

SHERPA
Rural Science-Society-Policy
Interfaces

SHERPA Discussion Paper

SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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Authors:

University of Ljubljana | Majda Černič Istenič

With contributions from Bárbara Soriano, Universidad Politécnica de Madrid

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Sustainable Hub to Engage into Rural Policies with Actors (SHERPA) is a four-year project (2019-2023) with 17 partners funded by the Horizon 2020 programme. It aims to gather knowledge that contributes to the formulation of recommendations for future policies relevant to EU rural areas, by creating a science-society-policy interface which provides a hub for knowledge and policy. Find out more on our website:

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Table of Contents

Summary.....	4
Introduction.....	5
1. (International and) EU policy context.....	7
2. Well-being and social relationships in rural areas.....	10
3. Public goods provisioning and social networks.....	14
4. Bridging the rural-urban gap by promoting cultural activities.....	16
5. Social inclusion of migrant population in rural areas	17
6. Conclusions.....	19
Acknowledgements.....	20
References.....	20



Summary

The SHERPA process will support the gathering of evidence from across Europe, at multiple levels, mainly regarding four sub-topics related to social relationships and their roles in: i) improving rural population well-being; ii) bridging rural-urban gap; iii) provisioning public goods; and iv) favouring social inclusion (migrants). SHERPA Multi-Actor Platforms (MAPs) are invited to discuss the following key questions for any or all of various topics contained in this Paper:

- What are the needs of the area covered by the MAP in relation to social dimensions in rural areas?
- What are the policy interventions already in place, and what are examples of actions taken by local actors addressing these needs implemented in the area covered by the MAP?
- Which policy interventions (i.e. instruments, measures) are recommended by MAP members to be implemented at the local, regional, and/or national levels? How can the EU support these interventions?
- What are the knowledge gaps, and what research projects are needed?

The exercise will follow the standard SHERPA process: (i) preparation of discussion material based on the SHERPA Discussion Paper as well as regional- and national-specific research (ii) consultation with MAP members, (iii) summary of the discussions in a MAP Position Paper, and (iv) synthesis of the regional and national MAP Position Papers for discussion at European Union level.

This SHERPA Discussion Paper provides a synthesis of international and EU policy aims and findings from research as identified in recent research projects.



Introduction

When talking about the ‘social dimension of rural areas’, it is important to bear in mind that this is an analytical category that refers to **a very wide range of topics and issues**. In fact, the term as such, with this specific word reference, is rarely mentioned and defined in the professional and scientific literature. It is the closest yet to the concept of **sustainability**, i.e., the ‘social dimension of sustainability’ alongside the environmental and economic dimensions (Dempsey et al. 2009), which refers to, for example, the ‘measure of human well-being’ (Mohamed et al. 2021), the ‘quality of life’ (Kandachar 2014), ‘public health’ (Tang & Huang 2017), etc.

In order to bring this topic more clearly into the SHERPA debate, it is first necessary to define what this concept means and what it entails. Etymologically, both the terms ‘social’ and ‘dimension’ come from Latin (WhatDoesMean.net 2022). More specifically, the term ‘dimension’ comes from “dimensio, dimensionis” which can be translated as both “measure”, “measurement”, “extension in all directions” or as an amount of some kind of thing e.g. “quantity of some quality” as suggested by Dodd (1943). The term “social” derives its meaning from “socialis”, which is equivalent to “belonging to a community of people”. A word composed of the sum of two clearly delineated parts: the noun “socius”, meaning “partner”, and the suffix “-al”, meaning “according to”. So considering the origins of the two words, the term refers to **relationships between people**, i.e. **social relationships**. In SHERPA’s case, it refers to relationships between people living in rural areas, which vary in intensity, extent, and quality, and which influence the life of the individual for better or for worse.

