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Social agriculture as an example of social innovation emerging in rural areas and the role of public policy

Abstract: *Rural areas are faced with the rising demographic, economic and social challenges such as aging society, migration due to the attraction of cities, centralization of services or loss of jobs, in part triggered by the increasing mobility. It is argued that social innovation can support rural development and, therefore, it has become a very popular concept. Yet, its definition and understanding remain a highly debated issue. The paper presents the concept of social innovation as a vital element for supporting rural areas in facing their developmental challenges. The example of social agriculture shows how social innovation works and how it can contribute to both meeting social needs and efficient use of local resources. The methodology applied in the study consisted of both literature review and a case study. The literature review deals with the concept of social innovations, social agriculture as well as the importance of social innovations in rural development and the role of public policy in supporting social innovations in rural areas. The case study is part of a local project done in 2016/17 in the province of Bolzano, whereby the potential of social agricultural practices was analysed through a comparison between already existing social agricultural practices in Europe and interviews conducted with local farmers in the province of Bolzano. The paper argues that social innovations can support rural development and rural development policy has an important role to play in catalysing social innovations by creating empowering settings for rural communities.*

Keywords: social innovation, social agriculture, rural areas

Introduction

In recent decades, social innovation (SI) has become a very popular concept. Yet, its definition and understanding remain a highly debated issue. Due to the lack of clarity of its definition, a large number of different kinds of activities are named social innovations. They range from strictly technological innovations to new processes and institutions created to cover social needs observed in different communities.

Numerous parts of the EU rural areas have been struggling with phenomena such as depopulation, aging and weak economic performance. Given these developmental challenges faced by rural areas there is a need for new solutions and approaches to boost the speed of the cohesion processes and supporting inclusive growth.

The aim of the paper is to present social agriculture also defined as social farming (SF) as an example of social innovation in rural areas that can support local communities in making full use of their social, economic and environmental endowments to boost their development. The paper is divided into three main parts. The first part is devoted to the concept of social innovations and their necessity for supporting rural development. The second part presents the concept of social agriculture, concentrating on Italy and the province of South Tyrol. The third part analyses the role for public policy in supporting creation and implementation of social innovations in rural areas.

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Social innovations in rural areas

a) Definitions and development of the concept

Social innovations (SIs) are currently a very popular concept. A simple explanation for it, is the fact that it encompasses one of the key recipes for growth of both regions and individual companies – innovations and the concept of the importance of social issues for the economic development. Yet, the concept of social innovations is not new. It can be traced back to the 1920s when it was used in various contexts of academic discourse relating to social change. The idea of SI became more widespread in the decade between 1965 and 1975 when it was part of an academic debate on social changes related to

environmental challenges and the survival of humankind (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace, 2017). In the 21st century the concept not only increased in popularity, but it also included a wider range of issues, both the earlier mentioned ones as well as the products, processes and services that are created with the use of modern IT solutions relating to social issues. This popularity of SI is accompanied by a diversity of academic disciplines that have taken interest in this concept. They include not only numerous fields of social sciences, but also, among others, environmental studies, agriculture and information sciences (Segarra-Oña et al., 2017).

Due to this plethora of meanings[1], the concept of SI lacks a unifying paradigm in social sciences. It is even argued that it is better to talk about "literatures" on social innovations (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012). Therefore, it is often contested and considered a quasi-concept. It seems that the high number of interpretations can result in the impossibility to generalise the phenomenon of SI. Yet, the effort to distinguish some general types and categories can help to fully present the complex nature of SI. The most general way of dividing the SIs is to categorise them into three groups based on their nature (Bock, 2012):
• Mechanisms – development, diffusion and use of innovations occur within a social context. In this approach innovations are a social phenomenon (Adams and Hess, 2010; Bonifacio, 2014).
• Objectives – taking into account innovation process, social preferences and values.
• Scope – social change.

