

ADCMoura as a shared vision champion

Over its 27 years, ADCMoura has been bridging the visions and aspirations of various stakeholders regarding the future development of the region, by bringing together actors from different arenas with their own (not always aligned) interests towards a shared vision of the region's development. Such a shared vision for the future of the region was talked about by interviewees with aspirations built around the ideas of sustainability, interconnectedness, and

opportunity-driven development. The common aspiration, repeated by both ADCMoura's members as well as partner organisations and institutions, is a sustainable, integrated development of the region that is based on utilising local resources that are unique to the territory:

> *So one of our main assets is that we have a territory which has a lot of potential and has not been spoiled yet. So one of our goals would be to keep what is unique about our territory and to keep it sustainable, both environmentally and economically* (Member of Intermunicipal community of Baixo Alentejo, April 2019).

The shared vision around the potential future development of the wider Alentejo region, based on the interview data, is centred on four main domains that both local development organisations and formal organisations regard as important. The first domain is *cooperation*, where, instead of being competitive, local and regional actors combine efforts in being more efficient and solidary in their work towards regional development. The second domain that has such a shared vision is *sustainability*, where the actors, instead of pursuing short-term goals and deliverables in projects, attempt to build a support infrastructure for future interventions. The emphasis on *connecting local resources and knowledge to wider contexts* is the third priority by which such a shared vision is constituted. The fourth domain is concerned with promoting *opportunity-driven development* instead of just focusing on solving the problems. As such, by promoting a shared vision, ADCMoura aims at changing both the perspective of formal institutions and the local communities on utilising local knowledge and resources towards achieving sustainable rural development.

ADCMoura as a transparency agent, mediator and conflict resolution agent

Through its intervention, ADCMoura has been bringing different interests together and acting upon it as a mediator between local communities and public administration. Such mediation can be seen in terms of *mediation in capacity building, mediation in budgetary domain* and *mediation in conflict/ crisis resolution.* Within the capacity building domain, the main objectives of ADCMoura's work, in cooperation with the Institute for Employment and Vocational Training (Instituto do Emprego e Formação Profissional), are focused on providing support at all stages of project design, implementation and consolidation by unemployed members of the community. Such work involves support in the preparation of the business plan, monitoring and post-creation consultancy in the first 2 years of activity. As such, it is targeting the creation of independent entrepreneurial activities by the local population, supporting them in acquiring the necessary levels of confidence and knowledge in order to run their own

activities in the future without fully relying on ADCMoura's mentoring. As an intermediary in budgetary terms, in a partnership with the municipality of Moura, ADCMoura has been a part of a project promoting participatory budgeting in the municipality of Moura (*Orçamento Participativo*). Within this initiative, the main aim is to involve the citizens of the municipality in the definition of local public policies, namely in decision making on the investment priorities of the municipal budget, based on a process of reflection and debate about the territory's problems and opportunities. As a result, the local community has a chance to gain direct access to decision making as well as the opportunity to exercise their agency in deciding how the municipal budget would be allocated. Within the domain of mediation in conflict resolution, ADCMoura has been working closely with the Roma community in the wider context of the Baixo Alentejo region. Within the project on municipal mediation (*Mediadores Municipais e Interculturais*), the aim lies in strengthening the integration of the most vulnerable communities, namely Roma and migrant communities, as well as in deepening intercultural dialogue between the various communities and the host society, promoting social cohesion and improving the quality of life. Facilitated by ADCMoura, such dialogue and partnerships are capable of creating bridges between citizens and institutions, as well as achieving change based on mediation between local actors, bringing actors around the same agenda, preventing conflict or, when necessary, acting on it in a mediating manner.

ADCMoura's role in acquiring the necessary resources

ADCMoura's involvement in and facilitation of many projects has allowed the initiative to be more effective and efficient in obtaining resources through established networks covering a wide range of public and private partners as well as geographical contexts. By participating in a substantial number of projects facilitated by the European Union (EU), ADCMoura has received organisational and financial support in the domain of research on social innovation and social entrepreneurship (RurAction, Horizon 2020) and active citizen engagement (My Smart Quartier, Erasmus+), with such opening up access to state-of-art academic knowledge and best practice on issues related to the ways in which SI initiatives might contribute to sustainable rural development. By being a part of such EU projects, acquiring the academic knowledge and linking such knowledge back to practice - the domain that organisations often lack the time and resources to work on themselves in such depth - ADCMoura has been able to bridge those resources back to the territory. Linking local interests and needs to European, national and regional development frameworks, ADCMoura has been able to acquire resources

that, while coming from the EU and national funding, still acknowledge local needs and interests.

Through developing the projects in conjunction with other projects and partners, ADCMoura has been able to maximise the opportunities for project activities and to minimise the related costs. However, the initiative still faces some difficulties in working in the 'patchwork' manner:

[Starting the projects], we try to get some financing, [...] and we always know that we must do this through a puzzle of different projects that when they can come together, we can more or less do most of the strategy. What is happening now is that even the puzzle is becoming smaller and smaller with pieces that no longer can be connected. It is becoming more and more difficult to just put things running. (Member of ADCMoura, March 2019)

ADCMoura has been able to overcome financial and operational constraints through partnering with peer organisations (such as Local Action Groups of ESDIME and Terras Dentro) and wider inter-municipal and inter-regional networks (Intermunicipal Community of Baixo Alentejo (CIMBAL) and Portuguese Federation of Local Development Associations (Minha Terra)). Such collaboration manifests as peer exchange, regular meetings, seminars and workshops for the purposes of exchanging and disseminating the latest know-how. Such an approach facilitated the acquisition of support in those domains where local knowledge and resources were lacking. By bringing the missing resources to the territory through networks and by operating through the project work rooted in cooperation and support for more efficient interventions, ADCMoura has taken on the role of resource broker.

In order to create a 'meso' level for actors to come together in the process of rural development, SI initiatives must take on the roles of bridging institutions that have the ability to: promote networks and enable the circulation of knowledge and resources within those networks, while promoting transparency within and beyond their own operations.

Critical success factors for transformative regional development: a balancing act

Alongside bridging roles that are discussed in the TSI framework and that ADCMoura takes on, the critical success factors have to be taken into account. Acknowledging those factors is needed to ensure that, through triggering bottom-linked governance, transformative regional development is to appear.

The first success factor is the acknowledgment of the fact that both the interests of local communities and the social-ecological context will change over time. The process, in which local communities actively advocate for the satisfaction of their needs, may potentially lead to

the satisfaction of such needs but also to a change in their (future) needs and concerns. The initial impetus for the work of ADCMoura was a wish expressed by a group of local people to promote an integrated area approach to local development, combining many distinct local community interests and needs. However, over time, ADCMoura has adapted the scope of its interventions based on the changing needs of the community towards more extra-local work, international cooperation, and knowledge exchange between various entities. Within the EPAM project discussed in the previous section, the initial interest was related to the promotion and support of the PAM sector. Going back to 2002, the first professional PAM production and transformation course conducted by ADCMoura was followed by initiatives to enhance floristic heritage through community projects developed in schools within the municipality of Moura. However, strategic work in favour of the Portuguese PAM sector's sustainable development started later on in 2009. The project, by meeting the initial needs of local actors in promoting the local PAM sector, reflected the need of local communities towards collaborating with extra-local actors in terms of knowledge exchange, access to the markets etc. This adaptation to changing interests and contexts demonstrates ADCMoura's acknowledgement that the changes are, indeed, occurring, which is further reflected in their integrated, rather than sectoral, approach to development. Despite the EPAM project, initiated by the Rural Development Network of Portugal, falling under a more top-down perspective, the project was actively supported by local actors, and only due to the high interest and the project meeting the needs and aspirations of wider communities, was it scaled-up and multiplied across Portugal rather than staying local.

Secondly, the local action delivers better sustainability outcomes only when it aims at scaling-up at multiple levels, including geographical scales as well as political levels of cooperation. ADCMoura, while prioritising work for and with the local community, realised that, through the process of scaling up its projects, it could have a wider scope of action in addition to wider reach. Returning to the example of the EPAM project, which started as a local initiative, the project has been scaled up to many Portuguese regions asa part of multiple networks, including producers, distributors and researchers joined into national networks as well as other networks and communities at the international level, such as the Mediterranean network CEDDEM - Center d'Etude et de Développement Durable Euroméditerranéen and the European association EUROPAM - European Herbs Growers Association. When it comes to transcending the political levels in delivering better sustainability outcomes, ADCMoura has been actively involved in common projects in collaboration with CIMBAL and Minha Terra as well as the Portuguese Association for Local Development (ANIMAR) which all function on

different political levels. Being a part of such intermunicipal and national networks provides a stronger platform for projects to be disseminated within and beyond the local. Doing so allows projects to be implemented across spatial scales and makes their outcomes more stable.

In order to trigger transformative change through the process of bottom-linked governance, the organisations have to acknowledge the necessity for cooperation with formal institutions in order to enable and sustain transformation. As said before, such cooperation is especially fruitful if the formal institutions involved are flexible, open-minded, willing to take risks and ready for the implementation of new solutions to regional development. In the case of ADCMoura, within the frameworks implemented by regional (e.g Regional Development and Coordination Commission of Alentejo) and national formal institutions (e.g. Directorate-General for Agriculture and Rural Development), such collaborations have been key for implementing and running the initiative's projects. However, while cooperation with formal institutions at the regional and national levels has been fruitful and productive, cooperation at the local level (e.g. municipal level) has been described by interviewees as 'difficult'. Despite the association's role as an intermediary between local authorities and the community, the work of ADCMoura is sometimes approached with a certain degree of scepticism from local authorities, which may be explained by the organisation's conscious choice to remain (politically) neutral and autonomous, putting certain constraints on such cooperation. As one interviewee put it:

We at ADCMoura try to be a very civic organisation, independent organisation, and this has a high cost [...] This is a relevant issue in our constraints (Member of ADCMoura, March 2019).

Additionally, in the relations between the municipality and the association, there has been said to be a degree of competition rather than cooperation. Since the resources available in the region are quite scarce, the municipality takes the lead on implementing certain projects in the field of social and community interventions. As a result, as argued in interviews, ADCMoura is only partially involved in those projects run by the municipality. Nevertheless, due to ADCMoura's integrated approach to local and regional development, the municipality's work is seen as rather compartmentalised and sector-oriented which might also contribute to the existing challenges faced by the association:

Because we are all societal problems are wicked, are very complex [...] you have to integrate many different sectors, many different stakeholders. And we are more prepared for those kinds of interventions than municipalities because all the departments are so separated (Member of ADCMoura, March 2019).

As a way of overcoming and mitigating such a barrier at the local level, ADCMoura is actively involved in a myriad of projects at both the national and international level, where the association is said to receive a higher recognition for its work. Having analysed the projects ADCMoura is implementing and participating in, a substantial portion of such projects are of national and international scale. Thus, due to some difficulties with acquiring support at the local level, while keeping the focus on its main area of intervention on Baixo Alentejo, the association counterbalances the constraints experienced at the local level by being actively involved at the extra-local levels of cooperation and networking.

Lastly, the fourth success factor for bottom-linked governance is the acknowledgement of the need for power and decision-making in the governance system to be shared. As argued in the analytical framework by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020), in such governance systems, the actors come together to collaborate for the benefit of all - and such collaborations depend on the distribution of power and decision making. However, despite the strong focus on promoting cooperation that cuts across scales (local, regional, national, EU level), and sectors (private, public, third sector) as well as institutions (academic, practice, peers), organisations like ADCMoura have been facing challenges related to some degree of competition among organisations at the regional level. As put by one interviewee representing the formal institution at the regional level:

We are trying to make them [organisations] speak to each other. On paper they are saying that there will be a regional system of transfer and knowledge, but it was on paper only. It is nice to have it on paper and give it to someone to read it and say oh it is very good, they are doing interesting things…But I think that instead of being competitive they should be cooperative (Member of Regional Development and Coordination Commission of Alentejo, April 2019)

Despite such constraints, the necessity for both cooperation with formal institutions as well as the need for shared power and decision-making have been acknowledged by ADCMoura, constituting an important part of its work. As such, ADCMoura's work is specifically interested in overcoming such barriers and changing the approach of regional actors from competition to cooperation, thus, creating a shared vision of a region that is achieving its sustainable development through knowledge sharing and resources distribution rather than competing for (already) scarce resources.

Conclusions

By applying the analytical framework for TSI by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020), the paper analysed the case of ADCMoura, a local development association based in rural Portugal. In order to trigger and contribute to sustainable transformation in rural regions, rural initiatives must seek to create wider networks, more just and participatory decision-making through changing the constellations of actors, and the wider transfer and exchange of knowledge within those networks. The results indicate that ADCMoura has taken on the five bridging roles in the development of middle ground collaborative space for regional development. By combining various axes of intervention, as well as by being actively involved in projects not limited to specific sectors (such as agriculture) and scales (despite starting as a local initiative), ADCMoura has demonstrated the ability to transcend the existing structures and become the 'meso-level' organisation. As such, its active engagement in establishing and enabling networks, knowledge exchange, resource acquisition, allowed ADCMoura to create that common space for public and private actors to come together and collaborate, thus contributing towards the triggering of bottom-linked governance.

In the process of bringing about bottom-linked governance, several critical success factors have been identified within the framework proposed by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020). Under such, the initiative must acknowledge i) the change in (local) interests and context, ii) the need for the local action to be scaled-up for better sustainability outcomes, iii) the need for cooperation with formal institutions to enable and sustain transformation, and iv) the need for the decision-making and power within the governance system to be shared. Despite being successful in taking on the bridging roles and acknowledging the critical success factors in the process of bottom-linked governance development, ADCMoura has faced some challenges while trying to establish cooperation at the local level. Results indicate that the initiative faced some degree of competition rather than cooperation at the local level. This may be explained by the conscious choice of the organisation to stay politically independent and the limited pool of resources available at the municipal/ local level. In order to overcome these constraints, ADCMoura has taken on an active role at the regional and national levels due to their wider availability of resources, as discussed in the results.

In keeping with the main idea of transformative SI that it is an attempt to contribute to sustainable development, several conclusions can be drawn. ADCMoura has contributed to the sustainable development of the Baixo Alentejo region in the following ways. First, by establishing multi-level networks (both geographically and politically), the SI initiative has been recognised as a channel between the local communities and other actors. By being actively

involved in said networks, ADCMoura delivers upon connecting the local resources with extra-local ones, thus, opening up new channels for knowledge transfer and exchange. Second, ADCMoura's participation and membership in various types of collaborative efforts (intermunicipal community, federation of local development associations) stabilises the outcomes of the projects since, instead of aiming at just scaling-up, they are being implemented and supported throughout wider networks. Third, despite some constraints at the local level, the promotion of collaboration based on a shared vision forms one of the pillars of the organisation's interventions, with an aim to a more cohesive approach to regional development in the future. As expressed by interviewees, even if the change is not apparent, it is a process of constructing and promoting the culture of collaboration based on the shared values and aspirations that ADCMoura is aiming for.

Discussion

By applying the proposed TSI framework, this paper investigated the case of a local development association based in rural Baixo Alentejo. The case of ADCMoura showed that rural SI can become transformative by engaging various actors and by developing a bottom-linked governance. To this end, the framework serves as a relevant tool for analysing the experience of rural initiatives with great potential for further application, both in research and practice. At the same time, the framework could be enriched by expanding the idea of bridging roles through discovering additional categories. Additionally, alongside enabling and critical success factors for bottom-linked governance, further research could also critically engage with the potential disabling factors for bottom-linked governance.

As outlined above, some more elaboration could be undertaken in expanding upon those other possible bridging roles that rural initiatives take upon themselves. Stemming from the results, two other categories could be added as distinct bridging roles, namely the role of SI initiatives in capacity building and their role in promoting opportunity-driven development rather than solely focused on satisfying pressing needs.

Concerning capacity building, the results indicate that, despite being partly covered in all interventions by ADCMoura, it is a distinct category of action targeting both the beneficiaries and the peer organisations. In the interviews, the importance of the capacity building was highlighted repeatedly where ADCMoura - and the actors from wider context and networks - see it as one of the most crucial domains and focuses on SI and local development work (Novikova et al., 2020). Having contributed to capacity building, especially of local communities, ADCMoura's aim has been to establish the independence of locals in

implementing and running their own projects and initiatives. Potential for further research also lies in the transition of the local communities' members away from being solely beneficiaries to becoming the actors that contribute towards the development of the region through running their own initiatives, thus, becoming more actively involved in participating in regional development.

Concerning opportunity-driven development, it has been argued that in rural development there has been a shift towards perceiving available local assets as an opportunity and a valuable feature rather than an obstacle (Dax and Fischer, 2018). The importance of such opportunity-driven SI compared to that solely based on problem solving stems from the fact that opportunity-driven SI can potentially provide more transformative outcomes (Bosworth et al. 2016), irrespective of problem-oriented actions providing the best available solution at a given time. The results of the current research indicate that opportunity-driven SI helps in re-evaluating available local assets by both rural development actors and the local communities, changing attitudes in favour of seeing a region as a place with enormous potential, and providing a perspective on how unique regional assets can be utilised. As such, the role of SI initiatives in developing solutions that focus on opportunities should be further explored.

While the framework acknowledges critical success factors for bottom-linked governance, more elaboration of the proposed TSI framework could be done into the potential disabling/ hindering factors for bottom-linked governance. Research suggests that in different configurations of actors who might have competing ideas, conflict and tension can emerge (Christmann, 2020). Briefly discussed in the paper, the results indicate that the process of rural development is still associated with some degree of competition both among the SI initiatives themselves and between top-down and bottom-up stakeholders due to the scarsibility of resources and conflicting interests. As such, the conflictual nature of SI might affect its potential to trigger transformation and should be considered as one of the factors contributing to the success or failure of SI and bottom-linked governance. At the same time, such conflict and contestation, if they are constructively processed, might potentially lead to a positive change rather than a failure of an SI initiative and the change it aims at bringing on (ibid.). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the role of conflicts in SI as a factor for TSI and its ability to trigger bottom-linked governance.

A further point of acknowledgement is that innovation, generally being understood as something desirable or inherently good (Godin, 2012; Coad et al., 2020), calls for more reflection on the potential 'dark sides' of it. Previous research (e.g. Fougère and Meriläinen, 2019) has identified several 'dark sides' to SI specifically, of which unintended adverse

consequences and the negative impacts of SI are of great interest. The applied TSI framework suggests that SI, by triggering bottom-linked governance, aims at transformative change. However, the further development to the framework, could take into account the (unintended) negative consequences of SI and how both the initiatives and their role in bottom-linked governance can contribute towards avoiding and/or dealing with such consequences.

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Chapter 3. Promoting social innovation through neo-endogenous development: the case of the Austrian region of Mühlviertel

Abstract

Aiming at addressing local challenges and increasing participation and decision-making, social innovation shares some common traits with the idea of neo-endogenous development that builds upon local resources and knowledge while connecting them to wider contexts. By investigating the case of the Austrian region of Mühlviertel, the paper seeks to analyse how social innovation can be promoted in a region exercising neo-endogenous rural development. Drawing from the empirical data, the paper concludes that the processes of SI are rooted in a neo-endogenous approach to the region's development, creating region-wide multi-stakeholder networks, in which bottom-up activities are supported and nourished. However, the paper also points out some pitfalls that the regional actors face when implementing SI, ranging from bureaucratic burdens to resistance towards innovation.

Keywords: social innovation, neo-endogenous development, rural regions, Local Action Groups, Austria

JEL code: O18; O35; R58

Introduction

Traditionally, in the context of regional development studies, local and regional development has been discussed through the lens of its economic dimensions, in terms of growth, employment, and incomes (Armstrong and Taylor, 2000; Pike et al., 2016), thus, understood as "a set of activities aimed at improving the economic wellbeing of an area" (Beer et al., 2003, p. 5). Within this scholarly tradition, innovation is often regarded as a key driver of regional development (e.g. Tomaney et al., 2011), linked to agglomeration economies, high-tech activities and market-oriented initiatives (Eder, 2019; Madureira and Torré, 2019). However, this dominant economic focus in local and regional development concepts and definitions has broadened since the early 2000s (Pike et al., 2016), acknowledging that the 'strictly economic' approach to regional development tends to leave out other types of territories and other types of innovation from the discourse (Vercher et al., 2021). To this end, some scholars suggest that there is the need for "sustained reorientation in economic understanding and policy strategies, placing 'social innovation', sustainable resource use and well-being 'higher' than economic growth" (Dax and Fischer, 2018, p. 299). As a part of this re-orientation, the relevance of innovation for rural development (Esparcia, 2014; Labianca, 2016; Madureira and Torre, 2019;

Živojinović et al., 2020) has been acknowledged within academia. At the same time, new social practices responding to unmet social needs are being identified across rural areas (Butkevičiene, 2009; Bosworth et al., 2016; Copus et al., 2017), giving momentum to the emerging phenomenon of social innovation (SI) (Marini Govigli et al., 2020).

More recent approaches to regional development advocate for a combination of local resources and local action integrated within wider networks, such as can be seen in the neo-endogenous development (NED) approach. At the same time, approaches to SI strongly build on the same core principles, rooted in local participation and empowerment with rural SI being distinct due to its cross-sectoral collaborations (Bock, 2016). However, with both NED and SI rooted in the same set of core principles, detailed research on how locally emergent SI can be triggered by and promoted within the neo-endogenous development is still rather underrepresented. In order to address this gap, the current article aims to investigate how SI is triggered by and promoted through neo-endogenous development, both advocating for bottom-up action rooted in local participation and engagement. The paper also aims at contributing to the knowledge on how the neo-endogenous approach to rural development can trigger SI in rural settings. By analysing the case of the Mühlviertel region in Austria, the paper seeks to understand the ways in which regional cooperation was made possible, the factors that both contributed to its success and the challenges that regional development actors were faced with.

This article is structured as follows. The article begins by discussing the concepts of social innovation and neo-endogenous development. It continues with the presentation of the Mühlviertel region case study. The article proceeds to discuss the findings and elaborates on the processes in which the case of neo-endogenous development triggered and contributed to the promotion of SI, followed by the discussion of results, providing some conclusions and suggestions for further research.

Understanding the role of social innovation and neo-endogenous approach in rural development

Neo-endogenous development for European rural regions

Over recent decades, approaches to rural development have moved away from the dualistic top-down discussion, calling for a re-orientation towards acknowledging context-specific challenges faced by rural regions and addressing them in a more territorial manner, placing an emphasis on local assets. As a result, there has been an additional shift, emphasising locally led approaches characterised by mixed endogenous–exogenous dynamics (Shucksmith, 2010;

Biczkowski, 2020). Building on earlier work on endogenous development (van der Ploeg and van Dyck, 1995), where the local control remains at the heart of such development, there was a need for the approaches that also emphasised the need to embrace 'extra-local' factors (Ray, 2001). As such, neo-endogenous development was introduced to offer an alternative approach to dualistic 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' perspectives on rural development. Neo-endogenous development has been advocated as "a mechanism to facilitate bottom-up development, with the development potential being rooted in local resources and local actors being supported by extensive networks facilitated by state institutions" (Bosworth et al., 2020, p. 1). Bock (2016) has argued that the neo-endogenous approach acknowledges the importance of external links and connections between communities in order to contribute to local development, but that this approach, in contrast to the exogenous model, does not consider development as imported from outside. Without disregarding the bottom-up character of the development as supported by the endogenous approach, the neo-endogenous approach places a greater emphasis on the interconnectivity between local and extra-local: actors and stakeholders in the political and administrative ecosystem (from regional up to European level) are seen as part of the extra-local environment that can potentially be recruited by and partnered with localities in support of their regeneration strategies (Ray, 2006).

As to neo-endogenous development, Ray highlights the need for development "in which extra-local factors are recognised and regarded as essential but which retains a belief in the potential of local areas to shape their future" (Ray, 2000, p. 4). Building on this, Neumeier (2012) points out the importance of neo-endogenous development in advocating for the connectivity between the resources available within the region (endogenous) coupled together with the extra local knowledge and resources required at the regional level (exogenous). For rural areas, neo-endogenous development represents a shift from sectoral to territorial rural development strategies resulting from the socioeconomic structural change in rural areas (Neumeier, 2012, p. 49). Such territorial development, based on the neo-endogenous strategies, should strive to maintain the delicate balance between innovation and stability, where "the development of sustainable structures and establishing a form of balance that, on the one hand, enables innovation, creativity, new ideas and visions in action; and, on the other hand, maintains the necessary stability" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 49). As such, in the development of rural regions it is necessary to mobilise endogenous potentials to "outweigh different interests and to strengthen regional identity as a central precondition for both regional development and the success of neo-endogenous regional development" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 59). The concepts for rural development have, therefore, turned towards making use of specific local assets and

presenting regional diversity as a valuable feature rather than an obstacle that attempts in regional development should seek to overcome (Dax and Fischer, 2018). Such an approach has been advanced as the developmental differences regions experience can no longer be fully explained by physical distance and the availability of financial resources. Instead, such differences have to be approached as a "result of the different organisational and technical abilities of regional actors to apply practical and technical know-how to the regional resources available" (Neumeier, 2012, p. 59).

As discussed above, neo-endogenous development provides an opportunity for both maintaining stability and fostering innovation. The current paper argues that, through supporting region-wide cooperation, knowledge exchange and transfer, and cooperation in terms of advocacy at the top-down/ bottom-up tension point, neo-endogenous development can trigger and foster SI.

Understanding the role of social innovation in the development of rural areas

SI has evoked many varying understandings and approaches, including meeting unmet needs, providing new solutions, and creating more just and participatory practices (see Moulaert et al., 2013). SI has been proposed as a means of tackling central challenges in contemporary societies that are not well addressed either by market solutions or the public sector (EC, 2013). At the same time, SI has been widely discussed in the context of urban areas (Mieg and Töpfer, 2013), while the processes underlying SI in rural regions are still rather understudied. The importance of the conversation about SI for rural areas in the EU stems from the fact that more than half of its land area (as for 2012) is classified as predominantly rural (Eurostat, 2016) and over a quarter (28%) of the EU's population live within the rural regions (Eurostat, 2018). As such, the challenges and needs of these populations and territories should be taken seriously, with social innovation in rural areas being "not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern" (Bock, 2016, p. 570).