There is a long tradition of studying the characteristics of social relations in rural areas. The academic debates on the issues of rural social life started mainly in connection with the distinction between city (urban) and countryside (rural), which presented the social life in the countryside either as ‘better off’ than the life in the city or, on the contrary, as more backward (e.g. according to the well-known distinction of ‘Gemeinschaft - Gesellschaft’ by F. Tönnies (1887) and the ‘idiocy of rural life’ by Marx and Engels (1848, 1871)). The urban/rural dichotomy was the subject of extensive empirical study in the second half of the 20th century, and the target of numerous critiques. For example, critiques covered things such as that it was seen as largely irrelevant because the interplay of globalisation and localisation processes, and the bureaucratisation of society had resulted in a predominantly urbanised population as far as “Western society” was concerned (Hale, 1995; Hutter, 1988, Pahl, 1966). Nevertheless, scholars and policy-makers continue to consider rural areas as an important variable in terms of social relations. Many researchers (Dymitrow and Stenseke, 2016; Woods, 2016; Cloke, 2006: 19; Sim, 1988: 59) deny that rural society and culture have disappeared, arguing that urban and rural life still exist in spite of constant social change, and suggest that people’s ideas of what is and what is not rural or urban, from which a shared understanding of rural places could be formed, have important social meanings and implications. Furthermore, EU policies such as the Rural Development Programme, with its LEADER and CLLD approach, refer to rural areas as encompassing multiple meanings and functions, be it as areas of agricultural production or of non-agricultural economy, as well as a place of recreation, relaxation and leisure, nature conservation, or quality of life for the local population (European Network for Rural Development, 2021a; European Committee of the Regions, 2017).

Rural areas in Europe have been facing challenges for some time, such as demographic change (out-migration and an ageing population), a high risk of poverty, and a lack of access to basic amenities of broad societal importance due to the withdrawal of the welfare state (Copus et al., 2011). Recent figures on this are quite revealing. For example (European Commission, 2022): rural and remote areas have the smallest share of the EU population in the age groups below 50 years; the percentage of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion was higher in rural areas (22,4%) than in towns (19,2%) and cities (21,3%) in 2019. The average road distance to essential

services is much greater in rural areas (in remote rural areas it is almost 21,5 km) compared to urban areas (for cities it is 3,5 km) to the nearest doctor. Only 60% of households in rural areas have access to fast broadband (> 30Mbps) compared to 86% of the EU population as a whole. In the 2020 Eurobarometer survey, 42% of respondents stated that employment opportunities in rural areas have worsened in the last ten years, and 37% of them consider that healthcare in rural areas has worsened in the last ten years. However, not all rural areas face such problems and deprivations, and many are successfully coping with global and de-peripheralisation processes (Steinführer et al., 2016). Yet the attention of scholars, policy-makers, and the public should be focused on those rural areas with the most pressing problems.

The ability to adapt and respond to the above phenomena and other specific challenges in rural areas depends on social relationships and social institutions (Duncan, 1996) that, together with other resources (economic, political, cultural, etc.), shape and reinforce existing opportunity structures. Social relationships structured in social networks of actors (individuals or groups and organisations) create intangible assets - social capital that manifest in a shared sense of identity and understanding, shared norms and values, trust, cooperation, reciprocity, and support (Portes, 1998; Coleman, 1990), and enable people to cope with and overcome the constraints of their environment (Putnam, 1993). These networks guide individuals' agency through incentive mechanisms such as social pressure and learning (Bernardi and Klaerner, 2014), through access to resources such as financial, instrumental, emotional, informational, and social support (McTavish, 2011), and more generally by enabling or constraining individuals' agency (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998).

