



Mapping European and forest related policies supporting social innovation for rural settings



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ABSTRACT

The term “social innovation” (SI) is currently applied to denote a broad range of activities connected to explicit goals and supposedly designed to address inherent societal problems. These problems are rooted in current economic and ecological crises, such as poverty, unemployment, forced migration, brain drain, social inequality or environmental destruction. This article focuses on the EU and national policies that have the potential to support Social Innovation in rural areas and maps possible future policy efforts in this regard. However, many of the policies that we find to have potential for possible effective social innovation support do not have much in common concerning their targets. In consequence, the article outlines a threefold typology for categorizing the different policy targets that have impacts on social innovation in rural areas: (i) policies targeting vulnerable social groups, (ii) policies targeting societal challenges at large and (iii) policies targeting the participatory inclusion of civil society. In addition we outline enabling and hindering policy factors for social innovation and we apply the threefold typology to the example of forest policy. The conceptual framework in combination with the forest policy objectives we identify provides a useful basis for further research in this area.

1. Introduction

In 2009, former US president Barack Obama established two new agencies for social innovation (SI)¹ and the concept has become increasingly popular among political leaders and policy administration. In a speech in March 2011, Manuel Barroso, President of the European Commission at that time, introduced the new “Social Innovation Initiative”. Since then, SI as a promoter of social welfare has been presented as a solution to many kinds of old and new social risks at a time of growing uncertainty and economic pressure on public administration (OECD, 2011; Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014). Scholarly literature has also engaged in the issue of SI in policies, identifying it as “common parlance” but presenting an opportunity for government to support social wellbeing (Pol and Ville, 2009), by regarding it as a general means to tackle marginalisation (Jacobi et al., 2017) and emphasising its transformative potential for research and collective action (Moulaert et al., 2017). Many authors have tried to define the concept (see examples in (Bock, 2012; Cajasanta-Santana, 2014; European Union, 2014;

Hämäläinen and Heiskala, 2007; Howaldt and Knopp, 2012; Phills et al., 2008; Pol and Ville, 2009; Sinclair and Baglioni, 2014)). Meanwhile, others concluded explicitly that its meaning continues to be “ambiguous and vague” (Grimm et al., 2013). The authors of this paper are part of the SIMRA project² that has developed its own working definition: “SI is 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). Overall, the definitions seem idealistic and normative and place a big burden on SI: it is expected not only to embrace a range of new institutional environments and arrangements, new decision making processes (Nijnik et al., 2018), new fields of activity, new actors relationships and interactions and so on. It is also expected to have an output: A social innovation has to meet social needs (Mulgan, 2007; Murray et al., 2010), has to solve a social problem (Phills et al., 2008) or has to enhance societal well-being (Polman et al., 2017).

For us, the high political and societal aspirations for SI call for an examination of the relationship between state policies and SI processes

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² Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas (<http://www.simra-h2020.eu/>).

in the forest sector. The concept of SI includes a claim to be able to substitute or complement functions that have usually been considered as responsibilities of the state. It has even been argued that, as neo-liberal policies of today cannot fulfil various social needs, SI functions as a mechanism for civil society actors to find new ways to meet the social needs, and to fill gaps that cannot be fulfilled by state or markets (Murray et al., 2010). Thus, social innovation is sometimes seen as an alternative to policies and as a more bottom-up and flexible way to meet existing social needs. We understand that in times of economic crisis and crisis of public social support systems, concepts like SI are becoming increasingly attractive in light of drastic cuts to public spending, also for the forest sector. However, SI as a part of grassroots and bottom-up constellations in rural areas has neither the functions nor the resources to replace regular social services or rural development policies. We rather see a need for policies to support the emergence of SI processes in rural areas and in forestry.

This article therefore focuses on the policies that have potential to support SI in rural areas and maps the actual and potential policy efforts in this regard. We identify challenges that the policy landscape has in promoting SIs in practice: how do the policies support and hinder SIs? We analyse the challenge of providing concrete benefits to forest-dependent communities. Our findings are based on the qualitative analysis of a combination of existing policy documents and qualitative interviews carried out with key experts in the field. In the following sections, we will first outline the links between policies, SI and forestry in rural areas (2) as well as the methods applied for this research (3). Our subsequent results section introduces a mapping of the European policy landscape on SI, with a focus on rural issues and policy objectives for the forestry sector. It draws a distinction between policy targets according to three key policy dimensions (4). In the discussion section, we deal with the role of the state and public policies in regard to SI and we apply the three policy dimensions to objectives in forest policy (5). First, we show that specific parts of the inherent logic of public policies are not fostering SI (5.1). Second, disregarding such obstacles, we identify examples of forest policy and forest policy objectives along the lines of our threefold typology (5.2). Our conclusion then summarises the findings and suggests that it is important to clearly distinguish between various policy targets when dealing with SI, both in research and in political practice (6).