As social innovations are defined in different ways and used in various contexts, for the purpose of this paper a social innovation is an innovation that results in a new form of functioning of social relations such as communication and coordination processes (Neumeier, 2017). It involves social change that translates into alteration of social practices, including both institutions and informal interactions. Social innovations can include products, services, markets, platforms, processes or business models (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012). Yet, only these changes can be considered as social innovations that are purposeful and orientated at a desired goal (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). According to Neumeier (2012) there are three stages of a social innovation, including:
• Problematisation – identification of a need.
• Expression of interest – expansion of the group interested in implementing the innovation.
• Delineation and co-ordination – specification of the details of an innovation.

Based on the distinction of these stages three groups of factors influencing the social innovation process can be named. They include:
• Factors influencing the participation in the innovation process, such as social capital, existence of key actors/group leaders.

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[1] Edwards-Schachter and Wallace (2017) identified 252 definitions of SI.

- Factors influencing the success of the social innovation, including consistence with existing solutions, foreseeability of result.
- Factors influencing the room to manoeuvre for the social innovation actor network that are external factors not under control of the innovation proponents.

The study shows that the concept of social innovations is still in a developmental phase, despite decades of intensive research. The theoretical background is generally based on the institutional and structuration theory (Cajaiba-Santana, 2014). Social innovations are characterised by their novelty and meeting a social need, efficiency and enhancement of society's capacity to act (Caulier-Grice et al., 2012).

Social innovations are undoubtedly a subcategory of the category innovations (Fig. 1). It seems that they also have some common elements with ICT innovations. Yet, the lack of a clarity concerning the concept makes it impossible to state exactly to what extent social innovations are part of ICT innovations.
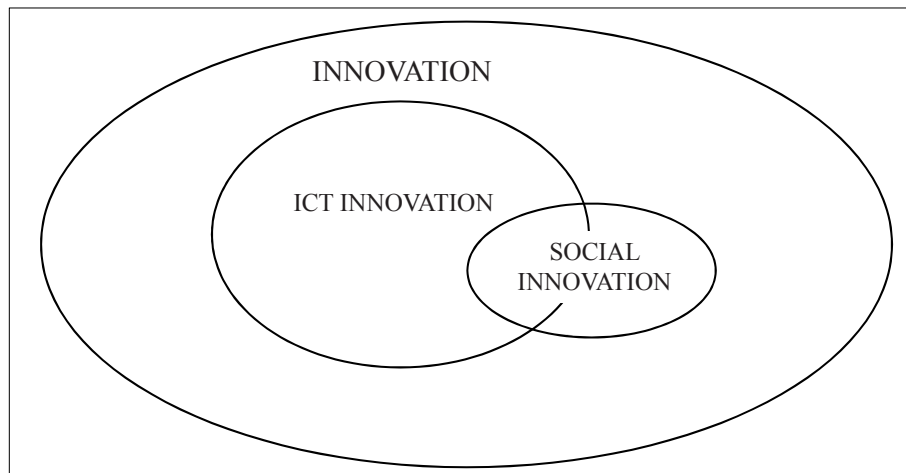

Figure 1. SI vs innovation

Source: Zambrano (2017).

Pisano, Lange and Berger (2015) proposed five core elements that should be presented to define a social innovation. They include:

1) Novelty,
2) Practical application that is financially sustainable in the mid- to long-term,
3) Meeting a social need,
4) Effectiveness,
5) Enhancing society's capacity to act.

These elements should be present in social innovations irrespective of their nature. Yet, as with other types of innovations, the fulfilment of some of these elements in a given case can be debatable.

The wide range of social innovations can be divided using a typology analogical to Schumpeterian innovations. We can distinguish between product, process, market, inputs and organizational innovations (Table 1).

Table 1. Schumpeterian approach to social innovation

Schumpeterian innovation	Social innovation
Product	New outcomes: new businesses, organisations, services or products
Process/methods of production	New approaches to value creation and policy/service delivery
Exploitation of new markets	Serving the breadth of society; responding to social needs (local demand)
Inputs	Maximising the use of local resources, including human and social capital
Organizational innovations	Network approaches and innovative partnerships

Source: Bosworth et al. (2016).

b) Role of social innovations in rural development

The need for innovations in the whole economy as well as in agriculture and rural areas is emphasized in numerous publications and policy statements (e.g. Ireland and Webb, 2007; European Commission, 2010 and 2013; Dudek, 2017). In the case of the agricultural sector, still an important part of rural economy, it is also seen as necessity for sustaining agricultural production in climate change reality (Rosenberg, 1992). Moreover, it is supposed to make the sector more sustainable in all aspects of sustainable growth (Pretty, 1995).