However, the application of SI in rural areas is not new (Lombardi et al., 2020). More recently, the contribution of SI to the development of rural areas has been recognised to be effective in overcoming those problems marginalised areas are faced with and often affected by urgent societal challenges, such as isolation, lack of opportunities for young people, and ageing (e.g. Bock, 2016; Dax and Fischer, 2018). Within the myriad of different approaches to SI, most scholars agree that SI is a prominent agent and a motor of change in rural regions and communities (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020), providing approaches that tackle emerging societal or community problems, complementing or sometimes even substituting the services

provided by the state and/or private sector (Marini Govigli et al., 2020), with SI being a "desirable response to social economic and environmental challenges arising from market and policy failures" (Slee, 2019, p. 152). Indeed, austerity measures and state withdrawal left rural actors in the situation where they had to step in and take on the responsibility of 'filling the void' e.g. by providing rural services that have not been provided otherwise (Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020).

In rural areas, SI can be used to "include new actors within local development dynamics, empower local communities and advance their position in the wider global context" (Vercher et al., 2021, p. 5). Rural SI is distinct in its "dependence on civic self-reliance and self-organisation (e.g. due to austerity measures and state withdrawal), and its cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations" (Bock, 2016, p. 552). Mirroring that, some authors argue that SI "cannot be achieved without connections beyond the local area – either to new markets or to distinctive sources of knowledge and inspiration" (Bosworth et al., 2020, p. 31). As such, SI should be analysed in their full complexity and rootedness within social processes, taking into account complex constellations of social actors within and across space (Christmann, 2020).

Aiming at the sustainable development of rural regions, SI facilitates the creation of networks among different actors (Neumeier, 2012; Gobattoni et al., 2015), thus, encouraging local linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al., 2018). At the same time, while focusing on enhancing more efficient collaboration between the actors, SI can help in adaptation of innovative solutions in the form of changed attitudes and practices (Richter, 2019) and in changing unsustainable behaviours and removing structural constraints (Gobattoni et al., 2015). Through mobilising local resources, SI aims at satisfying local public needs and at the same time creating economic value (Di Iacovo et al., 2017). But specifically for rural areas, SI represents community-driven innovations that create novel outcomes, e.g. new relationships among the members of a given community and beyond (Nordberg et al., 2020).

As such, both SI and neo-endogenous development are based on a set of similar core principles (see Table 3.1). Argued by Bosworth et al. (2020), neo-endogenous development represents a "holistic approach to rural development that includes local empowerment, capacity building, overcoming exclusion, adding value to local resources, enhancing connectivity and promoting innovation" (Bosworth et al., 2020, p. 30). At the same time, the existing approaches to SI are built around the ideas of local participation, capacity building and enhancing collaboration among actors through establishing networks (see Neumeier, 2012, 2017).

	Social innovation	Neo-endogenous development
Key principles	- Means for realising development and growth by replacing governmental involvement by building on citizens and enterprises as self-reliant development actors who take change and development into their own hands	- Socio-spatial justice and balancing local needs while competing for extra-local people, resources, skills and capital
Dynamic forces	- Local impetus in connection to the extra-local knowledge and expertise	- Networks of local actors connected to external influences
Function of rural areas	- Creating and implementing innovative solutions to address the needs and interests of local communities	- Sustaining rural livelihoods, while maintaining natural capital
Major problems of rural regions	- State withdrawal and austerity politics - Rural marginalisation - Demographic challenges (ageing population, population decline) - Lack of critical mass - Resistance towards innovation	- Neoliberal deregulation versus policy apathy and lack of regulation - Unbalanced communities – ageing and inequality - Remoteness and isolation - Lack of critical mass
Focus of rural development	- Territorial development instead of sectoral one - Capacity building for local communities - Promoting shift towards asset-based development, utilising unique local knowledge and connecting it to wider environments	- Place-making and community wellbeing - Building resilient rural places - Coping with the new politics of austerity - Realising and valorising alternatives to development (especially non neoliberal) in times of crisis

Table 3.1. Key elements of SI and NED. Source: author's own elaboration based on Moulaert et al. (2005), Bock (2016), Bosworth et al., (2016), Gkartzios and Lowe (2019).

As can be concluded from the above discussion, SI shares some common trends with neo-endogenous approaches to rural development (see Figure 3.1). By focusing on local participation, enhancing democratic decision-making and reconfiguring existing social practices for the benefit of the societies at large (EC, 2013), SI contributes to rural development through building upon neo-endogenous strategies that focus on mobilising/ utilising local capabilities and resources and connecting those to wider environments (Neumeier, 2012).

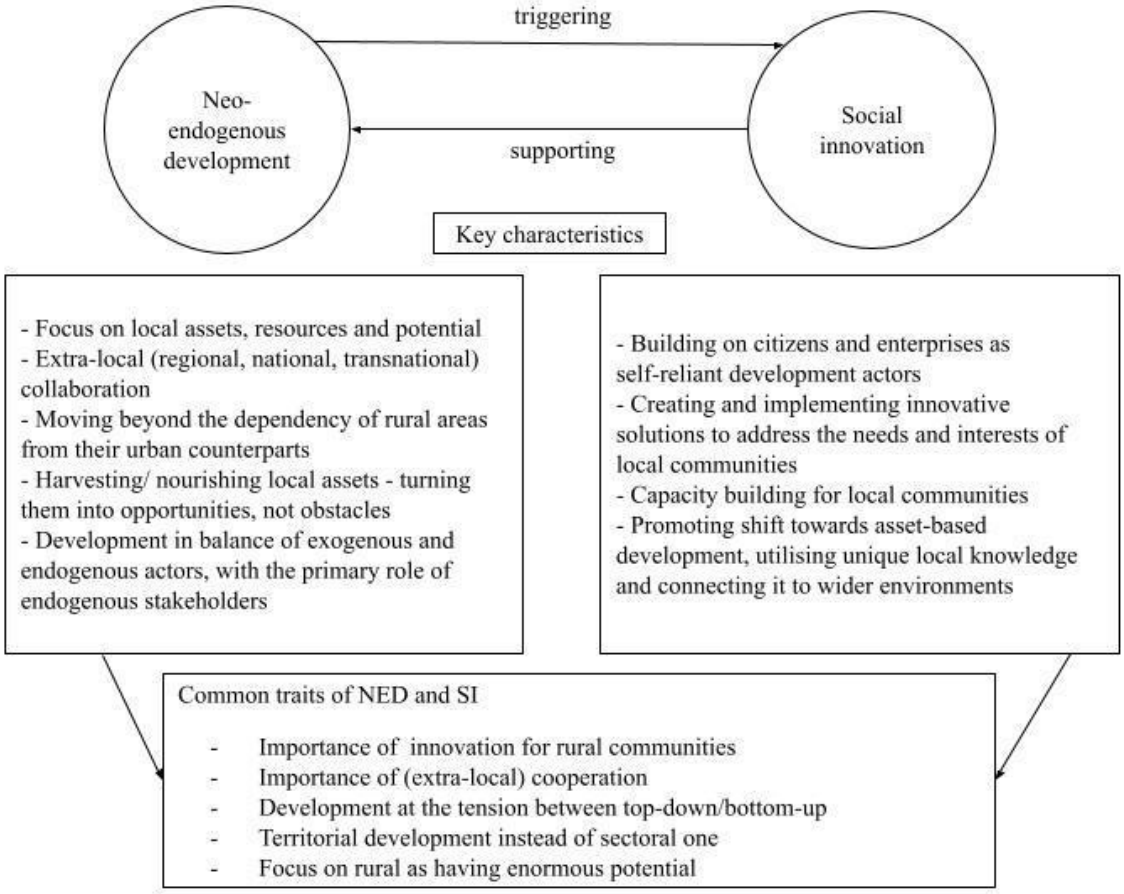

Figure 3.1. Analytical dimensions of the interrelations between neo-endogenous development and social innovation. Source: author's own elaboration.

Current paper argues that neo-endogenous development can, indeed, trigger the processes of SI in several ways. Firstly, for SI to flourish, rural development actors have to work towards creating and supporting the narratives of innovation for sustainable rural development. Second, SI projects heavily rely on cooperation and collaboration within and beyond multi-actor but also multilevel networks where stakeholders from various sectors (public, private, non-profit)

as well as locations (towns, regions) come together around the shared agenda. Third, within neo-endogenous development being rooted in the local assets and interests, SI projects have a potential to create the space for the local actors to both build the projects upon the unique environmental and cultural heritage of the region as well as change their perspectives towards the region itself. Building upon the need of developing the territory rather than just disconnected sectors, the fourth way in which NED can trigger SI is by designing and implementing projects that target the development of a region as a whole rather than focusing on specific sectoral projects (e.g. agriculture).

Case study and methodology

Mühlviertel is a NUTS III region and one of four sub-regions of the Upper Austria region (NUTS II), bordering Bavaria and Bohemia to the north, and Lower Austria to the south and east. Mühlviertel consists of 4 political districts (*politische Bezirke*) and 120 municipalities (*Gemeinde*). Being a predominantly rural region (Eurostat, 2019), Mühlviertel is talked about in terms of economic prosperity (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos, 2020) as well as shows a positive demographic development, being among one of the regions that did not experience negative population developments over the last several decades (Dax and Fischer, 2018). As such, Mühlviertel's experience does not necessarily experience the circle of declining rural regions (OECD, 2006) where rural regions are trapped in the process of losing population, leading to the lower business creation rates, followed by high unemployment and further out-migration. However, what makes Mühlviertel an interesting case study is the fact that the region went through the steady process of regional development starting from the 1990s with both Austrian membership in the EU starting from 1995 and the start of the LEADER framework implementation. Moreover, previous research suggests that local development activities have an even longer tradition in Austria, with local initiatives first established in 1979 through a national programme of endogenous regional development (Dax et al., 2016). The interview data, discussed in more details later on, suggests that such a success in region-wide cooperation is due to Mühlviertel being constituted by six LEADER regions, covering both almost the entirety of its land and population (see Figure 3.2).

Figure 3.2. LEADER regions of Mühlviertel. 1- Donau-Bohmerwald, 2- Urfahr-Umgebung, 3- Sterngartl-Gusental, 4 - Mühlviertler Kernland, 5 -Mühlviertler Alm, 6- Perg Strudengau. Source: authors own elaboration based on LEADER OÖ

Current research was carried out in line with the qualitative case study methodology. Within the case study of the Mühlviertel region, the initial data was collected through document analysis (e.g. Strategic plans and Periodic reports of six LAGs) as well as analysis of other related sources (e.g. web-pages of LAGs). Such analysis was applied to identify the projects implemented, to gain a systematic overview of those projects as well as to identify the stakeholders involved in the wider networks, e.g. partner organisations in bordering regions. Such analysis, rather than being a sole source of data, provided a rich background information on how the projects are designed, implemented and run - and how those projects build upon local participation, boosting endogenous resources and establishing and supporting the networks in the process of implementing SI.

At the stage that followed, narrative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with experts covering the organisations working in the NUTS III region of Mühlviertel. The recruitment of the participants was done through snowballing sampling (e.g. Noy, 2008). This technique was applied since the expertise in the field of SI is not a robust, clearly defined quality (Chatzichristos and Nagopoulos, 2020). Since the process of regional development involves a wide range of actors, not only limited to LAGs (Local Action Groups), the interviews were

conducted with the actors representing a wider political context in the regions, such as local politicians on a municipal level, regional politicians representing both the NUTS III (Mühlviertel) and NUTS II (Upper Austria) regions as well as national experts dealing with the issues of regional development. The actors interviewed were managers and members of LAGs, representatives of the local government and regional agencies dealing with regional and rural development, as well as members of cooperatives and social enterprises operating in the region. The interview guide included open-ended questions focusing on: 1) the challenges that actors face in rural development, 2) the ways in which such challenges were addressed (responses provided); 3) the constellations of actors and/or networks that have been established; 4) enabling and constraining factors in the organisation's work, including those challenges concerning the SI. In total, during a secondment at one of the cooperatives based in Austria 18 interviews were collected between September and December 2018. Following that, the interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, a method for "identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 79), constituted by several stages. After the first stage of initial coding, the produced initial codes were used in order to identify emerging patterns and their potential to be allocated to certain themes. As the themes that were identified as a result of coding were covering many domains, current paper focuses on i) enabling factors that play a role in promoting SI projects through neo-endogenous development and ii) challenges (or hindering factors) that influence the ability of actors to promote SI within neo-endogenous development.

Results

Neo-endogenous development approach, building upon both the connectivity between local and extra-local actors and the crucial role of endogenous resources and knowledge, has a potential as well to be a fertile ground for (social) innovation to flourish. Current paper argues that regional development which is based on strong cooperation, promoting new ways of addressing regional challenges as well as placing emphasis on the importance and unique character of local resources, triggers SI. In turn, SI encourages local linkages and collective learning cultures, enhances more efficient collaboration between the actors, as well as mobilises local resources around shared agendas, thus, strengthening the neo-endogenous development.

Enabling factors for promoting SI through neo-endogenous development

Presence of strong regional cooperation. Regional cooperation in the Mühlviertel region, in the way that can be seen today, has been started by several municipalities that later on served

as a base for creating Mühlviertler Alm LAG. In the early 1990s, when the region was facing both demographic (out-migration, ageing population) and economic (weakened economic activity) challenges, the municipalities of Mülhviertler Alm came together in order to find a solution in cooperation through which the knowledge and the resources were shared. Later on, through the LEADER framework that was implemented in Austria, more municipalities joined the effort in developing the region, thus, leading to the creation of six LEADER regions and LAGs respectively. As such, cooperation is regarded as a key element of sustainable development where the regions strive to work in the manner that was referred to in the following was by one of the LAG managers: "*nicht gegeneinander, nicht nebeneinander, nur miteinander"* ("not against each other, not next to each other but with each other"). Such an approach was argued for due to the ability of LAGs, when participating in wider networks, to acquire the necessary support and knowledge in those domains where the local knowledge is missing. Regarding the missing knowledge and resources, such is also exchanged in the form of so-called 'best practice' examples. In one of the LEADER regions - Mühlviertel Kernland - the awareness on regional development was said to be missing alongside the infrastructure to carry out the projects together with the local community. As such, the LAG manager got in touch with other LEADER regions in Mühlviertel in order to gather the experience of the peers and obtain knowledge and experience (in how to run a LAG) be brought back to and implemented in Mühlviertler Kernland. This exchange between LEADER regions has served, one the one hand, as a tool and a channel for knowledge and experience to be exchanged; on the other hand, it served to strengthen the network through such peer exchange.

Role of LAGs as intermediaries in the regional development process. Within the neo-endogenous approach, local communities have an opportunity to not just participate in the projects but also be a part of designing and preparing such interventions, contributing their ideas and, as such, being active participants of rural development rather than sole beneficiaries of the benefits provided by such projects and interventions. However, quite often local communities do not possess the necessary skills and know-how in designing and implementing the projects, as well as neither monetary nor organisational resources to do so. Therefore, for the rural communities, LAGs serve as intermediaries, connecting lacking resources back to the local actors. This role exists parallel to the expectation that LAGs serve as agents that provide access to missing knowledge. As put by one interviewees,

> *[Having LAGs] gives people the possibility to bring their ideas to realisation. One person sometimes cannot do the project but the LAG can give the possibility to find*

other people, we can build networks and realise a project without politicians. (Manager of LEADER Forum, November 2018*).*

Additionally, such intermediary roles come into play when it comes to the communication between local communities and other political levels, e.g. national or the EU. Here two aspects are important. Firstly, LAGs serve as a mediator in decision-making since the decisions regarding the future development of the region - and in how far such development allows for (socially) innovative projects to be implemented - is negotiated at all different levels. Thus, LAGs serve as intermediaries between local communities and other stakeholders, thus, representing their interests. Secondly, another intermediary function that LAGs take upon is bringing the operational language of regional development frameworks (e.g. LEADER, INTERREG) and bottom-up, community projects together, so that local ideas are linked back to reflect both the needs of communities but also a bigger regional development strategy.

Support for the innovation narratives in the region. Previous studies done into the relationship between the LEADER framework and innovation claim that "innovation is not usually an explicit goal of economic and cultural development projects undertaken as part of LEADER" (Dargan and Schucksmith, 2008, p. 283), with innovation being a term rarely discussed at the local level. As with the mainstream understanding of innovation, the range of varying approaches to and various conceptualisations of SI that exist both in research and policy is also reflected in the work done by LAGs. Regional development actors, when asked about the ways in which they understood socially innovative actions and projects, pointed out that the work done by LAGs, due to its bottom-up and participatory practices, facilitation and promotion of wider community participation in designing and implementing initiatives, can, indeed, be identified as social innovation. Indeed, according to the interviewees, SI is about '*empowerment of living together in a social and healthy way'* (LAG manager)*, 'open spaces for people when they want to try things'* (mayor of a municipality)*, 'positive ground for providing something new'* (LAG manager). However, despite such identification - and despite acknowledging their work as socially innovative, - some interviewees pointed out that SI is still rather underrepresented in the design of the regional and local development strategies and frameworks (e.g. Agenda 21, LEADER). Building upon that, innovation in general - and SI in particular - often occurs "almost implicitly as an offshoot of activities" (Dargan and Schucksmith, 2008, p. 283) with local actors having other objectives in mind such as creation of a new product or providing a particular service. As such, SI becomes a rather difficult concept for LAGs and other actors since it is not acknowledged in regional and local development strategies as a

distinct category of action and is not always seen as an end goal by the regional development stakeholders.

Focus on utilising local assets. As outlined in the academic literature, both SI and neo-endogenous development strongly build upon the local potential and unique local assets, with the spectrum ranging from cultural heritage unique to the place to environmental resources that make the region stand out. Among many projects, one of the examples of such an approach that builds both on utilising (unique) local resources and aiming at satisfying local needs is the project of *Johannesweg*. Johannesweg, an 84 km long round trail founded in 2012, was initiated as a tourism project that would boost the tourist activity in the Mühlviertel region. Throughout the time, the project became a platform for entrepreneurs, politicians and local communities contributing to the development of the region and was recognised as a lighthouse project by Upper Austria Tourism *(Oberösterreich Tourismus)* and as one of the most important tourist focal points in the region.

The significance of the project stems from the fact that, alongside being a cooperation project that transcends both geographical as well as sectoral boundaries, has contributed to the development of the region in several ways, including boosting the economy, granting more employment possibilities for local people and contributing towards positive thinking about the region from the locals themselves.

Moving beyond sectoral approach to development. In their projects, LAGs strive to promote integrated, sustainable development by interventions covering diverse groups of people (e.g. elderly, young and female) simultaneously while also not limiting their projects to specific domains, focusing only on social, economic or environmental aspects. In Mühlviertel the integrated and territorial approach to development came to replace the previously dominating sectoral approach. The initial idea behind promoting cooperation among municipalities that started in the 1990s was to move regional development in said area beyond a sectoral approach that solely focused on agriculture or tourism and to take a deeper look at the challenges related to the overall life conditions and well-being of the rural communities. As put by one of the interviewees,

> *What is with the social life and everything so they decided to design a process to make the regional development more than only agricultural development more than only touristic development. It is still important but it is not the only part. So we designed a process together* (Regional development advisor, Otelo member, November 2018).

One such initiative supported by all six LEADER regions of Mühlviertel is the BioRegion Mühlviertel. Being a network that includes both public (municipalities and regional authorities)

and private (companies, food and tourism industry) BioRegion Mühlviertel aims at both strengthening cooperation and creating closed value-added cycles in the organic sector in order to ensure sustainable regional development. Despite having a primary focus on organic agriculture, the project's mission is to promote holistic development and networking between different sectors of education, research, production and farming, as well as tourism and leisure in the region.

Challenges in promoting SI within the neo-endogenous development of rural regions

Alongside the enabling factors that support SI within rural neo-endogenous development in Mühlviertel, there are some challenges that regional actors face while trying to stay true to the local impetus and promote innovative local and regional development projects, few of which are discussed below.

Presence of parochial thinking. Innovation requires local actors to be ready to take responsibility and exercise their entrepreneurial capacity. Particularly in remote and marginalised rural areas, SI processes require the participation of rural actors, often distant from one another, and their alignment around perceived behavioural and structural changes that go beyond the individual level. However quite often the 'new ways of doing things' are resisted by various actors, including local communities. One of the main obstacles that the regional actors have pointed out while promoting SI was the so-called 'church-tower thinking' ('*Kirchturmdenken'*) both on the part of local communities and local politicians. Parochial thinking was said to shape the way in which locals think about both regional development and innovative projects implemented by the LAGs. The main difficulty faced in this regard by the LAGs is the promotion of regional thinking rather than the thinking that only concerns the development of a municipality in isolation. As put by one interviewee,

That is always the problem, the church tower has its own community or region [in mind]. [We work] so that not every mayor only looks at his community, but that we look very carefully, what is good for us as a region, what brings us forward as a region (LAG manager, October 2018).

As a way of responding to such parochial thinking, regional actors have implemented projects that, rather than focusing on single municipalities, target the region-wide cooperation projects from a territorial approach. However, most importantly, in order to promote the shift in the understanding toward regional thinking, each LAG positions themselves as an 'open space' where local communities can come to and learn about the benefits of moving forward in a cooperative manner.

Top-down/ bottom-up tension and conflicts. The importance of SI for rural regions is linked to its ability to find new models of socio-economic development through bottom-up approaches that are capable of meeting the needs of the local community more effectively than the traditional top-down policy interventions (Lombardi, 2017). That being said, the processes of implementing and running SI projects quite often happen at the tension point between the top-down structures and the bottom-up local action. Conflicting perspectives on both (the future of) regional development and SI are an inevitable element of the innovation process, with actors from different fields and sectors having competing new ideas. As such, innovative ideas and solutions for regional development can be contested, leading to the potential resistance and conflict (Christmann, 2020).

When talking about the flexibility of LEADER and the processes that underlie the mediatory role played by LAGs some tension has been highlighted with regards to the bottom-up character of LEADER and its flexibility in acknowledging and addressing local needs. As put by a member of the LEADER forum,

Very difficult topic in Upper Austria because they try more top-down and they have very strict requirements to do a topic, a project top-down, and LEADER is very successful and flexible in project realisation. Top-down, politicians say it is my topic and it should be done this way. But we have a topic in our region and we are more flexible in realising the topics. Sometimes it is a little bit different to bring these two together. (Member of LEADER Forum Austria, November 2018).

As a way of managing those tensions and conflicts that did emerge, LAGs from Mühlviertel came together to create a network that would represent their perspective on regional development. LEADER - forum Austria (*LEADER-forum Österreich*), a network of 77 LAGs, was founded in 2016 as a mediatory and advocacy body by the LAGs in their communication with different political institutions both at the national and international levels with the idea of achieving direct representation for all LAGs in the process of negotiations and decision-making regarding regional development. The need for such a network stems from the existing discrepancy between implementation responsibility and 'having a say' by LAGs, with LEADER-forum Austria attempting to reduce this said gap.

Remoteness from decision-making. As pointed out in the previous section, LAGs in Mühlviertel have experienced some challenges while operating at the tension point between top-down/ bottom-up approaches to regional development. Throughout the interviews, the centralised character of decision-making, leading to the remoteness of rural actors from it, was said to be one of the reasons leading to the disparities in decision making. In Mühlviertel, this

remoteness from the decision-making at the national level was described as one of the main challenges LAGs and regional actors face when designing interventions within the region's communities. Centralised decision-making regarding rural development is said to only partially reflect the context and the challenges rural regions face. Thus, such is causing disparities in the process of regional development at the national level and the projects needed at the level of regions. As put by one interviewee,

Every politician says it is important to develop the rural areas but the signals coming from the politicians are that you have to be more efficient, you have to centralise. That's a big big difference between what we try to do in the rural areas and what the politicians say. (Manager of LEADER Forum, November 2018).

As a result, LAGs face additional challenges with their freedom and flexibility in implementing projects, having limited capacity to influence the future agenda due to the disparities in perception on what rural development should look like and how it should be implemented. Additionally, the 'mainstreaming'[4] of LEADER has reduced the flexibility of LAGs and made it more difficult for the actors operating at the local level to be flexible and to respond to the particular needs of local areas (EC, 2011).

Need for efficiency in project implementation. Having started as an initiative that allowed for flexibility and experimentation, LEADER has gradually undergone a transformation that has been said to hamper the innovative character of actions taken and projects implemented. Alongside over bureaucratised procedures and the lack of animation, the interviewees point out the challenges they face with regards to the requirements of 'effectiveness' and 'successes'. Due to the dependence of money allocation based on past performance and the fulfilment of a project's objectives and goals, such experimentation has started to disappear, requiring LAGs to be efficient. The 'room for failure' approach of LEADER, despite the initial practice for LEADER to provide 'a room for failure', has changed. As one interviewee put it,

In LEADER, from the European perspective, it is allowed that the project is really a whole failure. If it is not working, it is not a problem. LEADER is designed as a funding for that you can try something. But in Upper Austria or national level it is not really ok if the project is not working. Then you will have problems with the money (Regional development advisor, Otelo member, November 2018).

[4] 'Mainstreaming' here is understood as a process of the transfer of part or all of the LEADER approach to mainstream rural development programmes, whether co-financed or nationally financed (Convery et al., 2010).

As such, despite the innovative character of LEADER and its focus on bottom-up and innovative action, LAGs in Mühlviertel feel the pressure to be 'successful' which is understood in terms of the number of projects implemented/amount of funds released. This perspective comes into conflict with the idea of LEADER providing a space for experimentation and trying out things that both trigger the innovative potential of local communities and places and account for the failure of such initiatives. Being a 'test bed' for neo-endogenous rural development actions that may not always succeed, but that "hitherto have been considered worth trying" (Maye et al., 2010, p. 26).

Conclusions and discussion

Current paper addressed the ways in which - and with what enabling factors - SI can be promoted in rural areas, focusing on the experience of an Austrian region of Mühlviertel. Such promotion is enabled by neo-endogenous development, reflecting the importance of local assets and their interconnection to the wider environment. Successful SI, addressing local challenges, nourishing local resources and establishing new practices/governance structures, is possible where regional development is done through the means of strong cooperation. By analysing the experience of the Mühlviertel rural region, the paper provided some new insights into how neo-endogenous development can trigger, contribute to and promote SI in the region. These include a number of enabling factors.

Among the enabling factors that support SI, the first one is the presence of innovation narratives in the region, with both local communities and authorities being aware of SI and being willing to implement new solutions for more sustainable development based on shared, democratic decision-making, collaboration and co-creation of SI projects. Secondly, neo-endogenous development, rooted in strong region-wide collaboration, can trigger SI through the exchange of experience, knowledge and best practice where the missing resources are bridged back to the localities through intermediaries (such as LAGs). Thirdly, within the shift from a sectoral to a territorial approach to regional development, neo-endogenous strategies place a great emphasis on local resources and potentials, with SI strongly connected to the unique local cultural, environmental and other assets.