2. Social innovation in rural areas and forestry

SI in rural areas seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being through the provision of societal benefits and services. Thus, its advantage has to be seen in light of creating social value as the outcome as well as throughout the stages of the innovation process. In all stages it includes societal inputs and engagement as well as communication between innovators and other actors. Likewise, SI in forestry seeks to enhance the social, cultural and ecological values of forests, via community projects, social forestry or communication and trust building activities across forestry actors' networks. A forest policy example for such communication policies at a higher decision-making level are official forest dialogue activities such as the "United Nation Forums on Forests" or the German and Austrian "Forest Dialogues" (*Walddialoge*), organized by the respective national ministries in order to promote open discussion, inclusion and conflict resolution across different forest stakeholder groups. A number of authors in the forestry literature are discussing the socio-economic benefits generated by forestry and its importance for regional economic development that goes beyond a production perspective towards also consumer perspectives (Seeland et al., 2011; Slee, 2006). The regional context in combination with socio-economic impacts of forestry is important when it comes to the effects of SI for regional and local development (Blanco et al., 2017). However, many forms of collaboration and partnerships could spin off new arrangements among state and civil actors related to forestry, thus transforming parts of the rather hierarchically organized forest sector

by shifting the traditional understanding of forestry as primary production branch of economy towards the broader benefits of forestry for society (Brukas, 2015; Buttoud et al., 2011; Liubachyna et al., 2017; Rogelja and Shannon, 2017; Secco et al., 2017).

In view of the literature on SI, very little is known about the broader effects of SI and how these *interrelate* to established policy programmes, such as regular social policy support systems. In other words: given the present state of research, we hypothesise that SI can complement present welfare state arrangements and achievements of social equality in rural areas. However, SI also goes far beyond such "social policy" realms, namely when it is dealing with the reconfiguration of social practices and the emergence of new constellations of actors in combination with the engagement of civil society. As a broad term and a new concept, the notion of SI is not immediately or explicitly visible in most of the policy documents. Thus, we were searching not only for documents that directly address the term but also for those that indirectly address issues relevant to enabling social innovation.

Recent research reveals that even technical and R&D-led innovation needs state intervention and subsidies (Mazzucato, 2015). This highlights the importance of identifying key interventions and policies that are relevant for social innovation. The rural settings in question have special social and economic needs determined by problems such as rural emigration, brain drain, youth emigration, lack of employment opportunities, population aging, shortage of health care provision, poor infrastructure and limited education services. In this light, SI can be argued to be a part of the social economy. The term social economy describes a whole range of organisations, such as co-operatives, non-profit organisations, social enterprises, and "charities", the latter being a form of organization very common in the UK. However, and most importantly, for policies to promote SI, it should not be associated with the social economy alone. SI can (and ought to) be understood to also exist in the private sector, the public sector, in new technologies, research institutions and also within other actors and institutions of civil society. As one example, the European Commission's "Guide to Social Innovation" (EC, 2013) can be understood as a policy document aiming to move beyond the focus on enterprise-driven technical innovation to include other sectors, such as health, social services and education. It states explicitly that the European Structural and Investment Funds have the mandate to promote social innovation ((EC, 2013), p. 51) within the EU's entire cohesion policy.

3. Methods

The article uses a qualitative deductive approach with the application of content analysis (Mayring, 2000). In this approach, policy documents are merely primary sources (Siegener et al., 2018) and represent written and negotiated plans of action (Knoepfel et al., 2007; Ludvig et al., 2017). Deducted from the theoretical literature on SI, we considered SI as being at the intersection of the following policy fields:

- Social Policy
- Rural Development Policy
- Regional Development Policy
- Forest Policy
- Environmental Policy
- Innovation Policy (most often embedded in economic/industrial policy and R&D Policy).

These policy fields are embedded and dealt with in numerous, various and often distinct policy domains ((Baldwin and Cave, 1999), p. 58). Examples of such domains are: social welfare, social care, employment, small business development, energy, resource and raw material use, technical infrastructure, agriculture, forestry, food industry, alternative food supply, regional development, technical research and innovation, tourism and education. The sample of policy documents was searched in a step-by-step approach. First all 32 SIMRA partners

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