As numerous rural communities face different kinds of structural problems, such as demographic changes, below-average economic productivity, insufficient supply of technical and social infrastructures, and suffer from chronic austerity of state systems hampering developing approaches for such communities to be resilient (Manthorpe and Livsey, 2009), there is a need for new approaches and innovative solutions.

Within the neo-endogenous paradigm these are the inner forces that can lead to the development of a given territory. This means that the existing endowment has to be used more efficiently, which requires new ways of using the available resources. These new ways can only result from innovations. They can be both copied from other regions or created within the region. When it comes to social aspects of rural development the social needs can be specific as a result of local culture, traditions and institutions. Therefore, a direct, one-

to-one application of solutions created in other regions can be problematic, if not impossible. This is a way there is need for social innovations in rural areas (Neumaier, 2012).

As stated by Dax and Fischer (2018) social innovations together with local participation, and establishing trust are vital to effectively impact well-being dimensions of rural development as it is an important part of dealing with the challenges faced by rural communities. These researchers state that a comprehensive social transition process which would foster an altered narrative for these rural regions compared to the current and predominant focus on compensation and growth policies.

The so-called community-led local development (CLLD) initiatives have already entered rural policy in Europe. This approach can be a catalyst for social innovations in rural areas (Bosworth et al., 2016) as it shows the importance of social aspects in all of the projects implemented (Bosworth et al., 2015).

Social agriculture an emerging initiative

a) Background and development of social agriculture

Rural areas are faced with the rising demographic, economic and social challenges such as aging society, migration due to the attraction of cities, centralization of services in the centres, loss of jobs, in part triggered by the increasing mobility. These social transformation processes have a particular impact on the social system and the development of rural areas. These rural areas, which are the place of origin for food, culture, tradition and values, nowadays suffer from a lack of appreciation of their value and depopulation. Values and traditions, which were passed on at the time, today are threatened by the mobility, materialism and comfort of today's society. As a practical response to these pressing societal requirements, social agriculture or social farming (SF) has been introduced for some time in Europe.

Today an increasing number of farms, especially in the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and Italy, offer disadvantaged groups of people by means of the use of agricultural resources, animals and plants alike (Di Iacovo & O'Connor, 2009), new complementary social or care service to improve their health, personal quality of life as well as intellectual, educational and physical well-being. Thus, agricultural resources are used for developing new business fields for farms, social cooperatives or associations that aim at increasing benefit in rural areas by combining economic, environmental and social services. Practically, SF offers farmers the possibility to diversify and generate additional income through on-farm social and care activities in order to help supplement their low agricultural income. Contemporarily social agriculture responds to social needs in rural areas.

The emerging social farming initiatives have been driven by different factors:

- The farm as a traditional place where social activities have been provided due to the generational tradition of taking care of old people or people with special needs such to say the ethical and social responsibility of the providers of social farming service;
- Women farmers, who have attained a social education in the field of care, education or social assistance and want to offer their service on the farm combining their education and agriculture;
- The entrepreneurial spirit or interest of farms, mostly also small scale farms to expand their income and diversify their agricultural activity;
- Social responsibility or willingness to respond to the pressing social challenges such as depopulation and assistance for disadvantaged vulnerable groups.

These factors are not necessarily to be seen individually, but rather overlapping each other as one does not exclude the other. Besides the grass-root initiatives in the single countries, social farming initiatives have been driven by the EU projects as well as political initiatives. The most important EU projects promoting social agriculture were:

- 2006: The SoFar project, which analysed social agriculture in Italy, France, Germany, Ireland, Slovenia, the Netherlands and Belgium.
- 2009: A follow-up project was the Cost Action 866 on green care in agriculture, which scientifically analysed the health effects, economic efficiency and political framework of social agriculture.
- 2011-13: The DIANA (Disability in Sustainable Agriculture und MAIE (Multifunctional Agriculture in Europe)) project focused on the education and further qualification in social agriculture.
- 2013-15: In the INCLUFAR (Inclusive Farming) project the main topic was the quality assurance, whereby qualification in the field of social agriculture plays a major role.
- 2012-14: Study Wiesinger, Situation and Potential of Social Agriculture in Austria, South Tyrol and Trentino (Wiesinger et al., 2013).
- 2016-17: Regional South Tyrolean Study on Social Farming Potentials and Perspectives (Südtiroler Bäuerinnenorganisation, 2017).