While the results indicate that neo-endogenous development can indeed promote SI in rural areas, results also indicate that SI is not always easy to exercise for the actors involved. SI, being about reconfiguration of social practices and providing new solutions for unmet needs faces some resistance in the region of Mühlviertel due to some degree of parochial thinking from both the local population and local authorities, where individual municipalities are

concerned with the well-being of their own population rather than thinking regionally. Additionally, SI being conflictual by nature due to different factors (e.g. change in social practices, scarcity of available resources), leads to some conflicts surrounding the implementation of innovative projects by LAGs. Despite the inevitability of conflicts, LAGs have to navigate their actions in these processes, bridging lacking resources back to the territory and being an intermediary between all the parties involved.

Operating as a part of the LEADER framework, LAGs in Mühlviertel also have to manage the tension arising between the top-down nature of governance in rural development and the bottom-up character of the SI projects they implement. Within this tension, one of the difficulties local actors on the ground have to face is their remoteness from decision-making. Such remoteness is referred to as not just geographical but also political, with national decision-making not fully reflecting/representing the context of rural areas and their needs, resulting in divergent understandings of regional development and projects that need to be tailored to respond to those needs. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid for the needs and demands of rural actors in accordance with their deep knowledge and experience of working 'on the ground' in rural regions.

Finally, the promotion of SI within the neo-endogenous development approach has been hampered by the 'mainstreaming' of LEADER. Such has been discussed previously (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008), with the current study echoing the results indicating the hardships LAGs have to confront due to such mainstreaming processes. As such, LAGs have to work under ever increasing requirements in terms of successful implementation of the projects, thus losing its character as a 'testbed' for innovation and an open space for trying things out. Such pressure being put on LAGs results in the implementation of projects that have a higher chance of 'success' (in monetary and other terms) rather than in projects that might be innovative in nature.

The results presented in the current article indicate that there are several important considerations to be made in both future research and practice when it comes to neo-endogenous development and SI. The results bring up some concerns among regional development actors from Mühlviertel about further state withdrawal, pointing out the pitfalls of neo-endogenous approach that advocates for self-reliance but might lead to facilitating state withdrawal where rural regions are left 'on their own' to deal with challenges. When it comes to SI, in times of austerity and state withdrawal, SI is called upon as one of the tools that can help local communities realise their potential and e.g. address gaps in rural service provision, thus, becoming an active agent in the process of rural development. However, SI should be

understood not simply as self-help in the context of rural areas but rather a way of how to address the uneven but interrelated effects of social change (Bock, 2016). As such, further research should look into neo-endogenous development as promoting SI that moves beyond understanding SI as a self-help tool.

Additionally, the results also indicate the need for more targeting of SI in frameworks as a distinct category of action rather than a supplementary idea to the interventions in social, environmental and other domains. Results presented also suggest that more attention is needed towards including SI as a distinct category of action in rural regions within different policies and frameworks. Despite there being attention paid to SI in policy terms (e.g. BEPA, 2010), it is rather underexplored within the existing frameworks for the development of rural regions. The role of frameworks in supporting and promoting innovative projects in regional development (e.g. LEADER) has been questioned in how far such support goes. The question about the role of LEADER in promoting SI in rural areas has been discussed in the literature before. What the results indicate is that, despite the presence of SI discourse and the regard that regional actors give to it in triggering more bottom-up action and creation of more participatory culture in realising LEADER projects, SI has a rather marginal position when it comes to the rural development frameworks and programs, still requiring much work in integrating the concept.

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Chapter 4. Local development initiatives as promoters of social innovation: evidence from two European rural regions

Abstract

Social innovation (SI) entered the academic discourse several decades ago and has since been seen as a way of tackling existing problems in various contexts. Although an extensive body of research has been conducted into the role of SI in urban context, there is still a gap when it comes to studying its role in the development of rural areas. In this article, an attempt is made to look at the role of local action groups (LAGs) and local development associations (LDAs) as promoters of SI in rural areas in Austria and Portugal and the challenges faced by the latter in promoting SI.

Keywords: social innovation, local action groups, local development associations, rural regions, Austria, Portugal.

Introduction

According to Eurostat, more than half (as for 2012) of the land area in the European Union is within regions classified as being predominantly rural[5] (Eurostat, 2016). Such areas are often characterised by issues of depopulation (Margaras, 2019), weak economic performance (Dax and Fischer, 2018) and large physical distances to end markets (Tregear and Cooper, 2016). In order to overcome these challenges, rural development policy has sought out novel solutions through social innovation (SI). However, despite there being various approaches to SI in territorial development, few have addressed the phenomenon in a rural context, with the notable exception of Neumeier (2012, 2017), Bock (2016) and Bosworth et al. (2016). There is still a lack of knowledge on how SI emerges in rural areas and how it might contribute to an area's development. In addition, the drivers and promoters of SI in rural regions remain rather unexplored despite attempts to analyse the role of actor networks (Neumeier, 2012), local communities (Di Iacovo et al., 2014) and social enterprises (Richter, 2019) in the process of SI promotion.

The importance of SI in rural development comes from a paradigm shift towards a more 'qualitative' development of regions, focusing on dimensions such as the population's

[5] According to the European Commission (2014), rural is considered to be an area where more than 50% of the population live in rural grid cells. Eurostat gives an explanation in which NUTS III regions are classified as 'predominantly rural' if the share of the population living in rural areas is higher than 50%.

wellbeing, network building, local participation and capacity building. Indeed, the literature (e.g. Dax and Fischer, 2018) suggests that future approaches to regional development will have to go beyond the economic growth paradigm and will have to focus more on issues such as local participation and SI.

This article examines LAGs and LDAs role in promoting SI in rural regions and how their work responds to their respective region's issues by using the cases LAGs and LDAs in the Mühlviertel (Austria) and Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) NUTS III regions. The results of the study show that by addressing the issues of empowerment, capacity building, inclusion and network building, LAGs and LDAs contribute to the overall development of a given region. However, irrespective of this success, such organisations face various challenges, including bureaucratic burden, difficulties with finances and the need to work towards changing community perceptions of both their work and the region.

The article is structured as follows. First, theoretical underpinnings regarding SI are presented. Second, the role of SI in regional development, namely in the (neo) endogenous development of rural regions, is discussed. Following that, the methodology alongside the cases under study is presented. Finally, the role of LAGs and LDAs as promoters of SI is analysed along with the challenges and opportunities of such promotion.

Social innovation as a concept of complementary meanings

Despite the steady growth of academic interest in the field of SI (Moulaert, 2016; Phillips et al., 2015), its role in rural development still remains underexplored with most research concerning urban SI (e.g. Moulaert, 2010; Angelidou and Psaltoglou, 2017). Despite this, what research there has been into the importance of, and drivers behind, SI for rural development (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Bock, 2016), the field has been gaining momentum.

In general, 'innovation appears to be a novelty in a given setting based on the recombination of existing elements, the transfer of ideas or solutions to or from other contexts, or inventions' (Richter, 2019, p. 179, citing Schumpeter, 1983 [1911]). SI, in turn, relates to 'changes of attitude, behaviour and/or perception that result in new forms of collaborative action', which, then, improve the lives of those involved (Neumeier, 2012, p. 55). Thus, SI is not only about meeting unmet needs, it is also concerned with the way in which this is done (e.g. through enhancing the capacity of actors, building networks and empowering disadvantaged groups). It involves new forms of organisation at both an institutional and personal level, which are developed at the local level and result in social changes beneficial to the communities involved (Moulaert et al., 2005). According to Bock (2012), SI as a concept originated from the 'debate

and critique on traditional innovation theory with its focus on material and technological inventions, scientific knowledge and the economic rationale of innovation' (Bock, 2012, p. 57). Whilst looking into various conceptualisations and definitions of SI, 'social' is being placed to be a 'core element of innovation' (Bock, 2012, p. 59).

The extant debate on the nature of SI indicates some concern in the literature about the term being conceptually 'fuzzy' and consequently lacking a critical edge (e.g. Pol and Ville, 2009; Bock, 2012; Neumeier, 2012). According to Marques et al. (2018), there is 'a need for a clearer distinction between SI as a research concept that is used to study specific phenomena, as a normative concept that serves as a guide for action, and as a concept in practice, where it is used to describe a wide range of activities from a variety of public, private and third sector actors' (Marques et al., 2018, p. 497).

According to Neumeier (2012), the theoretical concept of SI is built on the following key aspects. First, that SI is grounded in the alliances of different actors. This means that SI occurs through the aligned interests of a group of actors if only a certain critical mass of such actors decides to enrol into the actor network (Neumeier, 2012, p. 54). Thus, for the process of developing SI, a network of actors with aligned interests is crucial. Second, he argued that the development of SI (as is the case for other types of innovation) is always triggered by an initial impetus whether that impetus is external or internal to the group of actors involved in the process of SI. Third, SI builds on the aspect of relative novelty. The relative novelty of a SI, therefore, is the novelty in the subjective perception of the individuals involved (Neumeier, 2012, p. 55). In this sense, SI might also not be new per se but new to the context in which it is implemented. Fourth, SI has as main focus changes of attitudes, behaviours or perceptions (of a group of people aligned in the network). Fifth, the practical implementation of SI is connected with the fact that a particular SI is seen by the people involved as a superior solution (for existing challenges or unmet needs) compared to those that currently exist. Finally, according to Neumeier, SI is non-material, which implies that the material outcomes of SI are a supplementary result.

Building on the (main) characteristics of SI described above, the next section discusses the role of SI and its potential contribution to the (neo-endogenous) development of rural areas.

Social innovation and the neo-endogenous development in rural regions

The traditional image of a rural region is of an area that is lagging behind due to the limited capacity of actors and groups to participate in economic activities (Bock, 2016). Some literature suggests that rural areas are perceived as lacking innovation in comparison to their urban

counterparts (e.g. Shucksmith et al., 2009). However, this view is contested by other scholars, who identify rural regions as those that, despite structural disadvantages such as poor resource accessibility and detachment from markets and networks (Bock, 2016), develop creative solutions for existing challenges and have the drive needed for the development and implementation of innovative projects. Thus, the development of rural areas requires an approach that goes beyond just a technological and economic focus and places more emphasis on dimensions such as the improvement of the quality of life of the rural population. Technological innovations alone cannot solve the challenges of ageing populations, low population density exacerbated by brain drain of young people and weakened economic activity. Such challenges require solutions that would not just contribute to solving the challenges and future development of the regions but would do so through involving local populations in the design of such solutions. Such an approach could be described as neo-endogenous.

As suggested by Neumeier (2012), a neo-endogenous development framework, while still recognising the need for external participation in the development process (and the usual presence of an external impetus as well), places greater emphasis on utilising local resources and enhancing local participation in order to boost the development of a given rural region. In his article, Ray (2006) stated that the neo-endogenous approach in rural development 'emphasises the principle and process of "local participation" in the design and implementation of action' (Ray, 2006, p. 278) through its two primary characteristics. First, the development activities (including economic development) are 'reoriented to maximise the retention of benefits within the local territory by valorising and exploiting local resources', both physical and human (Ray, 2006, p. 278). Second, the main focus of the development is placed on the needs and capacities of local people (Ray, 2006).

The role of SI for the development of rural areas has been discussed in the literature from different perspectives. As previously said, SI can support sustainable rural development through building on neo-endogenous strategies (Neumeier, 2012). Through enhancing more efficient collaboration amongst the (local) actors (Dobele et al., 2015), SI helps to mobilise local resources to satisfy local public needs and, at the same time, creates economic value (García-Llorente et al., 2016) as well as contributes to the creation of networks amongst local actors (Neumeier, 2012; Gobattoni et al., 2015). SI, considered an innovation of and for society, includes rethinking social and spatial solidarity within and beyond rural regions (Bock, 2016). To this end, SI encourages local linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al., 2018).

In addition, and, perhaps most importantly, by bringing change to rural regions, SI challenges existing institutional contexts (Hulgard and Ferreira, 2019).

Having identified the existing gap in the research field of (rural) SI, the following section presents the methodology used in order to study the role and the contribution of local action groups (LAGs) and local development associations (LDAs) in promoting SI in rural regions.

Research design and methodology

This article presents the results of an explorative study based on semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2018 and May 2019 in two NUTS III regions Mühlviertel, Austria, and Baixo Alentejo, Portugal. Expert interviews were conducted to get an initial insight into the challenges that rural regions face, the (novel) solutions that have been provided for those challenges and the impacts of such solutions. To ensure data, several groups of experts were identified during the exploratory stage of the research. The first stage of exploring the field was performed via desk research wherein experts were identified, followed by the initial recruiting of experts. The groups contained representatives of development actors from the local, regional and national levels. The sampling procedure was based on the snowballing technique, where key experts identified through desk research were asked to provide potential references to key actors in the field of regional development, rural development and so on.

As regional and local development happen at different levels and in different organisations, the experts invited for interviews represented local development associations, local action groups (in the framework of LEADER; an acronym in French for *Liaison entre actions de développement de l'économie rurale*[6]), social enterprises, local administration, intermunicipal community, regional development agencies, business association, regional management agencies, network of LEADER regions, SI incubator and regional development commission, as well as federation of LDAs. Twenty-eight interviews were conducted during the data collection stage: 14 interviews for the Austrian case and 14 interviews for the Portuguese case. In order to ensure triangulation of data, additional sources of information, such as local development strategies from two cases were analysed alongside other sources such as Lokale Agenda 21 and material on LAGs and LDAs web pages. On the basis of the data collected, and their subsequent analysis, the following section provides insight into the contribution of LAGs and LDAs into

[6] The LEADER programme is a European Union initiative to support rural development projects initiated at the local level in order to revitalise rural areas. Its aim is to involve local actors in rural areas in the development of their own regions by forming Local Actions Groups (LAGs) and designing and implementing strategies.

the promotion of SI (alongside some examples of past projects), contextual factors that affect such promotion alongside the challenges and obstacles faced by LAGs and LDAs.

Study areas

Baixo Alentejo (Portugal) and Mühlviertel (Austria) are presented as cases to investigate the role of LAGs and LDAs in promoting SI in rural areas (Figure 4.1). First, two regions were chosen as study areas based on their different backgrounds in regional development (where Austria is considered amongst the pioneering countries). Second, both regions, despite falling under the category of predominantly rural, are not experiencing challenges such as low economic activity, rural exodus and ageing of population to the same extent. Third, the two regions are quite different in population and territory. Despite all the differences, the activities promoting SI are undertaken in both cases, which make an interesting ground for finding the commonalities and divergences in the ways of promoting SI.

Baixo Alentejo, part of the larger Alentejo region (NUTS II), covers an area of 8,544.6 km² (10.8% of the national territory). The region is bordered to the north by the District of Évora, to the east by Spain and to the south by the District of Faro. Baixo Alentejo consists of 13 municipalities (*Municípios*) and 83 parishes (*Freguesias*). The total population of Baixo Alentejo in 2018 was reported as 117, 868 inhabitants (INE, 2019). Compared to the national as well as regional population densities (NUTS II), Baixo Alentejo represents one of the most sparsely populated regions in Portugal with a decrease in population density from 14.5 inhabitants/km^2 in 2013 to 14.1 inhabitants/km^2 in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019). Over the past decades, the region has undergone an average negative population growth because of rural exodus, which especially concerns younger population and ageing of the population (Margaras, 2019). Economic sectors related to production of cork, wine, olive oil and dairy products occupy a prominent space in the economic activities of the region. However, the tertiary sector has, in the recent years, taken a prominent position in the regional economy because of the development of the information and communication technologies (ICT) and tourism (e.g. sustainable and ecotourism). Being a low population density region with relatively low diversification of economic activity, Baixo Alentejo is an area where LAGs and LDAs strive to create a support system for revitalising the region through triggering the positive development of it through the ideas of SI. As derived from the interviews, LAGs and LDAs identify the areas of social care for elderly people, youth integration, economic diversification alongside with the development and promotion of alternative economic models and its strengthening as main objectives of their work in rural development.

Mühlviertel is part of the Upper Austria region (NUTS II), covering an area of 2,660.17 km^2. The region borders Bavaria and Bohemia to the north and Lower Austria to the south and east. Mühlviertel consists of 4 political districts (*politische Bezirke*) and 120 municipalities (*Gemeinde*). For a 5-year period, the region has experienced an increase in the population density from 77.7 inhabitants/km^2 in 2013 to 79.2 inhabitants/km^2 in 2017 (Eurostat, 2019). Total population of Mühlviertel in 2018 was 208,483 (Eurostat, 2019), which indicates the increase in the total number of inhabitants in the region since 2013. When it comes to the economic sectors of the region, because of the relatively large distances to metropolitan areas and the low population density, agriculture has an important economic and social role in the region. As in the Portuguese case, members of LAGs and LDAs operating in Mühlviertel have identified the youth engagement, female entrepreneurship alongside economic development and agriculture (with a strong focus on ecological farming) as their main fields of intervention that require new and creative solutions.

Figure 4.1. Map with the location of two regions under study. Source: own elaboration based on Eurostat data

According to Eurostat (2016), both regions under study are predominantly rural and peripheral[7] regions but they are not facing the same challenges in terms of population and economic development. Despite having different backgrounds in economic and demographic development, the two regions represent interesting arenas for socially innovative projects of LAGs and LDAs. Analysing the work of LAGs and LDAs operating in two quite different rural contexts, the next section analyses the ways in which those organisations approach (rural) challenges, such as low population density, ageing of the population as well as strong

[7] In this article, the notion of 'peripheral' is applied to the region based on the geographic location, for example, the region bordering other countries. Both regions, therefore, fall under the category of peripheral.

connection of economic activity to agriculture, and how they contribute to solving them through novel solutions.

Ways of promoting social innovation used by LAGs and LDAs in Baixo Alentejo and Mühlviertel

In both cases under study, there is a high awareness of SI amongst the members of LAGs and LDAs. This may be explained by the entrance of SI into the policy discourse some time ago, leading to it being seen by interviewees as a tool that has the ability to help the development of their respective areas. Implicitly, such actors identify their work as SI based on the dimensions of an idea or a project being novel for the specific locality, the attempt to meet needs whilst involving the local community in co-creation as well as practising a bottom-up approach to project development. As pointed out by an interviewee in the Austrian case,

> *Social innovation means that people allow new ways. Any positive social innovation should provide positive input, positive ground for providing something new. For social innovation you also have to look to other regions, to take the practices from other regions. If other good projects run there it could also run here* (LAG manager, Mühlviertel, October 2018).

This understanding of SI and its importance for regional development was echoed by interviewees in the Portuguese case, where SI is seen as a tool for more sustainable, collaborative and goal-oriented actions:

[Social innovation is] putting people together, working together in a participatory way to solve their own problems, this is the idea I have for that (a member of the Portuguese Federation of Local Development Associations, Lisbon, April 2019).

Despite the promotion of SI having a more implicit character in two case studies, LAGs and LDAs take on various ways to promote novel solutions for the regions they work in.

- *Being an Intermediary*

According to Richter (2019), it is assumed that rural social enterprises are more capable of fostering SI in rural regions if they are socially embedded in the region and if they systematically connect 'remote rural communities with groups, organisations, and networks in other places, fields, and spatial scales' (Richter, 2019, p. 185). Despite the fact that LAGs and LDAs are not necessarily social enterprises, the above still holds true for such organisations. By serving as an intermediary (an embedded intermediary, in Richter's terms), LAGs and LDAs serve as a bridge between members of a local community, between local communities and regional authorities (such as Regional Directory of Alentejo), between actors on local level and

national networks and groups and between local and EU levels through the direct communication in case of LAGs. In addition, because the research concerns rural regions on the periphery of Austria and Portugal, those organisations serve as an intermediary in cross border cooperation between various regions. By connecting a local community with external actors (and exogenous resources), LAGs and LDAs promote cooperation, know-how exchange and inclusion of local actors into the supra-regional networks beyond their respective regions, which supports the neo-endogenous approach to the rural development where actors are connected to wider contexts (Neumeier, 2012; Bock, 2016). Facilitating access to the (financial) resources is another important part of such organisations' work, especially in rural areas where organisations and individuals usually find themselves in a situation of limited access to the resource pool. By facilitating access to various sources of funding, the most important of which being LEADER and European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), LAGs and LDAs provide local communities with more opportunities for financial support available for both existing and emerging initiatives.

- *Promoting an Integrated Approach to Rural Development*

In both cases, LAGs and LDAs strive for integrated development, meaning, the projects implemented by organisations cover various fields within one project rather than targeting only one domain, for example, promoting tourism through the use of natural assets and local knowledge. In most of the projects, such organisations strive to promote holistic development by interventions covering diverse groups of people (e.g. elderly, young and female) simultaneously while also not limiting their projects to specific domains of (purely) economic or social development. In both regions, integrated sustainable development through projects concentrating on different combinations of interventions was said to be one of the main objectives. Such an integrated approach is especially supported by LAGs and LDAs because the public sector does not always work in an integrated way. As a member of a Portuguese LDA pointed out,

[Municipalities] can see what is happening, but they lack an integrated approach. Even in small municipalities, they have those different departments, and there is no common strategy, each of the department's works only within a specific subject. And this is happening all over. The local development associations have a much more integrated approach on the territory than the municipalities themselves (a member of an LDA, Baixo Alentejo, March 2019).

One of the initiatives promoting an integrated approach is the EPAM (Empreender na Fileira das PAM em Portugal; translated as Business development in the aromatic and medicinal plant sector in Portugal) project. It has been led by ADCMoura since 2011 and driven by the

National Rural Network Program. The project embodies a consolidated methodology and set of tools to support the development of the aromatic and medicinal plants sector in Portugal. It acts at the level of network animation, research and provision of information, training and serving as a strategic and innovative platform. One of the cornerstones of the EPAM process is fostering collaborative solutions for business and industry development amongst producers and between producers and other industry agents such as researchers as well as public bodies and companies.

A similar approach is taken in Mühlviertel where LAGs see integrated rural development as one of the main strategic objectives of their work. Operating in the region, the Bioregion Mühlviertel association that includes stakeholders with all six LAGs of the Mühlviertel being a part of it, is a network that encompasses organic direct marketing companies, gastronomy and the hotel industry, schools, organic farming businesses and commercial organic food processors. Through strengthening cooperation and participation and creating closed value-added cycles in the organic sector, BioRegion Mühlviertel aims to support and ensure sustainable regional development.

- *Bringing Capacity to the Region*

In both cases, capacity building among local populations is named as one of the main goals of LAGs and LDAs. By organising meet-ups, workshops and one-on-one consulting to those wishing to open their own enterprises, such organisations build local/regional capacity. Throughout the interviews, it was noted that one of the main objectives is the establishment of a system (a support infrastructure) wherein the local community would acquire the entrepreneurial capacity necessary for their own autonomy in the future life of their projects:

So, this is more or less what we do, in that case it was with social care for elderly people, but this place to other sectors and other ideas. And this is how we started working with the aromatic and medicinal plant sector. The idea is to help people develop their own capacity and empower them in order for them to be able to develop the sector by themselves (a member of an LDA, Baixo Alentejo, March 2019).

Another important aspect of their work is to bring external knowledge and know-how to the regions from partners in other regions and countries, exchanging experiences and practices in frameworks such as LEADER and INTERREG (European Territorial Cooperation). By taking part in projects as partners and exchanging expertise with external experts, LAGs and LDAs bring necessary (and sometimes lacking) knowledge back to the region and share it through workshops, classes, lectures and so on targeting both internal stakeholders and local communities.

- *Promoting Shift From Problem Oriented to Opportunity-Driven Development and Social Innovation*

Rural development has experienced a shift towards available local assets that should be perceived as an opportunity and a valuable feature rather than an obstacle (Dax and Fisher, 2018). Despite the fact that most literature refers to SI as a new way of solving problems or meeting needs, opportunity- and asset-driven SI are rarely discussed in lieu of problem solving. The organisations in both cases under study took an approach towards the challenges faced by regions as opportunities, in an attempt to change both the way of work and the perception of local populations towards such work and the situation in their respective regions.

Another one is that we should look for the things that we normally see as a problem and change it and see it as an opportunity. And we are doing it, there are some examples…For instance, the low density of people, of houses, of companies, we have space in the region with no light pollution, dark sky. It's an example of how we can use low density as an opportunity to promote other activities (a member of the Alentejo Regional Development Agency, Alentejo, May 2019).

The importance of promoting opportunity-driven, rather than solely problem solving, SI stems from the fact that opportunity-driven SI can potentially provide more transformative outcomes (Bosworth et al., 2016) despite the fact that the problem-oriented actions can provide the best available solution at a given time.

- *Utilising (Natural) Assets of the Region*

New economic sectors are now developing in rural areas, such as the expanding sector of rural tourism and other activities linked to their natural and cultural assets (EC, 2008). This is confirmed by the words of another interviewee,

The environmental excellence that we have is the result of not having so many companies, so many people. So now it's a very good thing that we have that we should keep but explore at the same time, so we have to look for that (a member of the Alentejo Regional Development Agency, Alentejo, May 2019).

In both case studies, therefore, rural tourism is seen as a promising sector that both helps regions to attract tourists while staying true to a sustainable approach to the development as well as making use of the regional resources and assets on offer. The attractiveness of available natural assets and resources is used by LAGs and LDAs not only to attract tourists to the region but also to attract more young people to rural areas by showcasing the (high) quality of life and availability of support infrastructure to realise their own initiative.

On the basis of the different ways in which LAGs and LDAs promote SI in rural areas,

some conclusions can be drawn. The promotion of SI is performed through the complementary functions, which such organisations use in their work. The important objective of their work is promoting an integrated approach to the development of their respective rural regions. LAGs and LDAs work is to foster SI and, at the same time, the ways in which those organisations do this can also be considered a type of SI because it promotes cooperation, targets the change in people's perceptions (of existing challenges and available resources and assets), creates and strengthens networks and attempts to provide novel, opportunity-driven solutions.

Opportunities and challenges in promoting social innovation

The promotion of SI in both regions can be described as implicit rather than explicit: by realising projects aiming at regional and local development, such organisations do not necessarily strive to promote SI as an analytical concept but so as to provide new solutions and ideas for dealing with the challenges that territories and communities face. However, by following an integrated approach striving to meet unmet needs while including the local population in the process of co-designing the projects and creating networks among the locals, LAGs and LDAs can be assumed to be promoters of SI by both placing the emphasis on the process and the outcome dimensions of SI.