Social capital takes a variety of forms. The academic literature distinguishes between bonding, bridging, and linking social capital. Bonding social capital refers to the relationships within a group or community of 'alike' individuals (e.g., family, neighbourhood, or the same village), while bridging social capital refers to the relationships between individuals and groups with different sociodemographic or socioeconomic characteristics (e.g., people from different social classes, races, religions, or villages). This distinction led Robert Putnam (2000) to suggest that bonding social capital is good for "getting by" and bridging is crucial for "getting ahead". The benefits of bridging social capital are far-reaching and may include an improved ability to obtain information, to gain access to power or better placement within the network, or to better identify new opportunities (Adler and Kwon, 2002). It is also emphasised that the balance between bonding and bridging social capital is important to prevent negative outcomes. Networks with excessive levels of bonding tend to foster bias, leading sometimes to outgroups and exclusion. The distinctive feature of linking social capital is that it involves relationships between people or institutions at different levels of societal power hierarchy (Woolcock, 2001; Szreter and Woolcock, 2004). Linking social capital involves social relationships with authority figures that can be used to access resources or power (Stone and Hughes, 2002), and has many indirect benefits to the community that are often not mentioned in the literature, such as connecting government officials to the people who provide the knowledge and skills for their jobs (Jordan, 2015). Onyx et al. (2007) found that communities with higher levels of all forms of social capital are better able to mobilise in the face of adversity and less likely to experience negative outcomes such as nepotism, corruption, and oppression (Social capital research & training 2022, Clarige 2018).

Studies confirm (Klärner and Knabe, 2019) that social networks and high levels of social capital are an important resource for vulnerable groups in rural areas, such as the rural poor. An "extra-network social structure that systematically produces patterns in a social network" (Feld 1981: 1016), e.g., a nearby public meeting place, a centre (focal point, a foci), can also provide them with opportunities for social exchange. Although social networks are important resources for coping with rural poverty, the support capacity of these networks is however weakened by structural changes, selective out-migration of younger and better-educated people, and ageing and shrinking populations. Differences between rural and urban areas in social relationship networks are also thought to have health implications, but little scientific research has been done to date (Klärner, 2021). Below is an overview of how the social dimension (observed through social networks, social institutions, and various forms of social capital) of rural areas is considered, captured, and reflected in the themes in which MAPs have expressed interest from a policy and research perspective.

1. (International and) EU policy context

Rural areas around the world have always been a place of accumulation (exploitation) of natural, spatial, and human resources for the needs of urban areas. Due to this fact, as well as to globalisation and increasing urbanisation, rural areas are today facing increasing socio-economic and demographic challenges (population decline and ageing), which may lead to further reductions in services and infrastructure, and to the reduction and abandonment of rural employment opportunities. In fact, a substantial proportion of the European countryside continues to experience demographic shrinkage, which may well spread further in coming decades (Copus et al., 2021). Presently, around 75% of European citizens live in cities, with possibly 80% by 2050 (Medeiros, 2022).

According to OECD (2019), rural policy is defined as all policy initiatives aimed at promoting opportunities and providing comprehensive solutions to environmental, economic, and social problems in rural areas. This is done by valorising their resources, promoting their recreational, ecological, and cultural heritage, and improving productive activities and the delivery of public services, in close cooperation with sub-national authorities, and the active involvement of civil society and the private sector. Since the release of the Brundtland Report on Sustainable Development, governments have been expected to ensure sustainable solutions for rural areas in the formulation and implementation of rural policy. With regard to the latter aspect, Akgün et al. (2015) list five critical assets - factors (Figure 1) - that are necessary for a policy to promote sustainable rural development, including a social system with openness, social relations and cooperation, which means that the social dimension plays one of the central roles.