At the European level, however, a clear definition, a framework and a common platform for social agriculture is missing. Nevertheless, there have been a few political initiatives, which at the EU level have contributed to raise awareness on the topic. Therefore, in 2007 as part of the SoFar project 7 countries drafted the Witzenhäuser position paper through a participatory approach (Van Elsen and Kalish, 2008). This position paper explains opportunities and challenges of social agriculture in Germany. Based on the "Witzenhäuser Position Paper on the Added Value of Social Agriculture" from Germany and the "Green Care Strategy in Agriculture and Forestry" from Austria, the "European Manifesto on the Added Value of Social Agriculture" was prepared and discussed in 2009. Three years later the European Economic and Social Committee on So-

cial Agriculture submitted an initiative opinion on "Social Agriculture: Green Care and Social and Health Policy" recognizing, inter alia, social agriculture as a social innovation (multi-functionality of agriculture and social services).

b) The main characteristics of social agriculture

All social farming initiatives differ according to client group, objective and length of the stay, the offer on the farm, clients, financial aspects, qualification of the service provider, certification, institutional support, cooperation, etc. However, all SF activities include material and immaterial resources of agriculture to promote or combine with therapeutic actions, rehabilitation, and social and working involvement of disadvantaged or marginalized people. There are four categories of social farming that often are interwoven and include various target groups ranging from children and young people, elderly, people with disabilities and disadvantaged individuals, or people with psychological distress such as ex-prisoners, drug addicts even immigrants to meet the special needs of these people (Gallis, 2013).

These SF practices are a complementary offer of social and care services besides the existing institutionalised ones that stimulate a positive, integrative development of the clients. SF simulates the people's autonomy, social and working skills. Activities can be part of the whole production process starting from the preparation of the land, sawing seeds, cultivating and caring for the plants, harvesting and even selling them on the farm shop or the farmers' market. Furthermore, all human senses are addressed as clients see, touch and eat the products they plant and care for, or the animals they work with, which corresponds to an integrative learning, experiencing and working process. Thus, these practices can be understood as innovative practice for delivering social services in remote areas, where public care services are often only supplied marginally or inadequately (Lanfranchi et al., 2015).

c) Social farming in Italy

In Italy social cooperatives emerged in the 1980s after many psychiatric institutes closed down (Hassink, 2013). Many of these cooperatives include agricultural activities. It is only possible to give an estimate number of social farms, as there are different regional networks and no common survey, in Italy it is estimated that there are over 2000 of which the majority practice organic farming (Südtiroler Bäuerinnenorganisation, 2017). Most initiatives are concentrated in the North and South of Italy and are mainly offered by social cooperatives, which mostly provide labour and social integration activities for socially excluded persons such as long-time unemployed, former drug addicts or dropout youth, so that they find employment and are able to re-integrate into the society (Giarè et al. 2014). Since 2015 Italy is the first country with a national law on social agriculture.

d) The legal framework of social agriculture in Italy

The rapid spread of social farming practices throughout Italy determined the need for a legislative regulation of this sector. Thus, the National Network of Social Farms (Rete delle fattorie sociali) and the National Forum of Social Agriculture (Forum nazionale agricoltura sociale) were responsible for the introduction of the national law (Zampetti, 2017). The new law promotes the diversification potential of farms and their multi-functionality by promoting offers for complementary social, socio-asylum, pedagogical and rehabilitation services. It specifies the minimum requirements for operators, the permitted activities and infrastructure requirements as well as cooperation with private and public bodies, funding possibilities and the establishment of a monitoring centre for social agriculture. It, therefore, provides a framework for the activities of social agriculture and must be implemented by the individual regions and provinces. Thus, a close cooperation between the responsible departments, especially agriculture and social affairs, but also the other institutions and stakeholders, is essential. This is certainly the greatest challenge in the implementation. Several regions have already passed a regional law with provisions on social agriculture or multi-functionality, or the law on agri-tourism has been supplemented: Lombardy, Tuscany, Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Emilia Romagna, Marche, Molise, Lazio, Abruzzo, Campania, Calabria as well as the province of Trento. Some (Campania, Veneto, Umbria) have already defined what social agriculture is and which target groups should be considered before the national law was adopted (Giarè, 2014).

