PRACTICE ABSTRACT

The role of Social Innovation and Social Economy initiatives for inclusion of vulnerable groups

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Challenge

People living in rural areas face a series of unique challenges due to social, economic, environmental, technological and territorial asymmetries and injustices.

To alleviate rural vulnerabilities, **Social Innovation (SI)** and **Social Economy (SE)** have recently gained a lot of attention from European policy actors. Both concepts emerge under the paradigms of new models of development and alternatives to globalizations, which aim to prioritize community well-being over economic expansion.

SERIGO aims to develop evidence-based theoretical and practical knowledge that can inform debates, recommendations, and policy advice on building inclusive, just, and resilient rural communities. SERIGO has developed an inventory of existing SI and SSE initiatives that claim to engage with different kinds of rural vulnerabilities.

Methodology

To understand the role of SE and SI in addressing rural vulnerabilities, SERIGO conducted a mapping and evaluation exercise based on the data collected from three sources – 1) EU level policy, best practices and organization networks databases (example RIPESS Europe, OECD, Interreg) and European research project databases (Example: SIMRA, GrassCeling, Rustic etc.).

2)Systematic web search to identify stand-alone European, national, and regional initiatives webpages, and 3) inputs from SERIGO project partners based on ground research (through a structured questionnaire).

The criteria for data collection involved 1) capturing the diversity (not number) of SE/SI initiatives focussed on rural vulnerabilities in Europe. Thus, we tried to avoid repetition of initiatives in terms of solutions offered, 2) selecting a minimum of 2-3 case per country in EU. As a result, we built a selective (rather than exhaustive) inventory.

The inventory captured information on different aspects of rural vulnerabilities and SE/SI solutions including name of the initiative, rural vulnerabilities identified, kind of SI interventions (educational, alternative economic arrangement, job creation etc.), funding, organizational affiliation, scale (national, regional, municipal) and timeline of operation (ongoing/finished), type of collaborations (public/public-private) etc. We adopted a grounded theory approach to analyse the data. This means that the primary focus of the data collection and analysis is to understand how SE initiatives themselves understood rural vulnerabilities and their role in addressing them.

Conclusions

In this study a total of **180 SE/SI initiatives** were collected and analysed. The number of initiatives per country varied based on the diversity of SI/SE solutions available in each country. The SE initiatives under study identified **26 different kinds of rural challenges** ranging from lack of opportunities and infrastructure to loss of social cohesion in rural areas.

Thus, rural vulnerabilities, as per the SE initiatives, are a result of three interconnected practices that operate in a vicious cycle. These are 1) neglect, exploitation and destruction of rural resources, livelihoods, and ways of living, 2) loss of respect and dignity in rural life and livelihoods, and 3) migration, abandonment, and lack of opportunities and services in rural areas.

We identified 20 different types of SI/SE initiatives ranging from enabling access to training/education to building digital infrastructures to restoring cultural heritage and communal care. Broadly understood, SI/SE solutions aimed for rural revitalization by 1) agro-ecology and revalorization of rural livelihoods, 2) building inclusive infrastructures and social justice led alternative economic opportunities, and 3) empowerment of vulnerable groups.

The analysis of data suggested that a majority of SI/SE initiatives continue to focus on agri-food systems and allied livelihoods (handicrafts, rural agricultural tourism) that still form the mainstay of rural ways of living.

Read here the full report.

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Enhancing Resilience, Social Inclusion, and Well-being in rural areas through Social Innovation

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