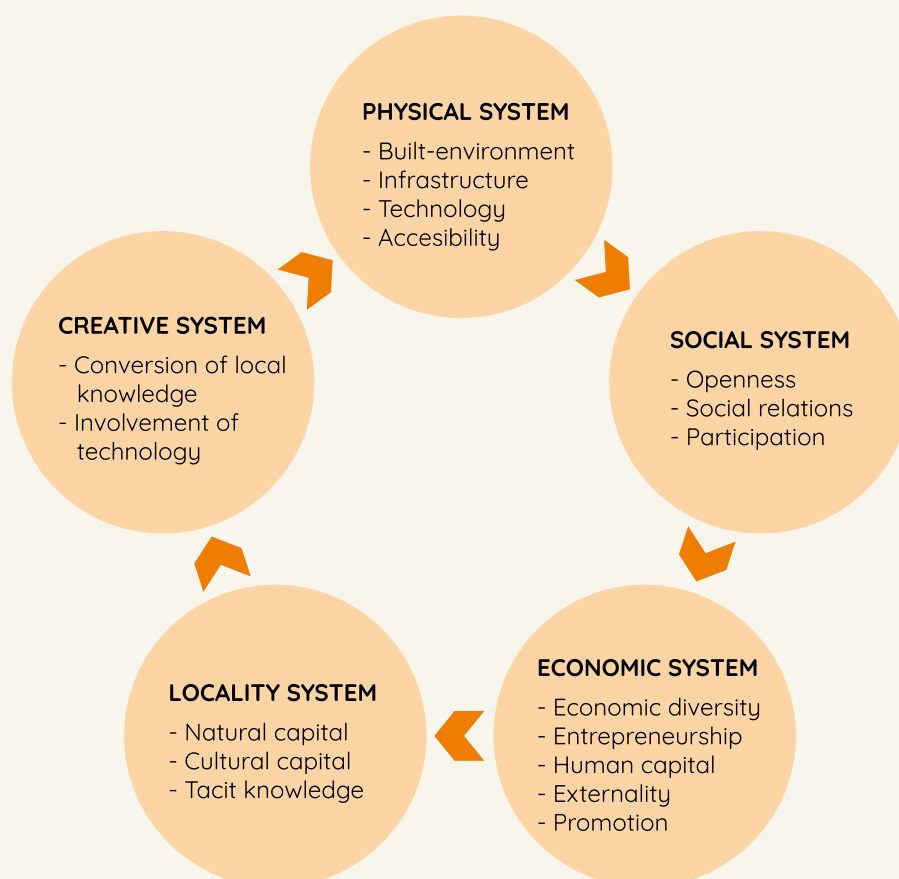


Figure 1. The critical factors of and driving forces required for sustainable rural development (Akgün et al., 2015).

It should be stressed here that rural development is a social construct, as the focus on its factors, the recognised drivers, has changed considerably over the last 50 years. The concept of rural development has evolved globally in several phases: from considering income (e.g., GDP) as the central determinant of people's well-being and progress, as was the case in the 1950s; to sustainable livelihoods characterised by coping with and recovering from stresses and shocks and maintaining or strengthening capacities and assets without depleting natural resources, as is the case today (Serfilippi et al., 2018). According to this conceptualisation, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) take into account both physical and social resources and activities, leading to the view that rural development should be considered as multidimensional, a combination of environmental, economic and social dimensions (UN 2015):



From this perspective, improving rural livelihoods requires the effective participation of rural people and communities in managing their own social, economic and environmental objectives, through the empowerment of rural people, especially women and young people, through organisations such as local cooperatives, and by applying a bottom-up approach (Commission on Sustainable Development 2009, quoted by Serfilippi et al., 2018).

In the EU, the importance and consideration of the social dimension in rural policy has been expressed and proved through the implementation of LEADER programme (the 'second pillar' of the Common Agricultural Policy - CAP) and its recent upgrading to Community-Led Local Development (CLLD). The LEADER approach was introduced in the 1990s as a local action and

endogenous ('emerging from within') development initiative that put in the heart autonomous Local Action Groups (LAGs) 'working in partnership' across public, private, and voluntary sectors to engage the energy and resources of people and local organisations as development actors rather than beneficiaries (European Network for Rural Development, 2021b). The original objective of the LEADER programme was to create public goods in rural communities that would help overcome market failures specific to rural economies by strengthening their capacities through various forms of social capital and networking between people and local organisations.

As analyses of LEADER revealed its experience has typically demonstrated problems of participation, elitism and the limitations of local action and control (e.g. Barke and Newton, 1997; Storey, 1999; Bosworth et al., 2016, quoted by Gkartzios and Lowie, 2019). For the UK, Shucksmith has argued that "[...] there is a tendency for endogenous development initiatives to favour those who are already powerful and articulate, and who already enjoy a greater capacity to act and to engage with the initiative, ... more marginalized groups are less able to participate or engage ..." (2000: 215). In relation to this, the question arose who were deserving recipients of funding, facilitation and animation. A similar point has been made by a number of social scientists in different European settings (Kovach, 2000; Osti, 2001; Shortall, 2008).