In accordance with this, the Autonomous Province of Bolzano-Alto Adige is currently working on a draft law for social agriculture and a corresponding implementing regulation. In addition to the already regulated activities such as day-care and educational farms, further activities should be regulated with this law.

e) The case of social farming in South Tyrol

The case of social farming in South Tyrol is relatively young and the initiatives are the result of the social cooperative "learning – growing and living" with women farmers (*Mit Bäuerinnen lernen-wachsen-leben*), which was founded in 2006 after some women farmers had started day care for children aged 0-4 informally and needed some regulation. Consequently, in 2007 the service of day-care mothers was officially promoted and regulated by the social cooperative. The childcare service includes individually adapted care accommodating up to six children, with an annual average of 420 children[2], flexible care hours (a total of 248.000 care hours in 2016)[3], integration into the family structure, the passing on of traditional values, and the provision of environmental education. Currently, there are 106 qualified day-care mothers, who are active in the social cooperative. This service is highly responsive to lo-

[2] SBO Jahresbericht (2016).

[3] SBO Jahresbericht (2016).

cal demands, which is particularly important in peripheral areas. Meanwhile, the cooperative has expanded its services. Since 2008, it promotes educational farm activities on its website. Schoolchildren age 6 and older can spend 3-4 hours on the farm and learn how to bake bread, work with the animals, etc. Providing new forms of environmental education, by allowing children to participate in farm-related activities, has stimulated children's awareness for the sustainable use of agricultural resources – animals and plants alike. The number of schoolchildren participating in this practically orientated programme has increased from 5.700 in 2012 to 10.000 in 2016.[4]

In 2014, the cooperative initiated the pilot project of elderly care on farms as a reaction to the growing number of elderly people in South Tyrol from 43.500 in 1975 to 100.000 in 2015. This temporary, family orientated care service, actively integrates elderly people on farm life. At present, there are 33 women farmers offering elderly care services on request. Due to the valuable contribution the social cooperative offers society, it is planning to expand its current services to the entire South Tyrol area, and to develop new potential services such as rehabilitation for people with disabilities and special needs, horticulture and animal-assisted therapy for people or even labour inclusion of migrants.
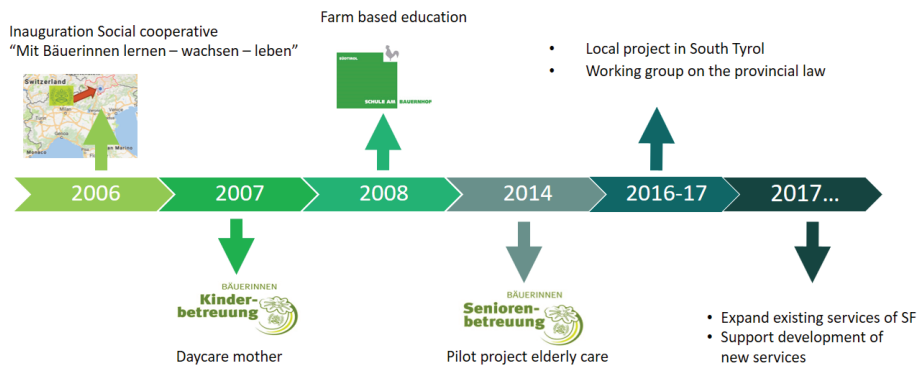

Figure 2. Social cooperative "Mit Bäuerinnen lernen-wachsen-leben"
Source: data of Bäuerinnengenossenschaft "lernen-wachsen-leben" (2016).