The importance of cross-border constellations of actors in the process of the development and promotion of SI projects is supported in the academic discourse (e.g. Noack and Federwisch, 2019). For the Austrian case, the results show that, during the early 1990s, some municipalities in the Mühlviertel region came together to develop a set of measures to promote regional collaboration. The working group was set up in order to develop a strategy for a collective 'regional' acting in order to overcome the challenges that existed in the region at the time such as weakened economic performance and decreasing population, especially the outflow of young skilled workers. In the process of developing new solutions for overcoming the challenges described above, the interviewees pointed out the importance of a collaborative approach in finding a new sustainable approach to regional development. Such development, however, is not seen as a development of separate municipalities but rather as a development of an overall Mühlviertel region:

At this time, there were eight municipalities and they thought it would be much more than a broader part and it was: what is with the social life and everything, so they decided to design a process to make the regional development more than only agricultural development, more than only touristic development. It is still important but it is not the only part. So we designed

a process together (a member of a cooperative operating in the region, Mühlviertel, November 2018).

In the Portuguese case study, such collaborative approaches are rather contested despite the fact that there is collaboration amongst LAGs and LDAs. In contrast to the Austrian case, members of LAGs and LDAs in Baixo Alentejo pointed out the existing challenges in promoting a collaborative spirit. As one of the reasons for this, an interviewee suggested the overall competitive spirit of enterprises and companies in the region:

[Enterprises] see themselves as concurrent, not as partners. Everyone wants to be a leader, this area is mine, so I'm afraid to share it with others. But at the same time they have to do it because we are very small. We cannot grow, we need to share more, work more together (a member of the Alentejo Regional Development Agency, Alentejo, May 2019).

The background in traditional agriculture was also said to hamper the possibilities (and willingness) of the local population to either start their own initiatives or get involved in entrepreneurial projects supported through the work of LAGs and LDAs in Baixo Alentejo. As stated by an interviewee,

For years for the regular person was to work for someone and not to think about creating his own job, starting his own initiative. So this remains the mentality that someone has to give me a job. So when we say that today we still have a lack of qualification, it is not only about the professional qualification, but especially some competences that people don't have in terms of entrepreneurial attitude (a LAG manager, Baixo Alentejo, May 2019).

Promoting SI is related to several other challenges faced by LDAs and LGAs. First, the results showed that there is a low degree of institutionalisation of SI in both cases under study. Local development strategies in both cases (*Lokale Entwicklungstrategie* in Austria and *Estratégias de Desenvolvimento Local* in Portugal) do not refer to SI explicitly. The discourse regarding the development in local strategies is rather centred on the importance of implementing and supporting innovation in various fields of intervention; however, it does not put SI as a distinct category of action.

Amongst other factors disabling the promotion of SI are (relatively) high levels of bureaucratic burden in organisations, lack of time in order to work in the field (described by interviewees as *on the ground*), presence of some hostility among locals towards projects, ongoing presence of centralised decision-making on local development, a lack of critical mass among a local population, the presence of parochial thinking, the necessity for the success of projects that leaves no room for mistakes together with the lack of cooperative culture amongst actors. As stated by one of the experts,

On the other hand, the way that the programs have been designed in each cycle constrained a little bit all this freedom and this innovative capacity that LAGs had in the beginning. [...] but they don't have time now because if they want to not be left behind on levels of engagement and funds and expenses they have spent too much time on dealing with the procedures, bureaucracy and less time to do, which I think is the really added value working together with people, what we call this territorial dimension (a member of the Portuguese Federation of Local Development Associations, Lisbon, April 2019).

In both cases, the work performed by LAGs and LDAs is project-based, which means that (1) the organisations face tight deadlines in releasing and finishing the projects; (2) there is substantial pressure concerning the success rate of the projects, namely, there is a need for a project to be successful; (3) not all the outcomes and impacts of the projects implemented live on after the financial support ends which raises the question of sustainability of actions and sustainability of innovation. According to Dax et al. 2016 (citing Strahl and Dax, 2010), LAGs 'feel constrained by the growing set of regulations while also losing their ability to make use of locally specific rural assets through an innovative approach' (Strahl and Dax, 2010, p. 38). This has been confirmed throughout the interviews in which, in both cases, the experts pointed out the (still) growing pressure from centralised decision-making procedures combined with the enormous bureaucratic burden put on them.

Discussion and conclusion

Most interviewees emphasise that LAGs and LDAs play an important role in promoting the development of rural regions while implementing changes and cooperating in a way that can be considered socially innovative (new, hybrid partnerships in order to tackle challenges; promoting integrated area development rather than the development of specific sectors, e.g. agriculture; supporting bottom-up actions). The awareness regarding SI initiatives is high; however, in both cases, organisations tend not to immediately describe their work as SI. Yet, people involved in LAGs and LDAs both in the Portuguese and Austrian cases confirm that the work they are doing in the regions centres around issues of novel local resource use, (neo)endogenous development, creating and supporting local supply chains and local networks and, therefore, promoting the development of the region alongside local development.

The implicit character of SI promotion may be related to several factors: (1) difficulties in identifying, defining and measuring SI and (2) some hesitation towards labelling the work as SI because of the 'buzz' around the term. It should be noted that, as evident from the interviews, there are some issues related to the fact that such organisations have to claim to be promoters

of SI in order to access more funding opportunities. The impact assessment of SI projects puts further constraints on LAGs and LDAs because the organisations struggle with assessing, evaluating and/or measuring the impacts produced.

Despite the role of SI in local development having been acknowledged in the literature (Moulaert et al., 2005; Neumeier, 2012), future research on the role of LAGs and LDAs in promoting SI could benefit from a more critical perspective on SI as a political term used to fulfil the interests of some stakeholders. In addition, more attention could be paid to the contextual dimensions, political power structures at play, and potential undesired (or even negative) impacts of implementing such projects in rural regions.

Greater elaboration on the present research is needed about the interrelation of SI and social capital in rural regions and how the latter affects SI promotion. The research could also benefit from more insight into potential conflicts amongst various stakeholders in rural areas that lead to the disabling of social innovation.

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Chapter 5. Social innovation impacts and their assessment: an exploratory study of a social innovation initiative from a Portuguese rural region

Abstract

Over recent decades, various approaches to social innovation (SI) have been developed. At the same time, the question on how SI can contribute to and can impact the development of rural regions still remains only partially answered. One of the research gaps that remains addressed only to a certain extent is associated with the ways in which impacts produced by SI can be assessed. Such research, focusing on SI impacts in rural contexts is even scarser. In the current paper, an attempt is made to investigate the impacts of an SI initiative operating in the field of integrated rural development. The study takes on a case study design focusing on ADCMoura, a local development association from Baixo Alentejo, Portugal. The results show that the impacts of said SI initiative have a multi-sectoral and multi-durational nature and transcend sectors and address multiple domains (social, economic, institutional, and environmental), with the SI initiative having the most impacts on the local level of the municipality. In addition to this, the paper provides some ideas for further research.

Keywords: social innovation; social innovation impacts; impact assessment; rural regions; local development initiatives; Baixo Alentejo; Portugal

Introduction

Social innovation (SI) is growing in prominence in research, policy, and practice. As a consequence, SI has been widely discussed and debated within various disciplines and traditions, leading to myriad of understandings of the nature of SI, looking at the phenomenon from the perspective of urban studies and territorial development (Moulaert et al., 2005; MacCallum, 2009), management (Dawson and Daniel, 2010), and business research (Van der Have and Rubalcaba, 2016). Such interest has been reflected in the policy, too, stressing the important role of SI in addressing societal challenges (EC, 2013).

While SI has been on the rise as a scientific concept and a policy instrument, within the research domain SI has been mostly targeted in the context of urban areas, leaving other territories (e.g., rural areas) out of the scope of the research to a great extent (Vercher et al., 2021). In order to deal with such a disbalance, SI should receive a stronger focus in the domain of rural development since "social innovation of marginal rural areas is […] not only a task for individual and disadvantaged rural areas but a common concern" (Bock, 2016, p. 570). Thus, addressing SI through the lens of rural research becomes of utmost importance.

Within the research, some cautious remarks have been made with some scholars arguing that an 'all-positive' approach to SI, viewing it as a 'panacea' (Benneworth et al., 2015) or a 'self-help' tool (Bock, 2016) for rural regions and its role in future policies of the new rural paradigm (Barlagne et al., 2021) puts the SI at risk of furthering the state withdrawal, putting rural regions at a greater risk, and leading to even less attention being granted to rural areas (idem). At the same time, the prominent space for SI in the development of rural regions cannot be disregarded. As such, SI has been regarded as one of the driving forces behind the development of sustainable and just communities due to the strong self-reliance of actors and the strong bottom-up character of action involved in and facilitated by the SI processes (Nicholls and Murdock, 2012). Indeed, empirical evidence supports the importance of SI as a driver of sustainable development of rural communities (Bosworth et al., 2020; Ravazzoli and Valero, 2020; Baselice et al., 2021). At the same time, SI focuses on building resilient communities, placing a great emphasis on empowering the actors (Avelino et al., 2019), building the capacity of local actors (Novikova, 2021), as well as developing rural assets (Neumeier, 2012). With this in mind, the role of SI in the development of rural areas and the impact of SI and its assessment, is necessary to be studied and addressed in a more holistic and systematic way. Again, despite the advancements on the impact assessment and evaluation in other fields (e.g., Glasson and Therivel, 2013; Esteves et al., 2012), studies have only partially addressed the impacts of SI, specifically within the rural context. Nonetheless, considered as long-term changes that affect different dimensions of territorial capital (Ravazzoli et al., 2021), SI impacts are an important element of any SI project and/or action undertaken. However, little is known with regards to the impacts of SI in the context of rural areas, where both theoretically grounded tools and systematic empirical evidence of the impacts of SI remain scarce.

Having presented the above, the paper aims to fill the research gap by addressing the following question:

What are the types, domains, and scales of impacts produced by SI initiatives in rural regions?

In order to echo and build upon the recent elaborations addressing the SI impact measurement and assessment (Antadze and Westley, 2012; Secco et al. 2019a; Cunha and Benneworth, 2020; Mildenberger et al., 2020), with specific focus on rural areas (Ravazoli et al., 2021; Barlagne et al., 2021), in the current paper an attempt is made to assess impacts of an SI initiative from a rural region of Baixo Alentejo, Portugal. Thus, in order to answer the proposed research question, the main aim of the paper is to carry out an SI impact assessment exercise through which the SI impacts (and their various types, scales, and domains) could be

identified and analysed. The paper takes on a case study approach of ADCMoura (A Associação para o Desenvolvimento do Concelho de Moura), a local development initiative (in the text—LDI) from the Baixo Alentejo region, further presented and discussed in the paper. In this paper, ADCMoura is understood to be an SI initiative due to the innovative character of the interventions with regard to the context (namely, geographical location) and beneficiaries, through providing a more effective response in meeting needs of the community than previously established initiatives, as well as through their aiming at reconfiguration of social practices, and their focus on providing integrated long-term solutions in the context of the region's development. Therefore, the goal of the paper is to present the results of a study derived from an online survey of ADCMoura's case that provide some new insights into the types, scales, and domains of impacts of a said SI initiative that aim at addressing current challenges, including various axes of intervention (e.g., economic, social, institutional, and environmental).

To this end, the paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents a brief overview of different approaches to SI and explores key themes and considerations of SI research in rural studies. In the same section, state-of-the art research concerning SI impacts will be presented. Section 3 introduces the context of the study (Baixo Alentejo region and ADCMoura). Section 4 presents the methodology of the study, explaining in more detail the choice of method(s) and their application. Section 5 presents the results discussing the impacts of the SI initiative in question, highlighting the key findings. Finally, Section 6 provides some conclusions alongside the limitations of the research, offering some suggestions for future research.

Theoretical considerations

Social innovation: brief discussion and rural focus

SI has been widely discussed both in research and practice, as well as across many disciplines and research fields (Moulaert et al., 2007; Angelidou and Psaltoglou, 2017; Pol and Ville, 2009). This attention to the concept and its core principles results in a myriad of understandings that revolve around finding new solutions to the complex societal problems (Lee et al., 2021), triggering reconfiguration of social practices (Moulaert et al., 2005; Howaldt et al., 2016), and changing the attitudes of actors (Neumeier, 2012, 2017). Despite the absence of a commonly agreed definition of SI, there is a consensus that SI represents both "*a process* of the transformation of social practices (i.e., attitudes, behaviours, networks of collaboration) and *the outcomes* in terms of new products and services (i.e., novel ideas, models, services, and new organisational forms" (Ravazzoli et al., 2021, p. 2) (italics added by authors). As such, SI should

be discussed in a two-facet way that represents both the processes as well as the outcomes achieved by such a change in the process and practices. Thus, SI should not be solely focused on the outcomes, but be concerned with the way in which such outcomes are to be achieved (e.g., through enhancing the capacity of actors, building networks and empowering (disadvantaged) groups). It involves new forms of organisation at both an institutional and personal level, which are developed at the local level and result in social changes beneficial to the communities involved (Moulaert et al., 2005).

SI is said to have a transformative potential, with Avelino et al. (2019) conceptualising transformative social innovation (TSI) as SI that "challenges, alters and/or replaces existing social relations and practices, primarily by co-producing new social relations, involving new ways of doing, organising, framing and knowing" (Avelino et al., 2019, p. 198).

In the context of rural studies, SI is seen as an increasingly prominent agent of change in rural communities (Bosworth et al., 2020), with many studies on the SI's role in rural development pointing out the potential of SI to improve the well-being of rural communities and societies (Bosworth et al., 2016; Bock, 2012, 2016; Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Ravazzoli et al., 2021), and its contribution to the transition towards sustainability (Repo and Matschoss, 2020).

There are several issues as to why SI is of importance in contemporary policy (Slee and Polman, 2021). With the presence of the dominance of economic policies that has produced negative outcomes for both particular occupational groups and regions, as well as with the unravelling crisis associated with the alienation of many people from mainstream political processes due to the lack of capacity of contemporary institutions to address wicked problems, SI has been flagged "as a laboratory in which coping and adaptive strategies are constructed and tested through the unleashing of citizen power" (Slee and Polman, 2021, p. 253). Within the rural SI research, it has been argued that rural SI "is distinctive in its dependence on civic self-reliance and self-organisation due to austerity measures and state withdrawal, and its cross-sectoral and translocal collaborations" (Bock, 2016, p. 552). Thus, SI indeed can provide an alternative, sometimes more efficient and effective response to the needs that have not been addressed otherwise. On the one hand, it requires self-reliance and self-organisation on the part of the rural actors; on the other hand, this has been discussed in light of the potential further state withdrawal and the risk for the rural communities to be left 'on their own'. At the same time, the research points out the high context-dependency of SI, with the society serving as the arena in which change should take place (Bock, 2016). Thus, SI should be analysed acknowledging the complexity of social processes and taking into account complex

constellations of actors and unpredictable dynamics, especially those of rural areas (Christmann, 2020).

Often faced with challenges such as population loss, rural exodus, economic deprivation, and overall marginalisation (e.g., Bock, 2016; Secco et al., 2019b), actors in rural areas strive to find new solutions to addressing said challenges. In rural communities, SI is said to "offer solutions that cultivate and implement new ideas that have the potential to deliver value and foster sustainability transformations" (Barlagne et al., 2021, p. 4). SI, seen as a response to societal challenges, aims at "reconfiguration of social practices which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors" (Polman et al., 2017, p. 4). As such, SI, by providing a novel response to unmet needs of the communities, and by reconfiguring social practices of actors within those communities, contributes to the sustainable transformation aiming at increased well-being and empowerment of the local actors.

Another contribution of SI in such transformation lies in supporting rural communities through the neo-endogenous development strategies (Neumeier, 2012) that concentrate on mobilising and building upon the local resources and local assets. The interrelation between SI and neo-endogenous development, with a specific focus on how the neo-endogenous rural development can promote and support SI in rural areas, has been discussed in the previous research (e.g., Neumeier, 2017; Bosworth et al., 2020; Novikova, 2021). Neo-endogenous rural development approach, focusing on promoting and harnessing local assets, resources, and potential, simultaneously places a great emphasis on extra-local (regional, national, and transnational) collaborations, which assumes the rural development that happens in balance of exogenous and endogenous actors and resources. Drawing parallels between social innovation and neo-endogenous development, Bosworth et al. (2020) conclude that a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches is required, and the most effective outcomes arise where local groups become more empowered to make decisions within a supportive, but not over-bureaucratic, framework. Ultimately, SI is both at the core of neo-endogenous rural development and an important prerequisite for its success, focusing on collaborative action supporting asset building and pooling of knowledge leading to new forms of collaborative action, new governance structures, and change of practices at an individual, community, and regional level. Through building upon the resources, assets, and knowledge that are locally available, SI works towards satisfying local public needs and creating economic value at the same time (Di Iacovo et al., 2014), as well as simultaneously creating social benefits and economic opportunities for the local communities (Cuntz et al., 2020). Acknowledging the need

for resources to be shared in order to achieve more sustainable outcomes within rural settings, SI is focused on creating and sustaining networks among actors (Neumeier, 2012; Gobattoni et al., 2015) and advancing more efficient collaboration between the actors involved (Grinberga-Zalite et al., 2015). Such collaboration requires the establishment of actors' context-sensitive arrangements, in which SI acts both as a mechanism for establishing such arrangements as well as contributing to reducing social inequalities and disproportionate resource allocation (Živojinović et al., 2019). More generally and for rural areas specifically, SI is about the cooperation between actors coming together for achieving a shared goal (Osburg and Schmidpeter, 2013), aiming at improvements in collective (rather than just individual) well-being. Within the process of such cooperation, through promoting a change in attitudes and practices (Neumeier, 2012; Richter, 2019), SI encourages local rural linkages and collective learning cultures (Navarro et al., 2018). As a result, SI contributes to rethinking social and spatial solidarity among actors involved (Bock, 2016).

In order to address the main research question posed, in the current paper SI is understood to be a response to societal challenges that is (a) leading to the reconfiguration of social practices, (b) innovative with regard to the context or beneficiary, (c) more effective in meeting needs than previous actions/projects/initiatives, and (d) focusing on providing long-term solutions (elaborated based on Neumeier, 2012; Barlagne et al., 2021).

Conceptualisation, core elements and types of SI impacts

The issue of impact is a cornerstone of the notion of SI, with some scholars arguing that having an impact is a central part of the SI process, with an implicit emphasis on the SI impacts on individuals and society (Baturina and Bežovan, 2015). Simultaneously, scholars argue that core elements of successful SI are durability and broad impact (Westley and Antadze, 2010). Yet, one of the main challenges SI initiatives face is to show the impact they have and how such impacts contribute to positively transforming society. Despite its relevance, the impact is an important issue addressed in the study of SI only to a certain extent (Portales, 2019).

One of the key questions in this area is still concerned with the notion of impact itself. In general, impact can be understood as the value created as a consequence of someone's activity (Roberts Enterprise Development Fund, 2001) and the value experienced by beneficiaries and all others affected (Kolodinsky et al., 2010). Therefore, the impact represents the "effect at the final level of the causal chain that connects the action to the eventual impact on society" (Maas and Grieco, 2017, p. 114). According to Maas and Grieco (2017), such a causal chain, often referred to as *impact value chain*, makes a distinction between the initial resources used by the

organisation to introduce an action (input); the action undertaken (project or activity); the immediate quantitative result of the action (output); the direct changes in the community, people, organisations, systems, and institutions (outcome) followed by the highest order effects of the initial action undertaken (impact) (Ebrahim and Rangan, 2014; Liket et al., 2014; Maas and Grieco, 2017).

In the field of SI research, some further elaborations have been made to distinguish along the *result-chain model* according to the Theory of Change (ToC) (see Figure 5.1). According to the ToC with relation to the SI research, outcomes derive from the use of the outputs by the direct beneficiaries of the action/intervention and represent "behavioural changes that produce new routines, decisions, rules and institutions" (Secco et al., 2019a, p. 60). The outcomes can be both intended and unintended, as well as positive and negative. Simultaneously, impacts derive from an accumulation of outcomes and usually have broader effects, including those effects on direct and indirect beneficiaries of an SI initiative. Impacts are changes, both intended and unintended, positive and negative, that produce "new routines, rules and institutions in the whole local community and society" (idem). It should be noted that impacts can also be absent.

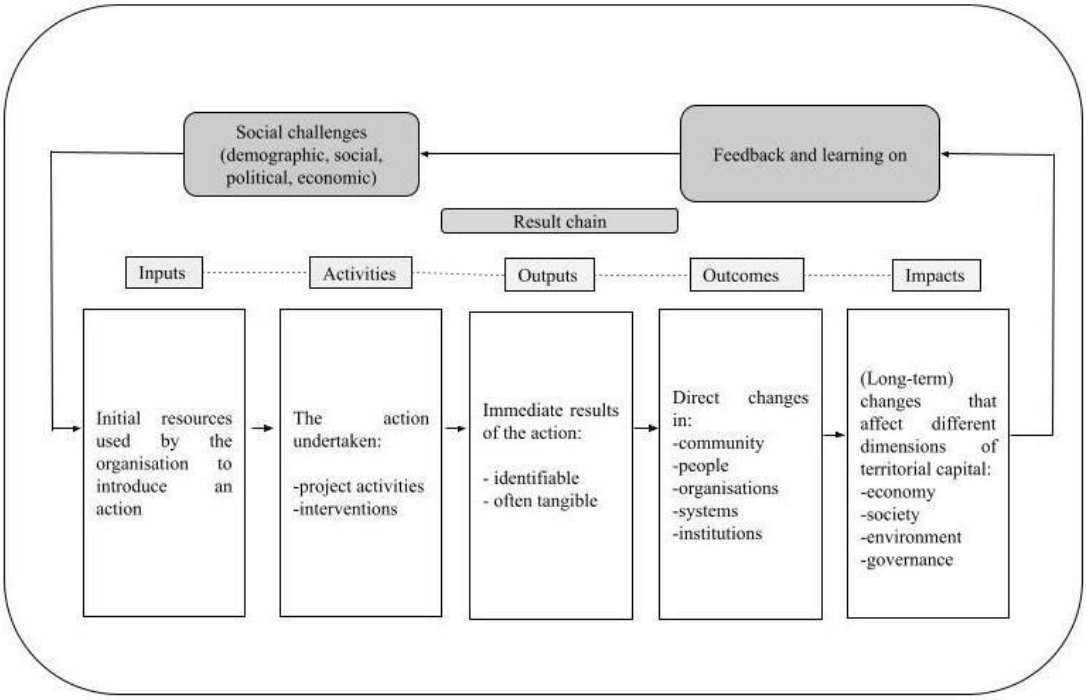

Figure 5.1. Result-chain based on the Theory of Change (ToC) key elements. Source: own elaboration based on Secco et al. (2019 a, b).

According to Ravazzoli et al. (2021), SI impacts represent "(long-term) changes that affect different dimensions of territorial capital (i.e., economy, society, environment, and institutions)

for the territory in which SI occurs" (Ravazzoli et al., 2021, p. 1). As proposed by Camagni and Capello (2013), territorial capital may be seen as "a set of localised assets—natural, human, artificial, organisational, relational and cognitive—that constitute the competitive potential of a given territory" (Camagni and Capello, 2013, p. 1387). According to Van Dyck and Van den Broeck (2013), territorial capital as a concept suggests that there are crucial factors in the process of socio-economic area development, encompassing "a set of resources, a spatial dimension, a social frame and a capacity to create added value through institutional and organisational arrangements" (Van Dyck and Van den Broeck, 2013, p. 5). In the current paper, the notion of territorial capital is applied as a guiding concept, allowing for the different dimensions of such capital (environmental, social, economic, and institutional) to be applied as an analytical dimension for further SI impact assessment.

In their study, Ravazzoli et al. (2021) suggest discussing the SI impacts alongside the types, domains, and scales of such impacts (see Figure 5.2). In the first category—types of impacts—the first distinction is made between the tangible (e.g., provision of services in rural areas) and the intangible forms (e.g., changes in attitudes of local communities). The second distinction points out the positive, negative, or neutral character of SI impacts. Overall, the impacts of SI are expected to be positive, contributing to the empowerment of the communities, changing the attitudes of actors involved in SI and beneficiaries, leading to the overall positive change in communities' well-being. However, SI also might trigger some negative impacts, e.g., empowering some groups while disempowering the others, with SI not being beneficial for all the stakeholders. Negative impacts of SI have been discussed in the literature (e.g., Fougère and Meriläinen, 2021) and might include disempowerment, uneven allocation of resources, power disbalance within and beyond the SI initiatives, etc. As such, both positive and negative impacts (as well as the absence of such) have to be considered as a potential by-product of the SI projects.

Concerning the domains, the SI impacts correspond to the social, economic, environmental, and institutional domains (idem). Within the *social* domain, impacts are described through the social changes related to the living conditions, health, and overall well-being of communities. Additionally, the creation and establishment of networks through SI projects, changes in attitudes, etc., fall under this domain (e.g., Esteves et al., 2012). Under the *economic* domain, impacts refer to any change in the economy resulting from activities related to the SI initiative contributing to entrepreneurial activities within the communities, use of local resources, etc. (e.g., Ziegler et al., 2017). The SI impacts falling under the *environmental* domain refer to effects that the SI initiative has on the surroundings in which SI operates, and addressing issues

of “climate change, air pollution, energy efficiency, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity relationships” (Schartinger, 2018, p. 176). Last but not least, the *institutional* domain of SI impacts refers to any change in the governance process, including the changes in the decision-making processes among stakeholders from various sectors (private, public) and scales (local, regional, national), with such changes triggered by the SI initiative (BEPA, 2014). Such institutional impacts have been further discussed, pointing out the role of SI initiatives in triggering the bottom-linked governance in rural areas, understood as a “multi-level middle ground where actors from various political levels, geographical scales and industry sectors come together to share decision-making” (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020, p. 45). Simultaneously, bottom-linked governance can be seen as both an outcome of social innovation and as a socially innovative space of action.

Concerning the scale of impacts, SI impacts can be discussed along the spatial and social scales (Ravazzoli et al., 2021). According to the dimension of the spatial scale, SI initiatives can have impacts inside the territory where the initiatives’ intervention takes place, e.g., a municipality, a sub-region, or a region, with the spatial scale depending on the challenge that the SI initiative is aiming at addressing. At the same time, SI initiatives can produce impacts outside of their main intervention territory, i.e., at regional, national, European, or wider levels. The literature argues for both points of view: some scholars suggest that, due to the local embeddedness of most SI (Terstriep and Rehfeld, 2020), the wider spatial scale of impacts is difficult to achieve (Moulaert et al., 2005; Brandsen et al., 2016); others claim that SI might have achieved impacts at a wider spatial scale (Farmer et al., 2018; Baptista et al., 2019).