However, Putnam's (1993) work shows that building social capital is a long-term process, which is particularly true for individuals with the least capacity to act. As the literature review in the just-published evaluation study on LEADER has shown (Dwyer et al., 2022), the outputs and outcomes of LEADER are poorly known to date, apart from the financial reports. A series of case studies conducted as part of the same evaluation showed that LAGs still focus more on economic than social development. However, the same report also states that networking through various motivational approaches (e.g., organising events, meetings, and other participation opportunities) was identified as crucial and the most effective mechanism for promoting social innovation and community building. Overall, this study has shown that LAGs, although they still have room for improvement, are the relevant social institutions for building partnerships and new networks of local actors (and beyond) through their advisory and animation activities, leading to a strengthening of networks and social capital in rural areas.

It therefore seems worthwhile to continue monitoring and building on the experience of the LEADER programme and the LAGs in generating social capital in rural areas, in order to launch new initiatives. One new initiative of the European Commission is the **Communication on EU Long-Term Vision for Rural Areas**, which aims to equip rural areas, as mentioned by Janusz Wojciechowski, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Development (European Commission 2021), with the right tools to respond to the challenges and problems they face today. The vision focuses on four complementary areas of action to achieve stronger, connected, resilient and prosperous rural areas by 2040, and the improvement of the social dimension of rural areas is a visible aspect of this. The Rural Action Plan that is part of the vision, contains various initiatives focused on improving social aspects of rural areas, such as addressing the inclusion and integration of people with a migrant background, highlighting urban-rural linkages in the new EU Urban Mobility Framework, and activities to increase the social resilience and women's participation in rural areas. The same applies to other initiatives currently underway to address rural areas from different perspectives, both those focused on primary production (CAP and Farm to Fork Strategy) and those more environmentally oriented (European Green Deal). This means that social capital can be seen as a software package, which, as Wiesinger has aptly pointed out, "has to be installed in the hardware of functioning infrastructures and services as a prerequisite for successful rural development" (2007: 32).



2. Well-being and social relationships in rural areas

As highlighted in the introduction, a large proportion of rural areas in Europe face acute problems of marginalisation, peripherisation, and deprivation, linked to demographic decline, ageing, abandonment of key public services, limited access to social services, threat of poverty (European Commission 2022), as well as deterioration of social life, i.e. the decline of strong social and community ties (Keim-Klärner et al. 2021, Klärner and Knabe 2019, Vaishar et al. 2018, Klärner 2017), although these issues also apply to many urban areas. The importance of strengthening social links, in particular in areas related to the above-mentioned problems and challenges in rural areas, and creating opportunities and favourable conditions for their development and strengthening is addressed in a number of Horizon 2020 projects.

The **POLIRURAL** (Future Oriented Collaborative Policy Development for Rural Areas and People) project, for example, has set itself the very ambitious goal of contributing to rural attractiveness by addressing the needs and challenges of specific socio-demographic groups in rural areas (women, young people, newcomers) that the project authors believe have been largely overlooked so far. In order to increase the attractiveness of rural areas by improving the **quality of life and well-being** (Ulman et al., 2021) of rural residents. The focus is primarily on economic processes, especially the promotion of new forms of entrepreneurship (multifunctional agriculture, tourism, social entrepreneurship, public services, etc.), and then **on new forms of integration and collaboration** (social innovation, sharing, crowdfunding, etc.). In this context, social networks, trust, and collaboration among actors seem to be an important condition for the success of small businesses, as noted by Mantino & Vanni (2018). However, social relations are not explicitly and comprehensively addressed in this project although the community-

¹ As regards the weak inclusion of themes in Horizon 2020 targeting rural women, this is evidenced by the recently launched single call 'Boosting women-led innovation in farming and rural areas' (HE call, HORIZON-CL6-2022-COMMUNITIES-01-01, 23 February 2022).

building focused on knowledge base - digital innovation hub is one of the planned results. The authors assume that social networks are necessary to achieve economic objectives, but do not explain in detail how they should be designed and developed to serve these objectives, which is essential from the perspective of rural social empowerment.