Moreover, based on the implemented national framework law No. 141/2015 on social agriculture, a working group of regional stakeholders (representatives of the farmer and women farmer association, the provincial department of agriculture and social department, the social cooperative, University of Bolzano including Eurac researchers), drafted a regional law for the province of Bolzano. It is evident, that the working group had to deal with many challenges in the elaboration of the regional law including the following questions: Which new services should be included and regulated? What are the

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[4] SBO Jahresbericht (2012, 2016).

necessary requirements – e.g. training, qualification, infrastructure, number of people that can be cared for, level of the needs of candidates? How the financial aspect should be regulated between the agricultural and social sector?

Reflection on social farming initiatives has shown that these practices meet the objectives set forth in point 1 "Promoting Rural Prosperity" and point 3 "Investing in Rural Viability and Vitality" of the Cork Declaration 2.0 of 2016 (European Union, 2016). Whereby point 1 stresses that innovative, inclusive and sustainable solutions for social inclusion should be recognised and diversification and entrepreneurship fostered.

Point 3 stipulates that society should benefit from the investment in private services, self-sustaining initiatives and the promotion of competitiveness in agriculture (European Union, 2016). In fact, social farming has a twofold benefit. On the one hand, it responds to the needs of society, and stimulates the personal development and independence of vulnerable people through individual, client-orientated services. It also promotes modern, family-orientated and innovative social services, empowering women farmers and creating horizontal and vertical collaboration, in both the private and public sector. On the other hand, it provides an extra income for women farmers in peripheral rural areas, whereby economic, sustainable development is fostered and services are provided for people in these areas.

Normally, agricultural or rural development are primarily linked to business innovations, e.g. products, processes. According to Pol and Ville (2009), innovation in an economic way of thinking stimulates the ability to increase profit and economic development also in rural areas. One of the reasons for initiating social farming, was definitely also to increase farm income. This corresponds with the objectives set forth in point 1 "Promoting Rural Prosperity" as care services are offered decentralised and are a response to the changing circumstances of society and the growing concern about the availability and efficiency of these services. A further economic aspect is that social farming contributes to reducing public health expenditure by new models of cooperation between the different sectors (agriculture, social, health and education).

Moreover, referring to point 3 "Investing in Rural Viability and Vitality" of the Cork Declaration 2.0 of 2016, which stresses fostering diversification and entrepreneurship. Social farming is an opportunity for farmers, especially women farmers in marginalized peripheral areas, to increase their personal income through new employment possibilities. Consequently, this also stimulates the rural development and viability of these areas as new private services are offered which benefit social inclusion of vulnerable people groups.

Besides the economic aspect of social farming, there is also the socially responsible innovation that responds to important social problems. As Phills, Deilmeier and Miller (2008) state: "Social responsible innovations call upon

businesses to invest in society and to come up with socially relevant innovations, as part of their corporate responsibility for "people and planet" and not only profit. According to this the case of social farming, that provides alternative or better complementary initiatives for vulnerable groups of people (people with disabilities, migrants, ex-drug addicts, children with special needs, etc.) can be defined as a socially responsible innovation.

Social innovation is characterized by co-design, co-construction and collaboration and the involvement of multiple innovation actors, such as in social farming where the farmer meets the pedagogics, or doctor or social assistant to develop innovative assistance, therapy or activities for creative and social learning processes to stimulate and promote personal autonomy. Thus, there is a mix of different people that combine their knowledge and create something new, these can be practices, skills or products and they create new social relations (Oreszczyn et al., 2010; Fløysand and Jacobsen, 2011).

The role of public policy in social innovation processes on rural areas

Rural development policy is constantly looking for new policy instruments more effectively and efficiently targeting developmental needs of rural areas and their inhabitants. Innovations are currently seen as means dealing with challenges, which arise in the economic development. Innovations are generally associated with new technological solutions. Yet, the innovations can also relate to non-technical aspects of functioning of the economy. Therefore, also in the social reality we can implement innovations. The concept of social innovations has been researched in different fields relating to, for instance, management and entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the idea of social innovations as a way of achieving socio-economic development has been gaining in popularity in recent years and in the agricultural and rural contexts, it is seen as an essential part of innovations (Bock, 2012).