The social scale of SI impacts refers to the impacts that take place at the micro, meso, and macro levels (Ravazzoli et al., 2021) where SI initiatives can impact the community (e.g., by providing social services), the whole society (e.g., fighting challenges of climate change) or the actors at the individual level (e.g., empowerment of vulnerable groups such as women). At the same time, SI can also be defined in terms of the level of its impact from the individual to the systems level, divided into micro, meso, and macro levels (Nicholls et al., 2015; Cunha and Benneworth, 2020).

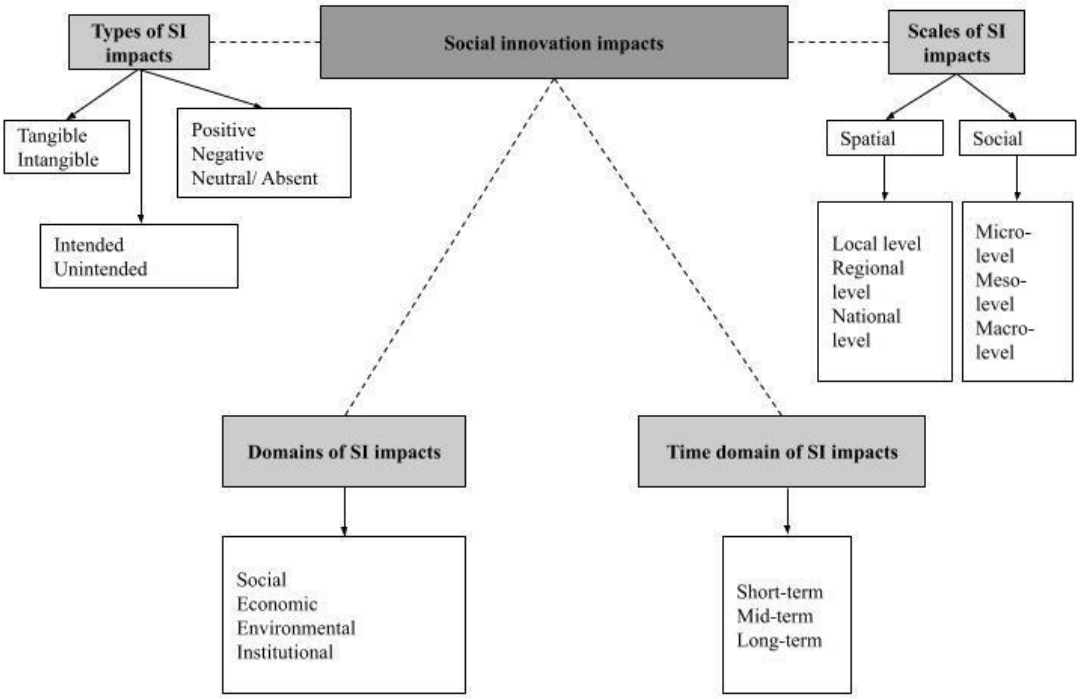

Figure 5.2. Analytical framework for social innovation impacts. Source: author's own elaboration, based on (Nicholls et al., 2015; Ravazzoli et al., 2021; Cunha and Benneworth, 2020).

Last but not least, the research into the SI impacts also distinguishes the impacts according to the time domain. While Ravazzoli et al. (2021) propose the definition of impacts as long-term changes, some other scholars (e.g., Lombardi et al., 2020) explore the possibility for SI evaluation that takes into account a more mid- and short-term perspective. Thus, in order to make a further discovery into the time domain of SI impacts, the current paper suggests distinguishing the SI impacts along the short-term, mid-term, and long-term impacts axis.

As such, the SI impacts might manifest across different scales, types, and domains. In order to address the research question outlined earlier and to provide the context of the study, the following section gives a brief outlook on the study area and the SI initiative in question.

Context of the study

Study Area: Baixo Alentejo region

The current study, with its focus on the SI impacts in the development of rural regions, is built upon the data collected in the rural region of Baixo Alentejo in Portugal, with the specific focus

on the Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura (ADCMoura). In order to provide the background information, the current section introduces some data concerning the development of the corresponding NUTS III region (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.3. Map of the NUTS III region Baixo Alentejo. Sources: author's own elaboration based on Eurostat (2019).

Baixo Alentejo, a Portuguese region and a part of the larger Alentejo region (NUTS II), is bordered to the north by the district of Évora, to the east by Spain, and to the south by the district of Faro. The NUTS III region consists of 13 municipalities: Aljustrel, Almodôvar, Alvito, Barrancos, Beja, Castro Verde, Cuba, Ferreira do Alentejo, Mértola, Moura, Ourique, Serpa, and Vidigueira (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5. 4. Map of the municipalities of NUTS II region of Alentejo, highlighting municipalities of Baixo Alentejo. Sources: author's own elaboration based on INE (2021).

The region covers an area of 8544.6 km^2, corresponding to 10.8% of the national territory. At the same time, the total population of Baixo Alentejo is 114, 887 inhabitants (Censos; INE, 2021), with the numbers continuously declining, previously registered at 126, 692 (Censos; INE, 2011) (−9.3% negative dynamic). The region is one of the most sparsely populated Portuguese regions with a population density of 14.2 inhabitants/km^2 in 2016, 14.1 inhabitants/km^2 in 2017, lowering further to 13.9 inhabitants/km^2 in 2018 (Eurostat), and 13.8 inhabitants/km^2 in 2019, respectively (Eurostat, 2021). Over the past decades, the region has undergone an average negative population growth due to rural exodus, which especially concerns the younger population, and ageing of the population. As such, the demographic data show some signs of negative population development and the overall loss of population.

The economic outlook of Baixo Alentejo indicates that the Baixo Alentejo region has a lower Gross Value Added (GVA) at current prices compared to the national and NUTS II accounts, indicating the lower productivity in the primary, secondary, and tertiary sectors (Table 5.1). At the same time, the proportion of the GVA at current prices is recorded higher for Baixo Alentejo compared to national and NUTS II accounts in primary and secondary sectors.

Sectors of activity Territory	Agriculture, animal production, hunting, forestry and fishing	Industry, construction, energy and water	Services
Gross value added at current prices (Base 2016 - €) by Geographic localization (NUTS - 2013) and Activity branch (A3), million euros, 2019			
Portugal	4 383,943	40 313,715	139 833,343
Alentejo (NUTS II)	1 314,382	2 743,974	7 539,279
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	248,002	621,211	1 142,464
Proportion of gross value added at current prices (Base 2016 - %) by Geographic localization (NUTS - 2013) and Activity branch (A3), 2019			
Portugal	2,4	21,8	75,8

Alentejo (NUTS II)	11,4	23,7	64,9
Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III)	13,0	29,4	57,6

Table 5.1. Economic outlook by geographic localization (NUTS 2013) and activity branch. Source: INE (2021).

The employment structure of Baixo Alentejo region, based on the National Institute of Statistics data (INE), suggests that the biggest share of people in employment in 2019 were employed in services (tertiary sector), followed by the secondary and primary sectors (see Table 5.2). As such, the employment structure of the NUTS III regions reflects the Alentejo and Portugal's trends, providing the evidence for the tertiary sector representing the highest share of employment across the national, regional, and sub-regional scales.

Sectors of activity Territory	Total	Agriculture, animal production, hunting, forestry and fishing	Industry, construction, energy and water	Services
Portugal	2 321 620	46 646	705 658	1 569 316
Alentejo	131 861	17 290	36 629	77 942
Baixo Alentejo	19 773	3 432	5 353	10 988

Table 5.2. Outlook on the employment by geographic localization (NUTS 2013) and activity branch. Source: INE (2021)

In summary, the combination of the economic outlook, the employment structure (as well as unemployment rates registered at 4.8% for 2020 (INE, 2021), low population density, population decline, and high levels of age dependency might have a strong influence on business development, outmigration, and ageing population, potentially leading to a deepening of the disparities between regions and furthering the 'littoralisation' process understood as disparities between the coastal and the more in-land regions of Portugal where wealth is concentrated in coastal regions "while the inland regions have remained neglected and underdeveloped" (Hennebry and Stryjakiewicz, 2020, p. 6). As claimed in the research, the

countryside in Portugal is often confronted with "few jobs opportunities and distance from markets and services" (Pato, 2020, p. 213), with outmigration of young, more highly educated people, as well as declining and ageing population, which is rather a common trend for the remote and peripheral rural areas of Portugal. Such trends can be also observed in Baixo Alentejo.

As such, the brief introduction of the region suggests that Baixo Alentejo, a NUTS III region, follows a trend that can be also observed at the level of the NUTS II region of Alentejo, where the regions experience the changes in the economic, demographic, and social domains, faced with the challenges of economic diversification, weakened infrastructures, and demographic challenges such as a shrinking and ageing population. In order to address said challenges, various initiatives have been actively engaging in the development of their respective localities. As such, a significant number of LDIs pioneer in and contribute to regional and local development and the promotion of SI within the rural contexts (Novikova, 2021b), with the abundance of innovative initiatives to be seen in the countryside (Olmedo et al. 2019). In the current paper, LDIs are understood to play an important role in developing, implementing, and promoting SI taking place in rural areas. As such, the paper focuses on the experience of ADCMoura, a local development initiative implementing SI projects in the domains of sustainable agriculture, circular economy, community engagement, and capacity building, with the main aim of contributing to the development of rural regions.

ADCMoura as a pioneer in rural development

ADCMoura (The Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura) is a non-governmental local development association based in the rural region of Baixo Alentejo in Portugal, with the main objective of supporting and promoting the sustainable development of the municipality of Moura and other areas of the region. Created in 1993, ADCMoura has been involved, as a promoter, an interlocutor, and a partner, in various projects in areas related to (i) education for entrepreneurship, (ii) participation in territory's projects, and (iii) support for the creation of companies in multi-institutional networks. Established through the initiative of a group of citizens from the municipality of Moura, ADCMoura's work has been inspired by the principles of local development, social and solidarity economy, and equal opportunities. Throughout the years of work, ADCMoura has developed a wide range of initiatives that have greatly contributed to the strengthening of the local economic and social fabric, namely through professional training, support for business initiative and job creation, and the strengthening of

associations in the municipality, especially in rural parishes, always guided by a perspective of empowerment of the people and organisations involved.

With the staff constituted by 10 permanent employees and 11 non-permanent employees, ADCMoura has been actively involved in a myriad of projects and provision of services related to the various axes of intervention (see Table 5.3)

Projects and provision of services	**ADCMoura´s area of action**	**Financing**	**Axes of intervention**	**Role**
Project activity of ADCMoura				
RurAction - Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action	Innovation in rural environment	Horizon 2020	3	Partner
My Smart Quartier	Digital citizenship	Erasmus + K2	2, 4	Partner
Spechale - SPEcialists in Cultural Heritage and Attractive Living Environment	Innovative training in culture and tourism	Erasmus + K2	3, 4	Lead Partner
Kus Kus - Backing Entrepreneurial Initiatives in the Culinary Sector	Kitchens of the world	Erasmus + K2	3, 4	European Expert Member
EPAM - Business development in the aromatic and medicinal plant sector in Portugal				
Inov@sfileiras - Innovative	Emerging agricultural	Rural Development	3	Project Lead

Chains	value chains	Program 2020 (PDR 2020)		
Provere - Valorization of the Alentejo's Wild Resources	Wildlife resources	Alentejo 2020	3	Promoting Entity
Despert@rte E7G	Support to Roma children and young people and social inclusion	Social Inclusion and Employment Operational Program (POISE), Portugal 2020	2	Beneficiary
CCPAM – Centre of Competence on Aromatic, Medicinal and Culinary Herbs	Medicinal and aromatic plant research	Rural Development Program 2020 (PDR 2020)	3	Project Lead
COOP4PAM - Cooperation for Growth in the Aromatic and Medicinal Plant Sector	Social inclusion	INTERREG V – A (POCTEP)	3	Partner Entity
Mediadores Municipais - Municipal Mediators	PAM cooperation and research	Social Inclusion and Employment Operational Program (POISE)	2	Partner
Passeurs de Culture	Local products	ERASMUS+ K1	3	Partner
Provision of services by ADCMoura				
ATCP - Technical Support for the	Support for the initiative	Institute of Employment and Professional	5	Service Provider

Creation and Consolidation of Projects		Training (IEFP)		
Orçamento Participativo - Participatory Budget	Citizen participation	Municipality of Moura (CMMoura)	2	Partner
COOPERA_RS - Cooperation for Wild Resources	Medicinal and aromatic plant sector events	Local Action Group ESDIME	3	Service Provider
Apoio a Cursos de Formação - Support and Courses for Training	Qualification/ support for training and courses	Various sources	2	Service Provider

Table 5.3. Summary of ADCMoura's activities. Source: author's own elaboration based on ADCMoura's Report of Activities and Accounts (2019)

Those axes focus on: (1) institutional and organisational development; (2) social and community development; (3) rural and environmental development; (4) education and formation; (5) support for the initiative. Over more than 27 years of its intervention, ADCMoura has also taken on the bridging roles in the development of middle ground collaborative space for regional development (Novikova, 2021c). By combining various axes of intervention and by implementing projects not limited to specific sectors and scales, ADCMoura has worked towards establishing and enabling networks, knowledge exchange, resource acquisition, creating the common space for public and private actors to come together and collaborate, contributing towards the sustainable development of the region.

Referring back to the working definition of SI applied in the current paper, SI is understood to be an action that leads to the reconfiguration of social practises, is innovative to the context or beneficiary in which it is applied, is more effective in meeting needs than previous interventions, while focusing on providing long-term solutions. Through being a partner in the projects addressing the capacity building and competence development (e.g., CCPAM—Centre of Competence on Aromatic, Medicinal and Culinary Herbs), addressing the issues of

sustainable and innovative agriculture practises (e.g., COOP4PAM—Cooperation for Growth in the Aromatic and Medicinal Plant Sector), as well as through being a service provider for the municipal projects for democratisation (e.g., Participatory Budget) and capacity building (e.g., Qualification/ support for training and courses), ADCMoura has been actively engaged in SI implementation, as well as being an outstanding example of SI initiative itself.

Materials and methods

In order to understand complex issues in their full potential, while taking into account the contextual factors, a methodology allowing in-depth analysis of a phenomenon is needed. Thus, this paper presents the results of an explorative study rooted in a case study approach. Allowing the researcher to collect and analyse rich data providing the context, the connection between the actors in the field, deeper understanding of it and how SI produces the impacts, through multiple data sources (described below) and through the placement at the SI initiative, case study methodology allowed to gain an understanding of the phenomenon in question. According to Yin (2003), the choice in favour of a case study approach is usually based on several reasons, when (a) the study focuses on answering "how" and "why" questions; (b) the behaviour of the actors involved in the study cannot be manipulated; (c) an attempt is made to cover the context and contextual factors based on their relevance for the phenomenon under study; or (d) there are no clear boundaries between the phenomenon and context. Thus, the case study was chosen as a methodology to allow carrying out the impact assessment of ADCMoura's work, a case of SI, embedded in the context of Baixo Alentejo region. Due to the initial unfamiliarity with the selected case study, the background data collection was carried out through the means of document analysis as well as expert interviews. The background data were collected within the framework of a secondment at ADCMoura between March and June 2019, followed by the data collection between August and October 2021. The first corpus of data was collected through the analysis of the publicly available sources (e.g., webpages of the organisations, Local Development Strategies), followed by the analysis of the ADCMoura's internal reports acquired upon request. The analysis of such data allowed for the in-depth overview of the projects and interventions by ADCMoura, providing more detailed information concerning the objectives and targets set out and achieved in particular. Additionally, in order to get a deeper perspective on the work of ADCMoura, as well as to get familiar with the field of SI and rural development in the region, expert interviews were conducted between March and May 2019. For the purposes of this study, however, the interviews were used to provide

some background information on the initiative as well as on its work, projects, and extended networks rather than being the main focus of analysis in the current paper.

The main data collection phase that allowed for the assessment of the impacts produced by ADCMoura was carried out by the means of online survey between August and October 2021.The main purpose was to collect the data concerning the perception of the respondents regarding the impacts of ADCMoura's work, according to the analytical framework presented in Section 2.2. The decision to employ the online survey as a main research method for the current study is twofold. First, in order to fulfil the main aim of the study of the SI impact assessment, the development of a questionnaire allowed to address the dimensions of the impacts that can be numerically evaluated, which was one of the attempts in the study. Second, other factors had to be considered since the data collection was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, which required certain adaptation on part of the researcher. Therefore, an online survey was the method that was an appropriate research tool in terms of scientific and organisational matters.

The questionnaire was developed to have both closed and open-ended questions to allow the respondents some flexibility to reflect on the types, domains, and geographical scales of SI impacts, as well as to gage their perspective on the interconnections between ADCMoura's work and the development in the Baixo Alentejo region. For the purposes of the current research, the questions were elaborated to include the territorial dimension, inquiring the effects of SI on the development of the territory in question (Baixo Alentejo region). The questionnaire was structured in five blocks addressing (i) the innovative character of ADCMoura's work, (ii) the effects and impacts of ADCMoura, focusing on the character (positive and negative), domains (social, economic, environmental, and institutional), time domain (short-term, mid-term, long-term), and (territorial) scale of impacts, as well as (iii) the interconnection between ADCMoura's intervention and the development of Baixo Alentejo. The diversity of domains, types, and scales of SI impacts (as identified through the analytical framework in Section 2.2), as well as the fact that such an assessment is exercised through the subjective perceptions of the experts, dictated the questions to be both closed-ended and open-ended. While attempting at extracting the results in the numerical expression, the design of the survey allowed open-ended questions to be included to provide space for the respondents to potentially reflect on more intangible (both positive and negative) SI impacts. At the same time, the closed-ended questions were designed to include both multiple choice questions (e.g., identifying the group an expert belongs to) and a block of questions based on Likert scales (e.g., identifying the perceptions on the SI impacts).

The questionnaire addresses the extended network of ADCMoura who represent actors directly or indirectly associated with ADCMoura, therefore, having a perspective on the potential impacts of SI initiative from a broader perspective. As a result, the online questionnaire was distributed to several groups of actors (see Table 5.4). The groups of experts were identified through the interviews that served as a source of the background information about ADCMoura's projects, partners, and activities. Thus, the respondents were asked to choose among six groups, with an option for adding other answers. As such, some respondents identified themselves as participants in developed activities, members of social bodies, and partners in some projects. The respondents were offered to choose a group they identify most with, resulting in a wide range of participants, while simultaneously creating a disbalance in participation (e.g., majority of ADCMoura's current employees), which can be considered an important bias of the methodology, which potentially influences the way the experts perceive the SI impacts.

Groups of experts	Number of questionnaires returned
ADCMoura's members (current)	10
ADCMoura's members (past)	5
Policy Makers	1
External Experts	2
Projects Partners	6
Extended Network	2
Other	5
Total	31

Table 5.4. Number of responses by group. Source: author's own elaboration.

Due to the extensive network of actors who are closely connected to ADCMoura's work—and, therefore, have a perspective on potential impacts of its work—the three-page questionnaire (requiring approximately 10 minutes for filling out) was distributed among the ADCMoura networks.

Described in more detail further on (see Section 6), the methodology has some important limitations. While being a cost-effective tool that provides a wider reach among the actors and experts, the online survey limited the possibilities to implement face-to-face data collection

techniques (e.g., questionnaires completed by an interviewer), which might be required due to the need for more detailed elaboration and explanation of the questions to the participants by a researcher. At the same time, the main focus on experts as main respondents in the survey process limited the possibility to include the beneficiaries of SI initiative's work as the main group. Thus, the few limitations outlined here (and discussed further) are important to take into consideration when approaching the results of the study.

Based on the analysis of the data collected, the further section presents the results of the study, focusing on the domains, types, and scales of impacts achieved by ADCMoura.

Results

Overview: positive, negative and neutral impacts of SI

In the current study, the analytical framework distinguishes among positive, negative, or neutral SI impacts. In the academic literature, the impacts of SI are expected to be positive, contributing to the development of the communities, contributing to the change of attitudes of actors involved in SI and beneficiaries, leading to the overall positive change. Such a perspective was confirmed in the current study. Of respondents, 93.5% see impacts of ADCMoura's work as having a positive impact, where the SI initiative is considered to have positively impacted the environmental, social, institutional, and economic development of the territory. SI also might trigger some negative impacts, e.g., empowering some groups while disempowering others, with SI not being beneficial for all the stakeholders. As such, both positive and negative have to be considered as a potential by-product of the SI projects. Regarding the negative impacts, 58.1% of respondents do not perceive ADCMoura to have any negative impacts, 38.7% do not know, with 3.3% of respondents claiming there are negative impacts resulting from ADCMoura's work. The question of neutral and/or absent impacts was not addressed in the questionnaire. Therefore, further research is needed to address the question of absent and/or neutral SI impacts.

The questionnaire design accounted for the flexibility and some openness while answering the questions, thus, having open ended questions concerning the positive and negative impacts of ADCMoura's work. The analysis of the data revealed that the respondents are more aware of the positive impacts in four domains rather than negative ones. This can be due to several factors, ranging from the biases of the methodology of this particular study in particular, e.g., the inclusion of only experts and not the direct beneficiaries of the SI initiative, to the more general considerations in (social innovation research such as pro-innovation bias (where the

impacts of any innovation are considered as positive with little regard given to the potential negative impacts).

Positive impacts in four domains: some insights

Concerning the domains, the SI impacts can be assumed under the environmental, social, economic, and institutional domains. For all four domains of intervention, ADCMoura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts (Figure 5.5).

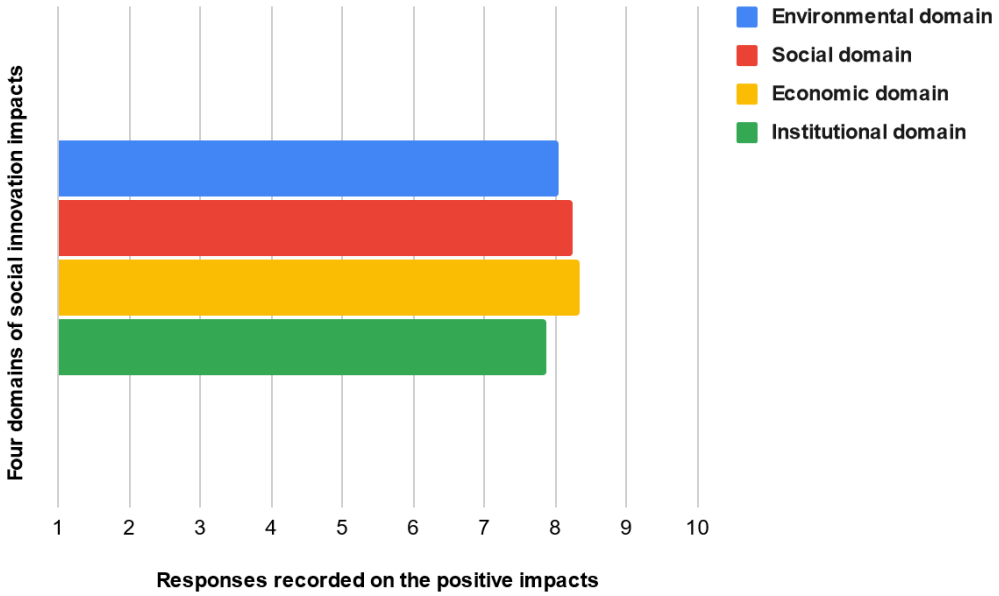

Figure 5.5. The averages for positive impacts of SI in four domains. Source: author's own elaboration.

In the first domain of environmental impacts, the average for the positive impacts is 8.03, on a 10-point scale ("not at all"—"to a large extent"). Considered to represent any changes to the environment resulting from promoting sustainable agricultural practices, addressing climate change, preserving biodiversity, and promoting environmental awareness, the SI impacts in this domain refer to effects that the SI initiative has on the surroundings in which SI operates, and addressing issues of climate change, air pollution, energy efficiency, resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production, and biodiversity relationships. As such, the respondents' perception of positive environmental impacts of ADCMoura's work is relatively high.

The impacts in the social domain, identified as any social change related to the living conditions, health and general well-being of the communities, and described through the social changes related to the change in communities' conditions, including the creation and

establishment of networks through SI projects, changes in attitudes, and re-configuration of (social) practices, have been registered with a relatively high average. For the social domain of SI impacts, the average among the responses is recorded at 8.24 (10-point scale), thus, confirming the perception of the social impacts in this domain as positive as well.

Under the third domain of SI impacts in economic development, impacts are understood as any change in the economy resulting from activities related to the SI initiative that contributes to entrepreneurial activities within the communities, promoting the use of local resources, supporting the local entrepreneurial initiative, etc. In this domain, the average is 8.34 (10-point scale), reflecting the respondents' perspective on ADCMoura's positive impacts.

Within the institutional domain of SI, impacts refer to any change in the governance process, including the changes in the decision-making processes among stakeholders from various sectors (private, public) and scales (local, regional, national), with such changes triggered by the SI initiative. Such institutional SI impacts, including, but not limited to, any change in the governance process resulting from promoting cooperation among stakeholders across sectors and scales, improving decision-making processes, supporting bottom-up initiatives, have been regarded relatively high, with the average of 7.35. At the same time, among the four domains, the results for the institutional domain are the lowest, thus indicating ADCMoura's work having impacted the institutional development to a lesser extent. However, here it is important to point out that the results obtained are potentially correlated with the (uneven) distribution of experts that took part in the survey (e.g., only one response for the "policy maker" group and sixteen recorded responses for the "ADCMoura staff" group) and, respectively, their varying perceptions on the potential impacts ADCMoura's work had on institutional development.

The respondents were also asked to elaborate on the potential impacts of SI in open-ended questions and to list some of the examples of SI impacts in the four domains (environmental, economic, social, and institutional), if any (see Table 5.5).

SI impacts domains	Impacts according to the respondents
Environmental	- promotion of knowledge on sustainable use and enhancement of the territory's natural and cultural heritage within a framework of responsible use of current and future socio-economic development opportunities - adoption of sustainable and regenerative agricultural practices - creation of circuits/short chains of distribution and proximity trade with -promotion of sustainable consumption practices

	- valuation and protection of the landscape - promotion of environmental citizenship (activities with schools, vegetable gardens, hiking)
Social	- promotion of community development initiatives - reduction of digital exclusion - empowerment of the most vulnerable communities (e.g. social valuation of the Roma ethnic minority) - strengthening citizen participation in local processes - training and inclusion of disadvantaged groups - integration of minorities and their education - promotion of a collaborative approach based on the territory and close to the community, community involvement in activities - empowerment and inclusion of disadvantaged groups of the population through projects in the area of digital literacy
Economic	- promotion of the diversification of local economic activities - the generation of added value through the creative and sustainable use of endogenous resources - stimulation and support to the creation and development of entrepreneurial employment -implementing income generating initiatives for the local communities - support to companies and encouragement of entrepreneurship in schools creation of networks of producers - promotion of tailored training to enhance employability - help in the preparation and development of entrepreneurship projects, which contributed to the financial autonomy of citizens - support for the creation of businesses/activities by the unemployed and other disadvantaged groups
Institutional	- improvement to institutional communication and collaboration - support the creation and consolidation of national and international research networks and political proposals associated with rural development - participation in networks and policy influencers (e.g. creation of the Moura Participatory Budget) - participation in local, national and international consortia/networks - political lobby at the local and regional level - participation in international projects and partnerships

	- integration of various consortia and forums at local/national/international scale in the areas of rural development and innovation

Table 5.5. SI impacts in four domains according to the respondents. Source: author's own elaboration.

An interesting observation that stems from the data obtained through the open-ended question on the potential impacts in four domains is twofold. Firstly, some of the responses registered could be assigned into the categories of outputs and outcomes, according to the result-chain framework (Section 2.2). Secondly, some of the perceived impacts that were associated with one of the four domains could be assigned into another SI impact domain as well. Thus, the results also indicate a fluid, cross-sectoral and multi-dimensional nature of SI impacts (see Moulaert, 2013).

Time dimension of the positive impacts

The time domain of the SI impacts is briefly presented, illustrating the time character of impacts distinguishing between short-, mid-, and long-term impacts (see Figure 5.6). In the academic literature, impacts in general—and impacts in the field of SI in particular (e.g., Secco et al., 2019a)—are traditionally understood to be long-term changes happening in society, which implies that the impacts are assumed to have a long-term character (both in terms of achieving such impacts and sustaining those). However, in the framework of the current paper, the analytical framework has been constructed to account for the potential short-term, mid-term, and long-term impacts (based on the respondents' perception).

For the environmental domain, the positive impacts of SI are perceived to have a long-term character (over five years) by the majority of the respondents, followed by the mid-term (two to five years) and short-term impacts (less than two years). The results indicate that the perception of the respondents confirms the assumption that the environmental sustainability, transformative environmental change—and, as such, the impacts SI initiatives have to strive for in this domain—are of a long-term nature that requires a longer period of time to be achieved and sustained (e.g., Olsson et al., 2017; Segarra-Oña et al., 2017).

Within the social domain of SI impacts, the results echo those from the environmental domain, with positive impacts perceived by more respondents as having a long-term character (over five years), followed by the mid-term and short-term impacts. Here, the respondents' perceptions are corresponding to the previous elaborations, where SI is understood to bring

about the long-term changes that are social at their core, with SI being social both in its ends and means (EC, 2013).

In contrast, within the economic domain, the respondents perceive the SI impacts to be more mid-term (impacts occurring within two to five years), indicating that the impacts achieved by ADCMoura in terms of economic development fall within two to five years' time dimension. This is followed by the perception of the SI impacts to be of a long-term character (over five years), with only a fraction of respondents believing ADCMoura to have the impacts in the economic domain that are present for less than two years (short-term impacts).

Last but not least, for the institutional domain, as for the economic domain, the majority of the respondents perceive the impacts to be of a mid-term nature (between two and five years), followed by the perception that ADCMoura has impacted the governance process, including the decision-making processes among stakeholders, both over the span of a longer period of time over five years (long-term impact) as well as much shorter time frame (less than two years for short-term impacts). These results might potentially indicate two critical issues that have to be pointed out, namely (1) a certain level of abstraction when describing and understanding the SI impacts in this domain, and (2) a much longer period of time that is required in order for the institutional change to take place (e.g., Pel et al., 2017), where the impacts of ADCMoura's work can be quite difficult to both observe and comprehend over a short time.

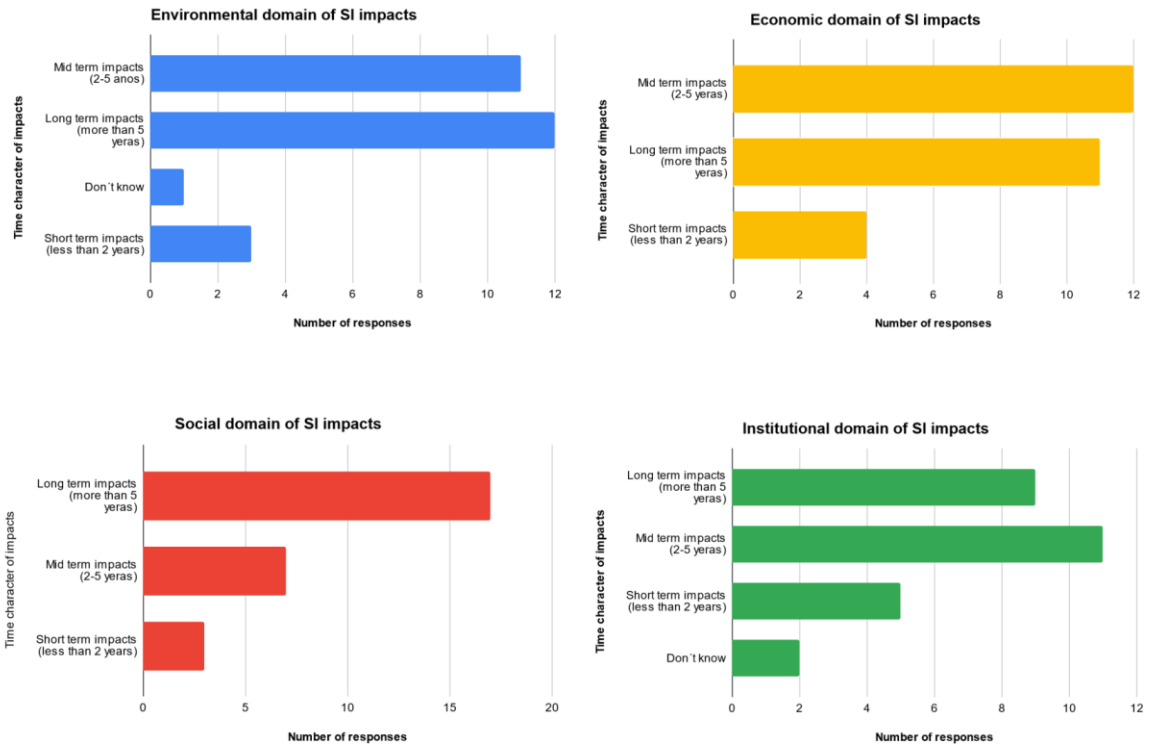

Figure 5.6. Time domains (short-, mid-, and long- term) of SI impacts. Source: author's own elaboration.

At the same time, the results point out that some respondents perceive the impacts to be of a rather long-term nature; still, there is some presence of the responses reflecting on the short-term nature within all four domains (which might potentially be related to a project-based nature of ADCMoura's work). Simultaneously, since there was an assumption that some respondents might not be aware of specific impacts and/or might not have an informed opinion and/or perception regarding that, the multiple-choice question design had a "don't know" option integrated. As such, some responses point out the unawareness and/or difficulty to answer the question concerning the time span of ADCMoura's impacts (e.g., for the environmental and institutional domains), with the respondents choosing the option "don't know".

Scale dimension of the positive impacts

The spread, diffusion, and impacts of SI have been discussed in the literature, pointing out the importance of such a spread and the potential for SI initiatives to have impacts outside their immediate area of intervention. Loorbach et al. (2020) highlight that transformative innovations are translocal, i.e., TSI is being locally rooted while globally connected. As such, the research suggests that more and more SI initiatives have a chance to be impactful beyond their local area. At the same time, there is research claiming that it can be quite challenging for the SI initiatives to reach a broad impact outside their locale (e.g., Brandsen et al., 2016).

With this in mind, the idea was to identify the geographical areas and territorial scales where ADCMoura had the most impacts, according to the respondents. The scale dimension, as identified in the analytical framework, distinguishes between spatial and social scales. The current paper focuses on identifying the spatial scale at which SI initiative had the most impacts as perceived by the respondents.

Concerning the question of ADCMoura's work and its impacts within the spatial scale, the level of municipality of Moura (local level) is perceived as the territory that ADCMoura's intervention affects the most, followed by the sub-regional level of Baixo Alentejo (NUTS III) and the regional level of Alentejo (NUTS II) (see Figure 5.7). The local geographical focus of impacts is reinforced as the main area of ADCMoura's intervention, according to the association's mission, is the development of the municipality of Moura.

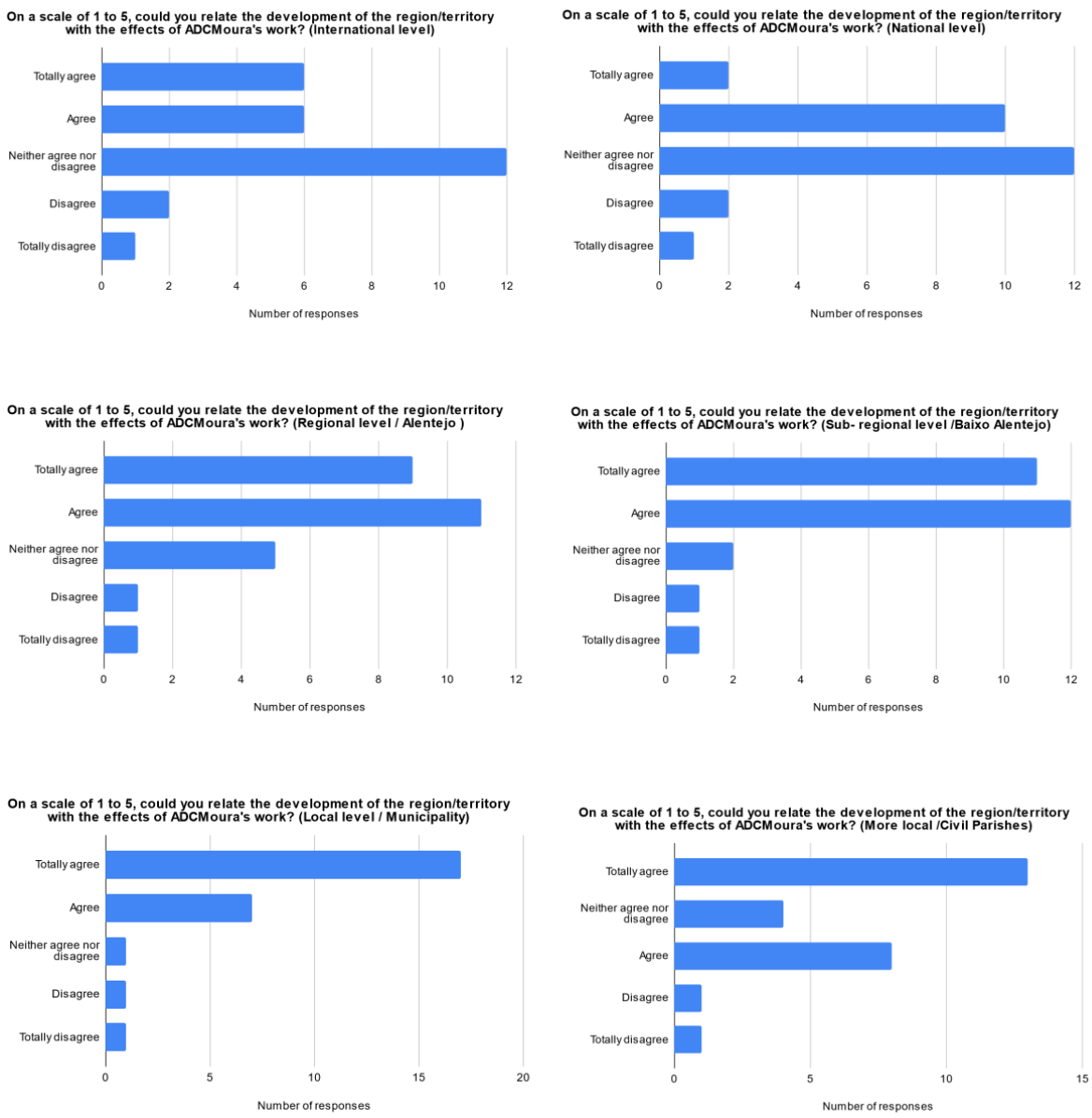

Figure 5.7. Spatial scale of SI impacts. Source: author's own elaboration.

While analysing ADCMoura's role in contributing to the development of Baixo Alentejo, only 12.9% of respondents perceive ADCMoura's intervention as a sole intervention that could satisfy the specific needs of the territory. At the same time, the results show that positive impacts created in the territory through ADCMoura's work could have been obtained without ADCMoura's intervention (1), but it would have taken more time (32.2% of responses); (2) where other similar initiatives only partially satisfied the needs of the territory (32.3% of responses).

The results indicate that ADCMoura has triggered certain intangible changes while promoting cooperation, community engagement, and network's creation among the actors

across local (Moura Council) and regional (Alentejo) scales. The results derived from data collection with the project partners and extended network reflect such changes and reinforce them through further need for promoting the changes in capacity building, integrated territorial development, preservation of resources, and shared decision-making.

Discussion and conclusions

In order to carry out the impact assessment exercise, the current paper addressed the types, domains, and scales of impacts produced by ADCMoura, a local development association located in rural Portugal. The research suggests that, in order to have a truly transformative potential, any SI initiative has to have a broader transformative impact, thus, having an effect on the development of a given locality (e.g., rural regions). The results of the current study indicate that the question of SI impacts and impact assessment represents both a promising pathway for further research and a complex, still underexplored field of study. Responding to this, the results of the current study indicate that there is a rather high awareness regarding the positive impacts of ADCMoura's work, with the recognition and awareness on the negative impacts falling behind. Majority of respondents perceive ADCMoura's work as having positive impacts, while the perception of negative impacts is rather absent. Simultaneously, for the four domains of impacts—environmental, economic, social, and institutional—ADCMoura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts, with the responses, however, suggesting that the positive impacts are rather ambiguous in the environmental and institutional domains.

Concerning the geographical scale, the results show that ADCMoura has the positive impact on the local level of the municipality of Moura, with the sub-regional NUTS III (Baixo Alentejo) and regional NUTS II (Alentejo) levels perceived to be positively impacted the second and third most. According to the results, the positive effects created in the territory through ADCMoura's work could have been obtained without ADCMoura's intervention (1), but it would have taken more time; (2) with other similar initiatives only partially satisfying the needs of the territory. Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents perceive ADCMoura as an important actor of transformative change in the rural area of Baixo Alentejo but not as the sole actor of change.

The results of the current study echo previous studies addressing the issues of SI impacts and their assessment in the field of social innovation (e.g. Antadze and Westley, 2012; Milley et al., 2018; Secco et al., 2019a; Ravazzoli et al., 2021), suggesting and developing new tools and ways for such an assessment. Among commonalities, the results confirmed that there is a certain trend in the discussion around positive and negative SI impacts. The results suggest that

the actors of SI are not fully aware of the (potential) negative SI impacts. While echoing previous research, the current study also provides some new insights regarding various dimensions and types of the SI impacts. The results for the spatial scales of the SI impacts indicate that the SI initiative in question has been perceived to have the most positive impacts at the local level, however, immediately followed by both the level of parishes and the sub-regional (Baixo Alentejo) level. Thus, the SI initiative is perceived to be impactful at many spatial scales simultaneously: while being locally rooted, ADCMoura has a significant impact at the sub-regional scale. Finally, the study indicates that the SI impacts in four domains can be differentiated along the short-, mid-, and long-term dimensions. Compared to the previous research, the current study made an attempt to fine grain the SI impacts' perception of the impacts' time dimensions. The results show that the impact in social and environmental domains are perceived as long-term, while the perception of the impacts in the economic and institutional domains is of more mid-term nature. This can potentially be interpreted in light of the change that is more visible to the participants of the study, namely, based on the project portfolio of ADCMoura that is focusing more on the interventions that fall under the social and environmental domains.

Having presented the results of the exploratory study of SI impacts and the SI impacts assessment of ADCMoura from Baixo Alentejo, the paper goes on to discuss some limitations of the current study. The first limitation is based on the choice of methodology, where the online survey was chosen as a means of data collection. Despite online surveys being cost-effective and providing a wider reach, the study of SI impacts and their assessment could have benefited more from face-to-face data collection techniques (e.g. questionnaires completed by an interviewer), since the theme itself, as well as the formulation of some questions, might require additional elaboration and explanation to the participants by a researcher. At the same time, some expressions of the SI impacts are difficult to translate into the research methodology and methods solely focusing on the numerical expressions (Novikova, 2021a), thus, requiring SI researchers to consider designing the research based on the mixed method approach, with scholars strongly advocating for such an approach (e.g., Nicholls et al. 2019). Thus, further research requires a more integrated and detailed attention paid to the methodological approaches that allow for meaningful integration of both qualitative and quantitative methods in studying SI impacts.

Further limitation is based on the need for putting the primary focus on other groups of stakeholders, primarily the beneficiaries of SI initiative's work. Since the current paper focused on ADCMoura as an SI initiative, as well as its extended network, the study is lacking

beneficiaries' perspective on the SI impacts, which presents a rather limited (and potentially one-sided) perspective. Including beneficiaries could be beneficial for capturing the opinions of 'ultimate' SI users regarding the experience on positive and negative SI impacts, as well as the types, scales, and overall perception of SI initiative as an actor of change in rural European regions.

While the main focus of the current study was on assessing the SI impacts of a particular SI initiative, an additional limitation lies in an unequal distribution of the respondents across the groups. The distribution of the responses across the groups of actors that took part in the online survey is rather unequal, with 16 responses recorded from the ADCMoura's members and staff, while only very few responses were recorded for the policy makers and extended network (one and two responses, respectively). As such, participation and partaking of different groups of actors (as well as their balanced representation) in further research is of crucial importance in order to mitigate such limitations.

Additionally, the paper is limited as far as the coverage of the issue of the negative SI impacts. Despite the questionnaire addressing the negative SI impacts, its dimensions and character, the results indicate low awareness and lack of knowledge on the part of the respondents concerning the negative impacts of ADCMoura's work. The issue of negative impacts of SI, as well as the overall potential 'dark sides' of SI have to be further discussed and taken into account due to the need to critically engage with the 'all positive' understanding of SI, accounting for the potential negative impacts, such as disempowerment (Avelino et al., 2019), worsening vulnerabilities of already vulnerable groups (Fougère and Meriläinen, 2021), to name a few.

Having discussed challenges of the SI impact assessment, the paper suggests some direction for the future research. The analytical dimensions suggested in the paper could benefit from further elaboration and explanation, namely, by further exploring and adding upon already presented domains of SI impacts, e.g., through adding the domain of SI impacts in culture. Thus, additional domains of SI impacts should be explored. Simultaneously, further research could build upon the results by providing a more detailed explanation and categorisation of SI impacts.

Another potential future contribution lies in analysing the SI impacts in connection to the various levels of SI, such as incremental, institutional, and disruptive SI (Lee et al., 2021). The assumption here might be that, depending on such levels, SI initiatives might have achieved (or not) different impacts. Further research could also benefit from a deeper elaboration of a more critical reflection concerning the power distribution in relation to the SI initiative: depending

on the actor's position—and access to power—the perceptions of the achieved impacts by an SI initiative might vary greatly. At the same time, the issue of power goes hand in hand with the potential disempowerment of some actors through the SI. This issue has been previously addressed in the research (e.g., Avelino, 2021), however, it has not been addressed in connection with the perception of SI impacts. Thus, further research could explore this avenue.

In summary, it becomes evident that the questions surrounding the SI impacts and their assessment (with a particular focus on rural areas) are continuously gaining momentum, still providing a myriad of possibilities to contribute to the research exploring the concepts, frameworks, tools, and approaches for assessment of the SI impacts.

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Chapter 6. Conclusion

General conclusions and discussion from the chapters

The thesis addressed the role and the impacts of SI in rural European regions. Specifically, it examined how SI initiatives address the contemporary challenges and affect the development of the respective regions in which they operate. It examined such responses from a mixed method perspective, embedding the results within conceptual streams of neo-endogenous development (Ray, 2001; Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Bock, 2016; Bosworth et al., 2020), transformative social innovation (Avelino et al., 2019; Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020), and the result chain approach (Secco et al., 2019 a, 2019 b). This chapter discusses the main findings and explicates the role and the impacts of SI initiatives from Austrian and Portuguese case studies. The following sections advance the understanding of how SI initiatives operate in rural areas, how they contribute to the development of their respective regions and what impacts of said SI initiatives can be observed. Reflecting on the limitations of each individual chapter – and the research as a whole, - chapter 6 also critically engages with the theoretical, analytical and methodological pitfalls of the thesis. At the same time, the chapter reflects on a future research agenda and policy implications for the SI field in European context. In combination, the chapters provide the insights into the role and the impacts of SI in two European rural areas, shedding more light onto i) the roles SI initiatives take on in order to trigger bottom-linked governance, ii) the mode of rural development that is the most favourable for the SI initiatives operating, namely neo-endogenous development approach, that in turn supports the promotion of SI, iii) the key actors of SI in rural areas, as well as iv) the impacts of said SI initiatives on rural development.

As discussed in **Chapter 2**, the SI initiatives in rural regions, by taking on bridging roles, can establish a meso-level that triggers the bottom-linked governance in rural development. Understood as a multi-level middle ground where actors from various political levels, geographical scales and industry sectors come together (Castro-Arce and Vanclay, 2020), the bottom-linked governance provides a shared space where said actors come together in order to share the decision-making related to the development of their respective regions. However, the success of the triggering of this mode of governance depends on the set of bridging roles that the SI initiatives take upon in the process. Bottom-linked governance requires SI initiatives to take on the bridging roles of network enabler, knowledge broker, resource broker, transparency and conflict resolution agent, and shared vision champion. Within the said roles, the SI initiatives aim at developing networks and interconnecting existing ones, addressing regional

challenges through cooperation at vertical and horizontal levels, providing a forum for sharing, translation and creation of knowledge, bridging the resources leading to win-win outcomes, facilitating participation and collaboration of actors around common agendas, as well as aligning visions and missions through collaboration and resources sharing. By combining various axes of intervention, as well as by being actively involved in projects not limited to specific sectors (such as agriculture) and scales (despite starting as a local initiative), ADCMoura has demonstrated the ability to transcend the existing structures and become the meso-level organisation. As such, its active engagement in establishing and enabling networks, knowledge exchange, resource acquisition, allowed ADCMoura to create that common space for public and private actors to come together and collaborate.

As evidenced by the results from the Portuguese case study of ADCMoura, the SI initiatives in rural areas contribute to sustainable development in the following ways. Firstly, by establishing multi-level networks (both geographically and politically), the SI initiatives are recognised as a channel between the local communities and other (both exogenous and endogenous) actors. By being actively involved in said networks, SI initiatives deliver upon connecting the local resources with extra-local ones, thus opening up new channels for knowledge transfer and exchange. Secondly, by participating in various types of collaborative efforts (intermunicipal communities, federation of local development associations), SI initiatives manage to stabilise the outcomes of the projects since, instead of aiming at just scaling-up, they are being implemented and supported throughout wider networks. Thirdly, despite some constraints at the local level, the promotion of collaboration based on a shared vision forms one of the pillars of the organisation's interventions, with the aim of a more cohesive approach to regional development in the future. As evident from the results, even if the change is not apparent, it is a process of constructing and promoting the culture of collaboration based on the shared values and aspirations that SI initiatives aim for.

At the same time, in order to play a role in contributing to the development of a given region, SI initiatives must acknowledge the critical success factors triggering the meso-level in the governance processes. Under such, the SI initiatives must acknowledge i) the change in (local) interests and context, ii) the need for the local action to be scaled-up for better sustainability outcomes, iii) the need for cooperation with formal institutions to enable and sustain transformation, and iv) the need for the decision-making and power within the governance system to be shared. Despite being successful in taking on the bridging roles and acknowledging the critical success factors, the SI initiative from the Portuguese case study, ADCMoura, has faced some challenges while trying to establish cooperation at the local level.

Results indicate that the initiative faced some degree of competition rather than cooperation at the local level. This may be explained by the conscious choice of the initiative to stay politically independent and the limited pool of resources available at the municipal/ local level. In order to overcome these constraints, ADCMoura has taken on an active role at the regional and national levels due to their wider availability of resources.

While acknowledging the role of SI in triggering bottom-linked governance which, in turn, contributes to the more democratic, just and sustainable development of ADCMoura's respective area of intervention, Chapter 2 also makes some suggestions in terms of the development of the respective (theoretical and analytical) frameworks. As such, the analytical framework, inspired by Castro-Arce and Vanclay (2020), suggests acknowledging both enabling and critical success factors in the process of triggering bottom-linked governance through SI. Alongside the enabling and the critical success factors, the thesis expands the analytical framework by adding the category of the disabling and/or hindering factors for the triggering of bottom-linked governance. Among such factors are the conflicts arising between the stakeholders, the lack of resources, the competing agendas on both the SI process and the future development of a given region. Additionally, other contribution of Chapter 2 lies in the identification of additional bridging roles discussed in the framework, namely the capacity building role and the role in promoting the opportunity-driven SI and development in contrast to the SI solely focused on satisfying pressing needs. Some further elaboration could be undertaken in expanding upon those other possible bridging roles that rural initiatives take upon themselves. While the TSI framework applied in Chapter 2 acknowledges critical success factors for bottom-linked governance, more elaboration of the proposed TSI framework could be done into the potential disabling/ hindering factors for bottom-linked governance and the role (and the potential) of SI initiatives in contributing to rural development. Research suggests that in different configurations of actors who might have competing ideas, conflict and tension can emerge (Christmann, 2020). Discussed in Chapter 2, the results indicate that the process of rural development is still associated with some degree of competition both among the SI initiatives themselves and between top-down and bottom-up stakeholders due to the scares nature of resources and conflicting interests. As such, the conflictual nature of SI might affect its potential to trigger transformation and should be considered as one of the factors contributing to the success or failure of SI and bottom-linked governance. At the same time, such conflict and contestation, if they are constructively processed, might potentially lead to a positive change rather than a failure of an SI initiative and the change it aims at bringing on (ibid). Thus,

it is important to acknowledge the role of conflicts in SI as a factor for TSI and its ability to trigger bottom-linked governance.