Based on the literature review, it can be concluded, that the role of a rural development policy should create an optimal environment for agents to develop and implement new ideas, so as to foster social innovation. Creating this specific environment, the policy designers have to bear in mind different initial conditions, especially differences in social capital, as well as variety of social innovations that require different environment settings. Moreover, policy should be opened to support prototyping that is putting ideas into practise in a form of pilot projects.

Naturally, the major role for policy is in the field of innovations' scaling and diffusion. This is the next step after pilot projects. Moreover, the knowledge gained by supporting prototypes and pioneering projects must be popularised to ensure an efficient use of public funds. This is also the cheapest way to ensure implementation of social innovations at a large scale.

Moreover, policy should support systemic change, i.e. create regulatory solutions that enable sustaining the innovations implemented, but at the same time, it must give room for further innovations. This means that the monitoring of the impact of regulations in force should be a permanent part of the policy.

There is still much need for further research on how to design an effective policy supporting social innovations. This is clearly shown by the experiences with the EU bottom-up approach for the development of rural areas. The LEADER approach is considered to be a right solution for supporting social innovations and increasing local communities' empowerment that plays a key role in catalysing social innovations. The experiences with the LEADER approach show that the key factor for the type and extend of results of using the bottom-up approach depend not only on the social capital already present in the targeted areas, but also on the exact procedures and extent of support offered. The EU LEADER approach is a right step into facilitation of social innovations. Yet, there is a threat that the mainstreaming of bottom-up approach is losing the power of this instrument (Dax and Oedl-Wieser, 2016) due to increasing administrative burden and growing intent of the European Union to concentrate in quantitative indicators in evaluating the results of the LEADER approach.

To sum up, it can be stated that social innovations are as important as other types of innovations to the development of rural areas. With the increasing number of challenges facing the socio-economic development of rural areas, it is necessary to take into account the issue of social innovations within the rural development policy and introduce effective and efficient measures to support such innovations.

Conclusions

Rural areas are faced with the rising demographic, economic and social challenges such as aging society, migration due to the attraction of cities, centralization of services in the centres and loss of jobs, in part triggered by the increasing mobility. The growing challenges facing EU rural areas require new approaches for rural development to address them. In recent decades the interests of both researches and policy makers have been shifting towards participation of local communities. One of the concepts gaining popularity is social innovation. Yet, this concept still lacks a clear definition, which results in vagueness, but at the same time in variety of initiatives named social innovations. A key feature that all the examples of social innovations have in common is the fact that they are a new, innovative way to address social needs.

One of the examples of social innovations, which is being popularized in the whole EU, is social agriculture also referred to as social farming. Social farming includes a wide range of different projects. All social farming initiatives differ according to client group, objective and length of the stay, the offer on

the farm, clients, financial aspects, qualification of the service provider, certi-fication, institutional support or cooperation. Social agriculture practices are a complementary offer of social and care services besides the existing institu-tionalised ones that stimulate a positive, integrative development of the clients. Social farming stimulates the people's autonomy, social and working skills.

Social agriculture is an example of social innovation as a way of employing available resources in a new way to tackle an observed social need. It also uses the local resources and is a conduit for networking and cooperation. Moreover, as the examples presented in the paper show, social agriculture is an innova-tion that can be implemented in different rural settings, that it can be copied in other places as it tackles the needs that are common to all EU Member States and it requires resources that can also be found in many rural communities.

The research discussed in the paper also indicates that public policy has an im-portant role to play at all the stages of social innovation process. This role fo-cusses on empowering local communities and creating conditions for making use of the potential of local endowment. At the level of the EU rural policy, an important task for the policy is to support dissemination of good practices, that is of social innovations that have already been implemented in some of the EU rural communities.

The element of policy supporting social innovations in the EU rural areas are already in place. The LEADER approach is considered to be a catalyst for social innovations. The currently implemented community-led local devel-opment is also an approach that can support the social innovation process in rural settings. It seems that the EU rural policy will continue to encompass the bottom-up approach as the European Commission plans to centre its ru-ral development policy around the emerging concept of "smart village" and reinforce support for capacity building in rural areas, which should help the process of social innovation (European Commission, 2017).

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