The ability of SI initiatives to play a role in the development of a given region is strongly connected to and tied with the rural development approach. To this end, **Chapter 3** discussed the interplay and interconnections between the SI and neo-endogenous development approach – and engaged with the question to which extent SI can be promoted and supported in rural regions through the NED approach. The chapter addressed the ways in which - and with what enabling factors - SI can be promoted in rural areas, focusing on the experience of an Austrian region of Mühlviertel. Such promotion is enabled by neo-endogenous development, reflecting the importance of local assets and their interconnection to the wider environment. Successful SI, addressing local challenges, nourishing local resources and establishing new practices/governance structures, is possible where regional development is done through the means of strong cooperation. By analysing the experience of the Mühlviertel rural region, the paper provided some new insights into how neo-endogenous development can trigger, contribute to and promote SI in the region. These include a number of enabling factors. Among the enabling factors that support SI, the first one is the presence of innovation narratives in the region, with both local communities and authorities being aware of SI and being willing to implement new solutions for more sustainable development based on shared, democratic decision-making, collaboration and co-creation of SI projects. Secondly, neo-endogenous development, rooted in strong region-wide collaboration, can trigger SI through the exchange of experience, knowledge and best practice where the missing resources are bridged back to the localities through intermediaries (such as local development initiatives). Thirdly, within the shift from a sectoral to a territorial approach to regional development, neo-endogenous strategies place a great emphasis on local resources and potentials, with SI strongly connected to the unique local cultural, environmental and other assets.

While the results indicate that neo-endogenous development can indeed promote SI in rural areas, it was also discovered that SI is not always easy to exercise for the actors involved. SI, being about reconfiguration of social practices and providing new solutions for unmet needs, faces some resistance in the region of Mühlviertel due to some degree of parochial thinking from both the local population and local authorities, where individual municipalities are concerned with the well-being of their own population rather than thinking “regionally”. Additionally, SI being conflictual by nature due to different factors (e.g. change in social practices, scarcity of available resources), leads to some conflicts surrounding the implementation of innovative projects by local development initiatives, including LAGs.

Despite the inevitability of conflicts, LAGs have to navigate their actions in these processes, bridging lacking resources back to the territory and being an intermediary between all the parties involved.

Operating as a part of the LEADER framework, LAGs in Mühlviertel also have to manage the tension arising between the top-down nature of governance in rural development and the bottom-up character of the SI projects they implement. Within this tension, one of the difficulties local actors on the ground have to face is their remoteness from decision-making. Such remoteness is referred to as not just geographical but also political, with national decision-making not fully reflecting on or being representative of the context of rural areas and their needs, resulting in divergent understandings of regional development and projects that need to be tailored to respond to those needs. Therefore, more attention needs to be paid to the needs and demands of rural actors in accordance with their deep knowledge and experience of working 'on the ground' in rural regions.

Finally, the promotion of SI within the neo-endogenous development approach has been hampered by the 'mainstreaming' of LEADER. Such has been discussed previously (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008), with the current study echoing the results indicating the hardships LAGs have to confront due to such mainstreaming processes. As such, LAGs have to work under ever increasing requirements in terms of successful implementation of the projects, thus losing its character as a 'testbed' for innovation and an open space for trying things out. Such pressure being put on LAGs results in the implementation of projects that have a higher chance of 'success' (in monetary and other terms) rather than in projects that might be innovative in nature. The main contribution of the chapter, therefore, lies in establishing a more detailed elaboration on the relationship between SI and NED, both being rooted in the same core principles of importance of innovation for rural communities, importance of (extra-local) cooperation, as well as the development at the tension between top-down/bottom-up.

The results presented indicate that there are several important considerations to be made in both future research and practice when it comes to neo-endogenous development and SI. When it comes to SI, in times of austerity and state withdrawal, SI is called upon as one of the tools that can help local communities realise their potential and e.g. address gaps in rural service provision, thus, becoming an active agent in the process of rural development. However, SI should be understood not simply as self-help in the context of rural areas but rather a way of how to address the uneven but interrelated effects of social change (Bock, 2016). The results also indicate the concerns existing among regional development actors from Mühlviertel about further state withdrawal, pointing out the pitfalls of neo-endogenous approach that advocates

for self-reliance but might lead to facilitating state withdrawal where rural regions are left 'on their own' to deal with challenges. As such, further research should look into neo-endogenous development as promoting SI that moves beyond understanding SI as a self-help tool.

Additionally, the results also indicate the need for more targeting of SI in frameworks as a distinct category of action rather than a supplementary idea to the interventions in social, environmental and other domains. Results presented also suggest that more attention is needed towards including SI as a distinct category of action in rural regions within different policies and frameworks. Despite there being attention paid to SI in policy terms (e.g. BEPA, 2010), it is rather underexplored within the existing frameworks for the development of rural regions. The role of frameworks in supporting and promoting innovative projects in regional development (e.g. LEADER) has been questioned in how far such support goes. The question about the role of LEADER in promoting SI in rural areas has been discussed in the literature before. What the results indicate is that, despite the presence of SI discourse and the regard that regional actors give to it in triggering more bottom-up action and creation of more participatory culture in realising LEADER projects, SI has a rather marginal position when it comes to the rural development frameworks and programs, still requiring much work in integrating the concept.

The ambition of the thesis in analysing the role of SI in the development of rural areas cannot be fulfilled without identifying the key actors in promoting SI in the rural region. As such, **Chapter 4** provided the perspectives from local development initiatives (LAGs and LDAs), understood in the current thesis as cases of SI.

Based on the results of the current chapter, it is emphasised that LDIs play an important role in promoting the development of rural regions while implementing changes and cooperating in a way that can be considered socially innovative (new, hybrid partnerships in order to tackle challenges; promoting integrated area development rather than the development of specific sectors, e.g. agriculture; supporting bottom-up actions; contributing to the empowerment of local population). In both case studies, the awareness of rural actors and stakeholders regarding SI as a concept and as a tool in the development of rural regions is rather high; however, in both cases, organisations in question tend to not to immediately describe and/or label their work as SI. Such could be explained both by a certain degree of hesitation to use the 'fashionable' terms and a certain confusion about what SI actually entails as a concept (due to the complexity of both the term and the nature of SI). Yet, people involved in LAGs and LDAs both in the Portuguese and Austrian cases confirm that the work done in the regions centres around issues of novel local resource use, (neo)endogenous development, creating and

supporting local supply chains and local networks and, therefore, promoting SI in the region alongside their focus on local development.

At the same time, while the work of LDIs is not necessarily labelled as SI, it is still being implicitly promoted. Such implicit character of SI promotion may be related to several factors: (1) difficulties in identifying, defining and measuring SI and (2) some hesitation towards labelling the work as SI because of the 'buzz' around the term. It should be noted that, as evident from the results of the chapter, there are some issues related to the fact that such organisations have to claim to be promoters of SI in order to access more funding opportunities. The impact assessment of SI projects puts further constraints on LAGs and LDAs because the organisations struggle with assessing, evaluating and/or measuring the impacts produced.

Despite the role of SI in local development having been acknowledged in the literature (Moulaert et al., 2005; Neumeier, 2012), future research on the role of LAGs and LDAs in promoting SI could benefit from a more critical perspective on SI as a political term used to fulfil the interests of some stakeholders. In addition, more attention could be paid to the contextual dimensions, political power structures at play, and potential undesired (or even negative) impacts of implementing such projects in rural regions. Greater elaboration on the present research is needed about the interrelation of SI and social capital in rural regions and how the latter affects SI promotion. The research could also benefit from more insight into potential conflicts amongst various stakeholders in rural areas that lead to the disabling of SI.

The thesis also made an inquiry into the impacts that the SI initiatives have on the development of rural areas. As such, **Chapter 5**, by analysing the experience of SI initiative ADCMoura (presented previously in the Chapter 2), provided some insights into the types, scales and domains of the impacts ADCMoura had on the development of the Baixo Alentejo region. In order to address the research question, as well as to carry out the impact assessment exercise, the chapter addressed the question on types, domains and scales of impacts of the SI initiative. The results indicate that the question of SI impacts and impact assessment represents both a promising pathway for further research and a complex, still underexplored field of study. Responding to this, the results of the current study indicate that there is a rather high awareness regarding the positive impacts of ADCMoura's work, with the recognition and awareness on the negative impacts falling behind. The results also pinpoint the SI initiative as having positive impacts, while the perception of negative impacts is quite divided. Simultaneously, for the four domains of impacts - environmental, economic, social and institutional, - ADCMoura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts, with the responses, however, suggesting that the positive impacts are rather ambiguous in the environmental and institutional domains.

Simultaneously, further research could build upon the results by providing a more detailed explanation and categorisation of SI impacts.

Concerning the geographical scale, the results show that ADCMoura has the positive impact on the local level of the municipality of Moura, with the sub-regional NUTS III (Baixo Alentejo) and regional NUTS II (Alentejo) levels perceived to be positively impacted the second and third most. According to the results, the positive effects created in the territory through ADCMoura's work could have been obtained without ADCMoura's intervention 1) but it would have taken more time 2) with other similar initiatives only partially satisfying the needs of the territory. Thus, it can be concluded that the respondents perceive ADCMoura as an important actor of transformative change in the rural area of Baixo Alentejo but not as the sole actor of change.

The contribution of the chapter, therefore, lies in empirical evidence shedding light onto both the impact assessment strategies and the exercise of such an assessment. An attempt was made to develop both a typology of SI impacts according to the types, domains and scales, while simultaneously carrying out an impact assessment of said SI impacts. Having addressed the SI impacts and their assessment, the chapter suggested some direction for the future research. Despite the fact that SI is often seen and discussed in light of its potential for a positive change, it can be misused. There have been several cautionary remarks about the potential for SI to contribute to the ever growing trend of public withdrawal from social services (Ziegler, 2017; Grieco, 2015). Thus, the chapter raises a concern, echoing the previous chapters, regarding the delicate balance between SI being a tool for positive transformative change in rural communities and its potential to contribute and further decline of the rural services and products provided by the state based on the idea of 'self-help' of rural communities through the means of SI.

Building upon the above, the chapter also suggests to take a closer look at the issue of the pro-innovation bias. As SI is often used as a policy design tool to find new means to fund and support alternatives to public services, there has been a growing number of authors questioning if SI is not furthering neoliberal interests (Burdge and Vanclay, 1996). This side of SI —and, indeed, of innovation in general,—is often overlooked, as the discourse on SI tends to stress the positive dimensions and hide the less desirable outputs (Epstein and Yuthas, 2014) which has been called the pro-innovation bias of innovation (Hazyet al., 2010). As such, further research is needed in the domain of the pro-innovation bias.

When it comes to the question of SI impacts, it should be noted that negative impacts were rarely spoken about in the context of SI. The absence of potential negative impacts vis-a-vis SI

in the narratives and discourse around SI activities could be explained through an overly idealised perception of SI as a 'perfect solution' for the challenges that rural regions face. Since potential negative impacts were not in the scope of the study, it is important to address the issue in further research, and to explore the potential factors that may come into play when talking about, as well as assessing the negative impacts that could emerge.

While having presented new insights into the challenges associated with impact assessment of SI, the analysis carried out within Chapter 5 offers some avenues for future research. First, a closer look into the assessment strategies of potential negative impacts of SI is required in order to gain a deeper understanding of how SI, while targeting and favouring some communities and/ or groups, can potentially create undesirable, sometimes even negative impacts. Second, an inclusion of other groups of stakeholders, such as monitoring bodies and policy makers, could benefit current research by providing a range of opinions regarding other challenges, as well as ways of addressing these challenges, driving forces and necessities behind the impact assessment of SI in rural regions. Future research could also benefit from a stronger focus on the contextual factors of the environment LAGs and LDAs work in, alongside a more in-depth examination of the political and institutional frameworks under which those organisations operate. Such research could shed more light on the issues as to for what reasons and in what ways the organisations are expected to assess the impacts and report on them. Additionally, the enabling and disabling factors for impact assessment of SI activities implemented specifically in rural regions could be explored.

Theoretical and methodological limitations of the thesis

Alongside the particular limitations connected to each of the chapters, there are overall limitations relevant for the current thesis.

The former category of limitations concerns theoretical limitations. First, the analytical frameworks of TSI and neo-endogenous development were not applied, and therefore addressed, in equal strength in both case studies. For example, while the concept of transformative social innovation was the focal point for analysis of the SI in Baixo Alentejo (Chapter 2), and the significance of bridging SI roles in rural development was shown, it was not sufficiently addressed within the Austrian case. At the same time, while the concept of neo-endogenous approach was applied to the case of Mühlviertel region (Chapter 3), it was a concept applied in the Portuguese context only to a certain extent. Thus, this creates a misbalance as to the extent to which the theoretical underpinnings and foundations were addressed within two selected case studies.

Another significant fundamental limitation of the research lies in a limited comparative focus of the study. While Chapter 4 presents the results of a comparative inquiry from both case study regions of Mühlviertel and Baixo Alentejo, other chapters analysed the phenomena in question (e.g. the role of TSI in top-down/ bottom-up tension, the interconnections between SI and NED) based on the research conducted in single case studies. Thus, the comparative case study approach served as a guiding principle more than an ambition that was realised to the fullest potential. Such limitations had to be accounted for due to the i) limited access to the field, ii) significant differences in the contextual factors (e.g. political, economic, institutional, social, and environmental) – and, as a result, different main themes and critical questions within single case studies. Further research into the role of SI in rural regions could be improved by placing more attention on the comparative study.

From the theoretical point of view, another limitation is an absence of a structured, systematised literature inquiry into the concept of SI in more general terms. Despite Chapter 1 providing a comprehensive overview of various strands of SI research, approaching the concept from different traditions of SI research and different disciplines, the thesis could benefit from an additional chapter dedicated to a more systematised inquiry into the world of SI.

At the same time, the thesis had several methodological constraints. The focus of the thesis was placed on two case studies of rural regions, which belong to the countries that are diverse in terms of economic, demographic and social development. Although the comparative case study approach allows for a deeper analysis of phenomena in question, analysis of further cases could provide a more comprehensive picture on the role of SI initiatives, the ways in which they operate, the enabling and disabling factors for SI in rural areas, as well as provide more room to critically engage with the questions of impacts SI initiatives actually have on the development of rural areas. Simultaneously, a comparative case study approach of cases from two different countries required a rather intense process of designing and carrying out the research. Despite the extensive data collection at both local and regional levels, the national and the EU arenas for SI were only partially addressed in the current research. At the same time, while considering the contextual factors in the SI process (political struggles, cultural heritage, social capital of actors, economic characteristics of the regions, to name a few) to a certain extent, the research did not sufficiently focus on the fields as most of the analysis was at the organisational and individual levels. As such, a more integrated approach, analysing the SI in the full complexity of various levels, should be prioritised in future research.

A significant methodological limitation of the thesis relates to the imbalanced use of quite diverse methodological approaches within the case studies. While Chapter 2, Chapter 3 and

Chapter 4 are based on the mixed method approach with the exclusive use of qualitative methods (e.g. interviews, document analysis), Chapter 5 stands out due to the application of an online survey. Although the choice of the methodology for the individual chapter was dictated by both varying research questions of individual chapters and the logic of the research overall, this poses certain limitations as to what extent the results from two case studies are meaningful in terms of comparison – and in how for such comparison could go. At the same time, the survey was deployed in an exploratory manner, where a more comprehensive data analysis that goes beyond the descriptive statistics (e.g. regression analysis) could enrich the analysis and inform future research.

Simultaneously, further deployment of qualitative methods and techniques within the research is an additional critical point. Alongside other methods within the case studies, the expert interviews were the main method used for the data collection. While providing useful for collecting the narratives and different opinions, expertise and knowledge from a range of stakeholders, additional qualitative methods were used in the research only to a certain extent. The potential for enriching the methodology of the current thesis could have lied in the application of the focus groups with rural stakeholders in broader terms, as well as the Delphi method in particular in order to collect more perspectives from the experts in the field of SI in rural regions.

The thesis also entails several methodological limitations in more practical terms. First, the sampling procedure could provide a potential bias in the data collected. Since sampling was done through the snowballing technique, the participants of the research were introduced through the gatekeepers which potentially leads to a) a representation of a specialised groups of experts dealing with the issues of regional and local development and SI, b) a bias in representation of the opposing voices that could provide new insights into potential conflicts between the organisations and the actors competing over the scarce resources in the regional development. Additional bias arose during the recruitment process for the Austrian case study of Mühlviertel where the recruitment process was done through one gatekeeper. Despite the opportunity to be a part of a local development organisation's daily life during the secondments in Mühlviertel and Baixo Alentejo regions, the researchers mostly had to rely on the gatekeeping provided by the organisations where secondments took place. However, such biases were mitigated/counterbalanced through on-side recruitment of participants using other sources of information, e.g. official web pages of Local Action Groups and local development associations, regional development professional online communities, social media pages of said LDIs (e.g. Facebook) etc. Such biases were acknowledged early on in the research and

mitigated by the desk research through the additional sources of information, expanding the pool of potential participants, as well as by making sure that a wide range of stakeholders (politicians, members of social enterprises, members of LAGs) were invited to take part in the research.

Second, the initial collection of the interviews in two regions was done by several researchers from the RurAction project. This was due to the fact that the organising and facilitating interviews in both regions took a significant amount of coordination among the researchers. Therefore, one of the limitations of the research is the fact that some interviews were not conducted in a face-to-face manner but rather in a group form with the presence of more than one researcher in the room. This might potentially impose two limitations on the current research. Firstly, due to the need to do the group interviews, each individual researcher had a smaller share of the time dedicated to their respective questions in the interview guide. Secondly, the presence of more than one researcher could lead to the bias in the answers and the flow of an interview. Such was mitigated through a collaborative approach by the RurAction researchers, where the notes and memos were shared and discussed at various stages of data collection and analysis.

Third, additional limitations were imposed by the language use of the research team. Due to some language limitations of the researchers, some interviews had to be done fully in English, in the respective language of the region with the help of an interpreter (either one of the researchers or a professional one) or in the mix of both English and German/ Portuguese. Such language issues, to an extent, might have had an effect on 1) the ways in which interviews were structured, 2) the ways in which interviewees responded to the question as well as 3) the ways in which the answers were recorded and interpreted by the research team. However, this limitation was dealt with by means of professional translation, transcription of the interviews by a native speaker (if not in English) as well as peer-review of transcripts for accuracy.

General policy implications and recommendations

Based on the above presented general discussion and the limitations of the current research, as well as keeping in mind the results presented in individual chapters, several policy implications and recommendations are addressed and discussed. Such is done in hope to provide policymakers at different levels with suggestions on how to approach SI as a tool for change in a more systematic way, while also acknowledging critical success factors and pitfalls along the way. It considers these implications within the framework of the major findings of the thesis, which suggest that SI in rural areas has a prominent space in addressing the rural development

challenges, playing a great role in promoting transformative change through enhanced participation, capacity building and more inclusive decision-making among the stakeholders.

The thesis suggests some more general policy recommendations related to the support and promotion of SI at the European level, as well as support measures that could help the actors and associations working on SI in supporting them. Based on the outcomes of the RurAction project, several important policy considerations on how to support SI in rural European areas were discussed and further elaborated. Currently, the importance of SI as an operational concept has been taking up, where work is being done on programmes that promote the potential of SI in rural areas more than it was done before. During policy round tables organised by the RurAction consortium, it was emphasised that the focus of the EC has been placed on SI (and SE) initiatives for quite some time and their importance being recognised, despite some initial delay in addressing the SI consistently in the context of rural areas specifically. As such, the stakeholders point out the practical implications of the RurAction empirical research since it provides a deeper understanding of the SI processes in rural regions and provides a better perspective on specific requirements of innovation processes in rural areas.

One of the issues arising from the research is that SI has long been on the radar of the EC, thus acknowledging SI as a potential tool for both urban and rural development. At the same time, the individual member states have often not yet recognised their potential. The awareness of this issue differs in the different Member States. The EU could provide impulses and is doing so. However, it cannot force the member states to pursue respective funding policies.

The results indicate that more robust focus on SI as a distinct category of action in rural regions and its inclusion into various development strategies is needed. Quite often, various rural development strategies (e.g. Lokale Agenda 21), as well as various programs (e.g. LEADER) place a great emphasis on the 'social' dimension of development rather than offering a specific focus on SI. As such, one policy suggestion would be to focus on SI specifically and include it in future policies and programs for rural areas in a more elaborated, distinct way.

At the same time, future policies should establish a clearer, stronger link between national, regional, and local strategies of regional and rural development, where policies at various levels correspond to each other (and do not contradict each other) in a more coherent way. Moreover, there is a further need for a coherence between various strategies of development created and implemented at different levels, meaning that the principles of regional and rural development elaborated at the national level should be elaborated more and implemented better into the local development strategies, thus, "translating" the principles developed at the EU and national levels into the strategies at the 'ground' level of smaller municipalities and communities.

Such harmonisation of the strategies and policies should also acknowledge the translation of the SI concept across all levels of policy intervention.

Regarding the specific policy recommendations for the Austrian case, several potential avenues were identified. Despite a strong awareness on the part of rural stakeholders of the concept of SI, the political and social understanding of SI should be promoted (even) better at the national and regional levels. The promotion of SI in the Mühlviertel region, as well as the understanding of SI as such, takes on an implicit rather than explicit character. This is taken as an indication for a stronger focus on SI in rural development strategies, as well as awareness raising among rural development stakeholders concerning the nature of SI.

Simultaneously, the policy discussions and the research results indicate a low degree of institutionalisation of SI where local development strategies (*Lokale Entwicklungsstrategie)* do not refer to SI explicitly (SI is not a distinct category of action), with SI not being implicitly targeted in policies and regional development frameworks (such as local development strategies and Lokale Agenda 21). Thus, one of the main policy recommendations would be the inclusion of SI as a distinct category of action at the regional and local levels in Austria.

Another avenue of the policy intervention should aim at more acknowledgement of the "learning from past", under which well-running projects implemented by SI initiatives should be identified, and their experience should be taken into account in the design of new programmes (EAFRD, ESF, and ERDF) and new programming periods within said frameworks. Such a perspective, as well as the need for the design of further interventions based on previous experience.

Another policy suggestion concerns the function and implementation of the LEADER programme at the local level. As pointed out in the Austrian context, currently, funding conditions through the EU funding programmes allow little creativity and innovation due to the strict funding requirements and specific thematic funding landscape that projects must fit into. What comes into play is the centralised character of decision-making on regional development where SI initiatives have to operate between top-down and bottom-up logic in the design and implementation of rural development strategies. The policy suggestion in this regard is to provide more room for manoeuvre for the stakeholders at the local level, where the influence of the federal level and the NUTS II level would have to be re-imagined and re-designed in order to promote effective participatory developments.

Further policy recommendation concerns the need to promote the transfer of (social) innovation. In this regard, more systematic work should be done to disseminate innovative ideas through networks so that innovative ideas can become far-reaching innovations. Networking

has a high priority in the distribution of innovative prototypes at local level. Its importance must be recognised.

Networking for SI should be better supported. The reasons for such networking for SI initiatives is threefold. Firstly, through the networks, practical experiences and know-hows can be shared among local development initiatives and rural actors. Secondly, through such networking could provide the room for dissemination of innovative practices. Thirdly, it might help to address the issue of parochial thinking ("*Kirchturmdenken*", directly translated as "church tower thinking") among local actors towards the innovation projects. In order to change the perspective of rural communities towards innovation, future policy should incorporate the strategies of promoting innovation narratives in rural areas.

Regarding the Portuguese case, the discussion around SI support and promotion is strongly connected to the issue of the low population density, as well as a certain lack of critical mass of the actors oriented towards innovative solutions. Pointing out specific aspects of SI dynamics in the case of Portuguese rural territories, the actors suggested that often a critical mass of individual actors becoming active (in the SI initiatives and projects) is missing in the Portuguese reality of rural regions with a low population density. In these regions it is LDIs located in rural territories that play an important role in the promotion of social inclusion and the empowerment of local populations (namely by innovative solutions).

SI initiatives build on a capacity in promoting innovative solutions that has been gained in the past by having carried out projects in the framework of European programmes such as LEADER, EQUAL and INTERREG. This also echoes the policy recommendation for the Austrian case, where the previous actors' experience and participation in various programs and projects, as well as what has been learned through such, should be considered more carefully in designing and implementing future interventions.

In the Portuguese case, another policy recommendation is connected to the funding opportunities for promoting local development and SI in rural areas. It has been indicated that European funding is absolutely crucial for continuous work of SI initiatives in question. Such support through various programmes is said to be a foundation of resources acquired by the organisations implementing and promoting SI. However, acquiring such resources is becoming increasingly difficult and burdensome for actors in question due to ever-increasing bureaucracy, as well as limited pool of resources available within the existing programs and frameworks. As a response, alternative financing (e.g. through foundations) has become increasingly important as well as financial independence from public funds by creating income from the sale of services and products (which is however still hard for these institutions). As such, policy

recommendations here could be more focused on different and new programs and funding opportunities tailored for SI specifically.

Additionally, several challenges were identified in relation to the European funding, with the actors voicing their concerns regarding the European funding programmes. Firstly, a certain lack of flexibility in adaptation of local measures was expressed, wherein said funding schemes do not fully take into account the context specific approach to implementing SI in rural reality. Secondly, the issue of excessive formality and bureaucracy was reinforced in relation to both implementing the SI projects and in acquiring funds necessary for that. Therefore, the testing of experimental action and development of innovative approaches and solutions is rather difficult to carry out. As a result, existing European funding programmes cannot really do justice to the specific characteristics of Portugal's rural areas and to their need for SI. The policy recommendations resulting from it, therefore, should acknowledge the i) need for flexibility in implementing development strategies at the local level, ii) address the over-extensive bureaucratic burdens in order to allow for experimental character of any (social) innovation intervention, as well as iii) address the challenges in acquiring funding through potentially designing designated funds for SI projects and activities. At the same time, the resilience of local development initiatives (LDIs) in the Portuguese rural context is strongly pointed out, since they remain active even in times of crisis, despite the lack of continuous financing programmes and overall challenges they have to overcome.

Policy recommendations for the impact assessment of social innovation

Taking into account the more general policy suggestions regarding the support in promotion of SI solutions in rural areas, some policy recommendations regarding the impact assessment of the rural SI initiatives and projects in question are made. Based on the results, there is a necessity to better monitor what effects SI has. In this context, questions of monitoring and assessing impacts were raised that are still far from being resolved and where policymakers need science. Through the cross-case comparative analysis, the results indicate that specific policies targeting the impact assessment of SI initiatives should be considered.

Since the nature of SI activities and projects vary greatly, the policies regarding impact assessment (IA) should go beyond trying to find a "fit-them-all" approach. The results indicate that the main obstacles on the way of (universal) impact assessment for SI stem from i) the 'qualitative', intangible nature of SI and ii) the high context-dependency and embeddedness of SI where various factors (political structures, economic development, territorial dimension) come into play. Keeping in mind the diversity of organisations working

in the fields of SI and regional development, their different approaches and target groups together with different contexts they are operating in (political, institutional, environmental, and social), the question arises whether it is possible or whether there is a need for a "universal" impact assessment tool. As such, future policy would have to consider the context sensitive approaches to SI impact assessment that reflect on various types of SI and take into account the context in which SI is implemented.

At the same time, SI initiatives often struggle with creating tools for IA (or adopting existing ones to their needs), as it requires resources that are lacking at the level of organisations, namely human resources alongside expertise and know-hows in the field of IA. As such, more support is needed in both financial resources and expertise and knowledge provided for SI initiatives and projects in learning how to do IA, as well as in designing and executing such impact assessment.

Impact assessment in general, and in SI in particular, requires data that is reliable, structured, and collected over longer periods of time, since the notion of impact itself is about the long-time change occurring as a result of a given intervention. However, the lack of (systematised) data on both SI initiatives at the national and regional levels, as well as the data at the level of SI initiatives on their respective projects/ interventions, makes impact assessment challenging. The initiatives face the issue with data availability due to the lack of resources to compile such data sets (e.g. time constraints due to project- based work). Additional challenges related to the use of data, both with regards to SI implementation and promotion as well as the impact assessment of such SI projects, is the relatively low implementation of the data collected and results obtained during the previous programming periods into the design of further program implementation. The stakeholders point out these challenges as one of the obstacles that arise in the process of promoting SI further and implementing it in rural development programs, since the design of new programming periods rarely acknowledges and includes said data. As such, future policy, as based on the results of the current study, should also place a stronger focus on including the results of impact assessment and impact evaluation done at the level of the organisations and associations working in SI field into the next programming period of rural development programs, e.g. LEADER and INTERREG. In addition to the better use of data in order to inform future interventions, there is a need for more correspondence between various strategies and tools for impact assessment used by SI initiatives working in the regions.

Future policy should pay greater attention to the multi-facet nature of SI, where initiatives promoting SI usually cover various fields of intervention (starting with projects supporting female entrepreneurs to creating common brands of eco products) which makes the unified

approach to IA a complex task in need of accounting for all the different scales, types, and domains of said impacts.

Understanding the challenges that SI initiatives are faced with in the process of IA is of crucial importance as this allows for more elaboration and caution when it comes to choosing, designing and implementing (or at least attempts at implementation) impact assessment strategies and tools at the level of said initiatives. Initiatives in question face some crucial challenges when it comes to the impact assessment of the SI projects they implement. Based on those challenges identified in previous chapters, several policy suggestions have been developed, having the potential to contribute to building an improved, more sustainable mode of impact assessment for the organisations in question:

• SI initiatives require more (extensive) knowledge on the existing and available tools for conducting impact assessments of their socially innovative projects. This can be achieved through partnering with peer organisations, academia (e.g. universities and research centres), and wider public and private sectors stakeholders engaging with impact assessment in general – and the SI impact assessment in particular.

• The initiatives working in the field of SI could benefit from more exchanges of know-how and experiences with other organisations and expert bodies focusing on impact assessment procedures. The neo-endogenous approach comes into play when local actors are seeking support from extra-local bodies in the procedures of assessing and evaluating the impacts of the projects implemented (e.g. the support of intermunicipal communities, federations LAGs).

• Impact assessment requires extensive resources – including financial means, knowledge, and expertise, – that quite often are lacking at the organisational level. Therefore, more support infrastructure could be offered by the regional and/or national frameworks and institutions to the SI initiatives in implementing and running impact assessments in a sustainable way.

• The long-term character of impacts (in contrast to results which are short-term and outcomes that are mid-term in focus) requires some time and perspective in order for such impacts to be assessed. One of the solutions arising from empirical research is the idea of setting up a task force and/or working groups to follow-up with the participants of the projects so they have an opportunity to come together (some time) after finalising the projects and reflect on the potential impacts.

• SI might have a "dark side", e.g. the potential negative impacts of innovation policy on society (Fougère and Meriläinen, 2019), socially divisive or destructive objectives and intentions (Nicholls et al., 2015), as well as deviant or unintended consequences that achieve negative social effects (e.g. widened social exclusion as a result of some groups falling out of

focus). Therefore, the impact assessment strategies for SI initiatives should account for a more reflective approach concerning the potential negative impacts produced as a result and/or as a by-product of the SI implemented.

Summing up the presented policy implications and suggestions, it can be said that in both cases under study, SI still remains an underexplored concept and tool in European policy. Such requires a stronger focus on the concept of SI within the rural development framework and policies. Furthermore, there is a certain degree of artificial distinction between social dimensions of rural development and SI as a distinct category of action, thus, requiring a more intentional distinction between SI action and other initiatives targeting social development, with further need to incorporate SI into the rural development programmes. Building upon such, there is a need for stronger recognition of the SI and local development initiatives' relevance for regional development, not least due to their extensive knowledge of rural areas and their experience with social processes. At the same time, while recognising those initiatives' contribution, an awareness has to be developed that said initiatives need further support for developing their capacities and particularly for their continuous networking tasks, in order to address the existing challenges of their regions. Concerning the SI impact assessment, future policy would have to acknowledge the mostly 'intangible' character of impacts produced by SI activities, constituted by network creation, community empowerment, shared vision creation, etc. However, such intangibility poses some challenges for the organisations promoting SI, since it makes impact assessment and evaluation challenging. SI initiatives, therefore, require stronger support from peers and other SI promoters, as well as from formal organisations in terms of knowledge exchange and capacity building related to assessing and evaluating their impacts.

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Annexes

Annex A. Participant Consent Form I (English)

Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions:
Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action

Participant Consent Form I

Main investigator and contact details	Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space Flakenstrasse 29-31 15537 Erkner/Germany gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de

Name and host institution of the Early Stage Researcher:

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1. I agree to take part in the RurAction research project. I have read the Participant Information Sheet for the study. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, without giving a reason.
3. I am free to ask any questions at any time.
4. I understand what will happen to the data collected from me for the research.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this Participant Consent Form and the Participant Information Sheet.
6. I understand that quotes from the interview may be used in the dissemination of the results.

Processing and publishing my interview data in

an anonimysed form

Any information which might help to identify the respondent will be removed from the transcript. Data that will be removed are your name, your job title, location information (name of municipalities, cities and towns), names of institutions and time specifications.

a non-anonimysed form

Hereby I agree that my interview data will be processed and published in a non-anonymised form. I know that I have the opportunity to withdraw from this agreement and to demand that my interview data will be anonymised. I understand that this is only possible before publication.

I wish to withdraw from this study

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact the project coordinator Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann (gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de) and the early stage researcher referring to the project title RurAction. You do not have to give a reason for why you would like to withdraw.

Annex B. Participant Consent Form II (English)

Participant Consent Form II

Processing and publishing photographies within the framework of the project

The Early Stage Researchers will take, view and store photographies of the research areas and the interviewed social entreprises for analytic purposes.

I agree ☐yes ☐no

Recording and publishing of photographs and video sequences (if applicable)

I hereby declare my consent to the recording of photographs and videos of my person during the interview. Following the interview the Early Stage Researcher will view and store the photographies for analytic purposes. Further, I declare my consent to the publication of the photographies on the following channels and media:

- scientific and popular publications
- the RurAction website (www.ruraction.eu)
- the websites of the participating research institutions
- project related social media channels (Instagram, Twitter, Facebook)
- public presentations
- a documentary film that will be produced by Dr. Łukasz Rogowski (Adam Mickiewicz University Poznan/Poland) who is an expert in visual documentation

Use for other purposes is excluded. In case a photograph or video sequence of my person is planned to be released in the documentary film I will be notified in advance.

I grant my consent.

I refuse my consent.

_____

___

Name of participant (print)

Date and signature

Participants will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Annex C. Participant Consent Form III (English)

Participant Consent Form III

Main investigator and contact details	Prof Dr. Gabriela Christmann Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS) Flakenstrasse 29-31 15537 Erkner/Germany gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de

Name and host institution of the Early Stage Researcher:

Your interview data (original text and its changes) will be archived in a chosen social science repository in order to be used for research purposes. The full anonymity will be checked and, if necessary, further measures of anonymity will be taken. The voice recordings of your interviews will be deleted after completion of these anonymity measures.

I agree ☐yes ☐no

Your contact information will be transferred to the chosen social science repository in order to give other interested researchers the possibility to contact you at a later time.

Your contact information will not be linked with your interview data and will be saved so that no third person can access them. We will store the data in the repository for at least ten years in order to allow follow-up research.

The transfer of your contact details to other interested researchers will only be approved for non-commercial research purposes in similar research fields.

I agree ☐yes ☐no

Name of participant (print)

Date and Signature

Participants will be given a copy of this form to keep.

Annex D. Participant Information Sheet (English)

Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action

Participant Information Sheet

About this research project

RurAction is a European research project that investigates how social enterprises facilitate social innovations in rural regions. It acknowledges social enterprises as promising but often neglected actors that are perceived as troubleshooters of social problems who are able to stabilise and improve the living conditions in these regions.
RurAction aims at achieving excellent results and qualifying early stage researchers as equally scientifically and practically skilled experts for social entrepreneurship and social innovations in rural regions. The project lasts from December 2016 until November 2020.

The Early Stage Researcher

Name: ……..
Hosting institution: …….
E-mail: ……**……..**

How will the research be conducted?

The research will be conducted in the following rural regions: Mid-West/Ireland, Sjaelland/Denmark, Uckermark/Germany, Pilski/Poland, Mühlviertel/Austria, Phtiotis/Greece and Baixo Alentejo/Portugal. Field research involves the following methods:

Quantitative research methods:

· a standardised online survey of social entrepreneurs, regional economic experts, regional politicians and experts of social welfare

Qualitative research methods:

· Participant observations

· Semi-structured interviews with social entrepreneurs, local residents, regional decision makers, customers of regional services and network partners of the social entrepreneurs · Network analysis

Who is organising the research?

The research programme will be implemented by ten research institutions and five social enterprises:

· Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (IRS, Erkner/Germany), Prof.

Christmann · Adam Mickiewicz University (AMU, Poznan/Poland), Prof. Stryjakiewicz and Dr. Rogowski · Roskilde University (RUC, Roskilde/Denmark), Prof. Hulgård
· University College Cork (UCC, Cork/Ireland), Dr. O'Shaughnessy
· Ballyhoura Development (Kilfinane/Ireland), Pádraig Casey
· Leibniz Institute for Regional Geography (IfL, Leipzig /Germany), Dr. Lang
· University of The Aegean (UAE, Mytilini/Greece), Prof. Tsobanoglou
· Otelo eGen (Vorchdorf/Austria), Martin Hollinetz and Wolfgang Mader
· University Institute of Lisbon (ISTE-IUL, Lisbon/Portugal), Prof. Ferreiro, Prof. Henriques, Prof. de Sousa
· University of Potsdam (Potsdam/Germany), Dr. Weinbach
· ADCMoura (Moura/Portugal), Clara Lourenço
· Stevia Hellas (Lamia/Greece), Christos Stamatis
· Social Impact (Potsdam/Germany), Norbert Kunz
· Technical University of Berlin (Berlin/Germany), Prof. Christmann
· University of Leipzig (Leipzig/Germany), Prof. Lentz

Why have I been invited to take part?

We are inviting you to take part because of your contact or relation to one of the involved social enterprises or because of your residence or position in one of the investigated regions. Talking to people with contact to a social enterprise will help us to understand the activities of this enterprise. Talking to residents will help us to understand the situation of the observed region and the impact the social enterprise has.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

We will arrange a meeting or a Skype call to conduct a loosely structured interview. Thereby, we will use a digital recorder to record the conversation if you are comfortable with this approach. If you disagree with recording the conversation, we will take handwritten notes. You do not have to answer any questions that you would prefer not to.

In some of the researched regions, videos and pictures will be taken by professional filmmakers and researchers. This may include also your image. Images and video sequences of you only will be released if you give your consent.

Can I refuse to take part?

Yes. You do not have to take part and you do not have to give any reason for refusing. Even if your employer has given general permission for the research to be carried out in your organisation, there is no obligation for you to participate.

What will happen to the information I provide? How will confidentiality be safeguarded?
Recorded interviews will be transcribed; handwritten interview notes will be typed up by the interviewer. In both cases, your transcript will be anonymised by removing your name and any information that might allow identifying you such as your job title, location information (name of municipalities, cities and towns), names of institutions and time specifications. All personal data are strictly kept separate from the transcripts. The voice recordings will be deleted at latest at the end of the project while the interview transcriptions will be stored securely on a password-protected hard drive. If demanded, you will have the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview and remove data from it, to ensure that no unnecessary risks are being taken.

The procedure of anonymizing interviews as described above, may be contradictory to your intention to popularise your insights or to promote your case study as best practice. In this case, you have the opportunity to declare in the consent form that you agree with processing and publishing your interview data in a non-anonymised form. However, if you feel that there is any risk or potential for harm, you can withdraw from your consent and demand that your interview data will be anonymised. *Please understand that withdrawal from the project has to be declared four months after data collection at latest due to planned publications.*

What will happen to the results of the study?

The results of the study will be disseminated in different ways:

- Findings will form the basis for the doctoral dissertation of the early-stage-researcher as well as further publications in academic journals. Moreover, the research findings will be presented at both national and international conferences
- Results will be communicated to the public by press releases, which may result in newspaper articles and in articles of public or special interest magazines.
- Results will be presented to politicians in the field of rural development and social business at the European level during a policy round table; they will be the cornerstones of a policy brief.
- Findings will contribute to a practice handbook that addresses social enterprises operating in rural regions.
- Pictures and videos will be published in the project's social media profiles (like Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) during the implementation of the research. We will not publish any pictures of your person without your signed consent.
- A documentary film will be produced about challenges and opportunities of structurally weak rural regions and how social enterprises respond to them and will be addressed to rural residents.
- An exhibition will show how bottom-up initiatives seek to initiate social changes in the respective regions. The exhibition will be used for presenting the project at science nights and as a travelling exhibition in the investigated regions.

Photographs and video recordings

In some regions, pictures and videos will be taken during the research process. They will be stored on hard drive and some of them will be digitally edited. Some of the pictures, videos and films will be used in exhibitions and public presentations and/or will be uploaded to the project's social media
profiles. Visual materials will be used as a form of introducing the participants of the project to general audience. They will not be connected to your statements from the interviews.

Contact for further information:

If you would like any further details, please have a look on www.ruraction.eu or contact the project manager Mrs. Marie-Julie Jacquemot (marie-julie.jacquemot@leibniz-irs.de), the ethic commissioner Łukasz Rogowski (lukasz.rogowski@amu.edu.pl) or the participating

researcher.

If I agree to take part in the study now, can I withdraw later?

Yes. You can withdraw at any time, and you do not have to give any reason. To do so, please email the project coordinator, Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann (gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de) and the early stage researcher. *If you would like us to remove the anonymised information you have already provided, please note that this is only possible four months after data collection at latest.* Afterwards the results will be published and it will no longer be possible to remove your contribution.

Are there any benefits or disadvantages to taking part?

There are no disadvantages we are aware of. Your agreement to participate does not affect any of your legal rights. There may be no direct personal benefits from participation. However, the project will provide information about the impacts of social enterprises in rural regions which you might find valuable.

Contact details for complaints

If you should have any complaints about this project, please contact the project coordinator Prof. Dr. Gabriela Christmann (gabriela.christmann@leibniz-irs.de).

Postal address: Prof. Dr Gabriela Christmann, Leibniz-Institute for Research on Society and Space, Flakenstrasse 29-31, 15537 Erkner/Germany.

You will be given a copy of this to keep together with a copy of your consent form

Annex E. List of interviewees for the Austrian case study

	Coding	Location	Organisation/ Position
1	AT_1	Mühlviertler Alm	Former mayor of Schönau and one of the founder of the region "Mühlviertler Alm" and for 20 years chairman of the region
2	AT_2	Mühlviertler Alm	CEO Verband Mühlviertler Alm, Leader-Manager and one of the founder of Otelo Weitersfelden/ Head of the project "Jugendtankstelle Mühlviertler Alm"
3	AT_3	Mühlviertler Alm	Innovative and young organic farmer family and Mario is former coordinator of the project "Regionale Agenda 21 Mühlviertler Alm"
4	AT_4	Ottensheim or Linz	Representative in the Upper Austrian Parliament and former mayor of Ottensheim (Mühlviertel)
5	AT_5	Donau-Böhmerwald	CEO Leader Donau-Böhmerwald, Leader-Manager
6	AT_6	Perg Strudengau	CEO LEADER Perg Strudengau, LEADER manager
7	AT_7	Mühlviertel	Branch Manager Mühlviertel Regional Manager Spatial and Regional Development
8	AT_8	Berg/Rohrbach or Linz	Representative in the Upper Austrian Parliament, Chair-Women for a regional sustainability-process in the Donau-Böhmerwald Leader region
9	AT_9	Mühlviertel	LEADER forum Upper Austria CEO /Leader manager EFERDING
10	AT_10	Mühlviertel	CEO Mühlviertler Kernland, Leader-Manager and project-coordinator of #ThinkTankRegion2018 Festival für regionale VordenkerInnen
11	AT_11	Mühlviertel	Regional manager for Agenda 21, Sustainability and Ecology
12	AT_12	Sterngartl-Gusental	CEO Sterngartl-Gusental, LEADER manager
13	AT_13	Vocklabrueck	Member of the Otelo eGen cooperative

14	AT_14	Urfahr West	CEO Urfahr West, LEADER manager
15	AT_15	Mühlviertel	Agenda 21 and Sustainability Management at the Zukunftsakademie des Landes OÖ

Annex F. List of interviewees for the Portuguese case study

	Coding	Location	Organisation/ Position
1	PT_1	Lisbon	Representative of MINHA TERRA - Portuguese Federation of Local Development Associations
2	PT_2	Alcoutim	Manager of LAG Terras Do Baixo Guadiana - Terras do Baixo Guadiana Association
3	PT_3	Beja	Technician of LAG Alentejo XXI – Association for the Integrated Development of the Rural Environment
4	PT_4	Castro Verde	Manager of LAG ESDIME - Agency for Local Development in Southwest Alentejo
5	PT_5	Serpa	Manager of LAG Rota do Guadiana – Integrated Development Association
6	PT_6	Alcáçovas	Manager of LAG Terras Dentro – Association for Integrated Development
7	PT_7	Evora	Member of Eugénio de Almeida Foundation
8	PT_8	Beja	Representative of Intermunicipal Community of Baixo Alentejo/ CIMBAL
9	PT_9	Beja	Member of Baixo Alentejo Social Innovation Incubator
10	PT_10	Evora	Representative of Alentejo Regional Coordination and Development Commission/ CCDR
11	PT_11	Beja	Head of Regional Development and Business Initiative department/ Business Association of Baixo Alentejo and Alentejo Litoral/ NERBE

12	PT_12	Evora	Member of Alentejo Regional Directorate of Agriculture and Fisheries
13	PT_13	Moura	Project manager of ADCMoura, Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura

Annex G. Questionnaire for the impact assessment of the SI impacts

Horizon 2020 research project RurAction - Impact of social innovation on regional development

This questionnaire is a part of the EU Horizon 2020 project that investigates social innovation and social entrepreneurship in rural regions. The project is coordinated by the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space (Leibniz-Institut für Raumbezogene Sozialforschung) and has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 721999.
In this research, we are interested in two principal issues. First, your opinion regarding the overall contribution of ADCMoura and its work. Second, your opinion on the impact of the work of ADCMoura has had on the overall development of the Baixo Alentejo region. The survey will take approximately 8 - 10 minutes to complete.
The project data protection agreement guarantees absolute anonymity of participants as well as of data obtained. Answers will be analysed anonymously and used exclusively for scientific purposes. If you have any questions regarding the project and the results of the study, as well as questions regarding data protection issues, please send your requests to Marina_Novikova@iscte-iul.pt.

Thank you for your willingness to collaborate!

Hosted at: ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa, Portugal
Scientific supervisors: Professor Maria de Fátima Ferreiro (ISCTE-IUL), Professor Cristina Sousa (ISCTE-IUL), Professor José Manuel Henriques (ISCTE-IUL), Professor Tadeusz Stryjakiewicz (AMU, Poland)
Early Stage Researcher: Marina Novikova

A. Basic Information on the Respondents

A. 1. Gender:
1. Male 2. Female 3. I prefer not to respond

A. 2. Highest degree or level of school you have completed:
1. No schooling completed
2. Lower than high school diploma
3. High school diploma
4. Bachelor's or higher university degree (PhD included)
5. Other
A.2.1. Please specify the Other: _____

A.3. Employment:
1. Employed for wages
2. Self-employed

3. Out of work
4. Homemaker
5. Student
6. Military
7. Retired
8. Unable to work

A.4. Age:
1. <20
2. 21-30
3. 31-40
4. 41-50
5. 51-60
6. 61-70
7. >70

A.5. Which describes best your relationship to ADCMoura? (Please chose)
1. ADCMoura's worker/ staff member (current)
2. ADCMoura's worker/ staff member (past)
3. Policy Maker
4. External Expert
5. Project Partner
6. Member of extended network
7. Other
A.7.1. Please specify the Other:_____

A.6. Please indicate the country if you are an international partner of ADCMoura:
_____

B. Innovative Character of ADCMoura's work

B.1. On a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent is ADCMoura innovative as an initiative?
1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

B.2. More specifically, which elements of ADCMoura's work might be considered innovative? (Please choose all that apply)
1. a new idea
2. a new network
3. a new governance arrangement
4. a new attitude
5. a new product
6. a new service
7. Other
7.1. Please specify the Other: _____

B.3. On a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent do you consider the work of ADCMoura to be innovative in the Baixo Alentejo region?
1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

B.4. What are the new products and/or services delivered by the ADCMoura? Please name up to three in each category.
Products
1._____
2._____
3._____
Services
1._____
2._____
3._____

B.5. What are the 3 main needs of the Baixo Alentejo territory (collective needs), which ADCMoura satisfied? (Please list a maximum of three examples)
Needs of the territory
1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B.6. On a scale from 1 to 10, to what extent has ADCMoura satisfied the needs of the Baixo Alentejo territory?
1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

D. The Effects and Impacts of Social Innovation

D.1. Has ADCMoura's work had any positive effects?
1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know

D.2. [If yes], On a scale from 1 to 10, in which domain do you think ADCMoura had positive impacts?

- Environmental (e.g. any change in the environment resulting from promoting sustainable agriculture practices, addressing climate change, preserving biodiversity, promoting environmental awareness)

1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Social (e.g. any social change related to the living conditions, health and overall well-being of communities)

1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Economic (e.g. any change in the economy resulting from promoting capacity building, promoting entrepreneurial activities within the communities, enhancing use of local resources)

1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Institutional (e.g. any change in the governance process, resulting from promoting cooperation between stakeholders across sectors and scales, improving decision-making processes, supporting bottom-up initiatives)

1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

D.3. Could you specify the time character of positive impacts achieved by ADCMoura?

	Short-term impacts (less than 2 years)	Mid-term impacts (2-5 years)	Long-term impacts (over 5 years)
Environmental domain			
Economic domain			
Social domain			
Institutional domain			

D.4. Has ADCMoura's work had any negative effects?

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't know

D.5. [If yes], On a scale from 1 to 10, in which domain do you think ADCMoura had negative impacts?

- Environmental (e.g. any change in the environment resulting from promoting sustainable agriculture practices, addressing climate change, preserving biodiversity, promoting environmental awareness)

1- Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Social (e.g. any social change related to the living conditions, health and overall well-being of communities)

1- Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Economic (e.g. any change in the economy resulting from promoting capacity building, promoting entrepreneurial activities within the communities, enhancing use of local resources)

1- Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

- Institutional (e.g. any change in the governance process, resulting from promoting cooperation between stakeholders across sectors and scales, improving decision-making processes, supporting bottom-up initiatives)

1- Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

D.6. Could you specify the time character of negative impacts achieved by ADCMoura?

	Short-term impacts (within the project timeframe; less than 2 years)	Mid-term impacts (beyond the project; 2-5 years)	Long-term impacts (over 5 years)	I don't know
Environmental domain				
Economic domain				
Social domain				
Institutional domain				

D.7. Could you list some examples of negative and positive effects in the four domains, if any?

	Positive effects	Negative effects
Environmental domain	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
Economic domain	1. 2. 3.	1. 2. 3.
Social domain	1.	1.

	2. _____ 3. _____	2. _____ 3. _____
Institutional domain	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

E. Social Innovation and Regional Development

E.1. In your opinion, what is the territory that ADCMoura's intervention is affecting the most? Please choose one option from the list.
1. International level
2. National level
3. Regional level / Alentejo
4. Sub- regional level /Baixo Alentejo
5. Local level / Municipality (Concelhos)
6. More local /Civil Parishes (Freguesias)
7. Other_____

E.2. On a scale of 1 to 5, could you relate the development of the region/territory with the effects of ADCMoura's work?

	1 - Strongly disagree	2 - More disagree than agree	3- I don't know	4- More agree than disagree	5- Strongly agree
International level					
National level					
Regional level / Alentejo					

Sub- regional level /Baixo Alentejo					
Local level / Municipality (Concelhos)					
More local /Civil Parishes (Freguesias)					

E.3. On a scale from 1 to 10, would you relate the development of Baixo Alentejo region/territory to the effects of ADCMoura's work?
1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

E.4. On a scale from 1 to 10, do you think that the changes that happened in the Baixo Alentejo region/ territory would have happened without ADCMoura's activities?
1 - Not at all/ 10 - To a great extent

E.5. To what extent would the positive effects created in the territory through ADCMoura's work have been obtained without its intervention?
1. No, only ADCMoura could satisfy the specific needs of the territory
2. Yes, but it would have taken more time
3. Yes, but other similar initiatives only partially satisfied the needs of the territory
4. I don't know

E.6. Please, leave any comment you might have:
_____

According to the new data protection guidelines in the European Union, your approval is needed to allow us to use the data of your questionnaire. Data will be used for scientific use only. Do you agree to allow us, ISCTE-IUL, to use your statements for scientific use? Please note, if you select "no", your answers cannot be used and will be deleted immediately.

Thank you!