The project **SIMRA** (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas) has gone much further in conceiving and designing an innovative approach in building social relations and social capital in rural areas that can have positive effects on economic, as well as technological, environmental, socio-cultural developments. The project team designed and implemented innovative social initiative, a Rural Hub (Lombardi et al., 2020), with the aim to strengthen relationships amongst actors in the area and quantitatively and qualitatively verify its functioning. For example, a motivational and interactive event called 'Farmers Dinners' gathered farmers in a farmhouse and helped them build and deepen relationships with their neighbours. Its design relied on structured and systematic preparation of the venue and selection of participants. The core of the invited participants was represented by those who already knew the general goal of the Hub's initiative, are neighbours of the host, are trusted, share the same main cultural values, feel a sense of belonging to the same area, and are committed to the same activities such as agricultural development. Different stakeholders were also invited to participate, interact, and share information to develop new relationships. This also builds trust, motivation, dignity, and a sense of community. This process contributed to a greater number of relationships (+308%) and density in the social networks (+250%) and enabling participation in the development of new activities, e.g. new business.

In addition to the importance of rural hubs as a promising social innovation linked to improving and maintaining the social fabric of rural areas, the SIMRA project has also underlined other messages (Slee and Mosdale, 2020). It stresses the importance of involving civil society actors in the reconstruction and improvement of social well-being, especially of disadvantaged groups such as migrants, poor, young people, women, in rural areas. In this context, the third sector (voluntary sector, NGOs, non-profit organisations, etc.) is seen as a key driver of social innovation, with activities that are citizen-led or socially motivated. Positive development results are closely linked to the presence of creative people, managers, and the research community. It is also stressed that where social capital is strong, social innovation is more likely to thrive and more sustainable development outcomes can be expected.

The contribution of social enterprises (SEs) as a third sector organisations addressing unemployment, poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation in rural areas, is addressed and discussed in the **RurInno** project (Social Innovations in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: How Social Entrepreneurs Promote Innovative Solutions to Social Problems). This project reveals that the innovative power of SEs lies in the form of service delivery or in the provision of new services that respond to the needs and challenges of rural society that have not traditionally been addressed. In their business model, SEs strategically mobilise and reconfigure different types of social capital by harnessing resources at the community level through vertical linkages with regime-level actors such as government agencies, development agencies, fundraising agencies, and public research institutions. The intermediary role of SEs between local communities and regime-level actors is complex and depends on the absorptive capacity of local communities and the position of public sector and institutional arrangements. The project's main new insights into the functioning of SEs in rural areas are related to the dialectic of horizontal and vertical social networking. Specifically, the building of relationships and mobilisation of social capital by SEs depend on the actors that ensure SEs' legitimacy in the rural community. That is, SEs' access to resources depends on the effectiveness of public policies or market actors in delivering services to rural communities. A weak

public sector or limited market that leaves gaps in the institutional environment and provisioning opens up space for SEs to operate. A fundamental challenge for rural SEs in implementing their business model is the following: the entrepreneur must provide value to both rural community members and regime actors, which in reality is often based on potential rather than actual access to resources in their networks. It is therefore up to regime actors to encourage or discourage the activities of SEs in rural areas. Innovative niche strategies for rural SEs are being developed as viable solutions to regime-level problems. The challenge remains the limited transferability of all forms of social capital, as they are highly context-dependent and cannot be easily institutionalised in organisations or transferred across time and space.

The importance of social relations is also highlighted in projects dealing with the promotion of innovative technologies in agriculture and sustainable changes in agricultural production related to environmental and socio-economic objectives.

The common finding of the projects **Smart-AKIS** (European Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation Systems (AKIS) towards innovation-driven research in Smart Farming Technology), **PROVIDE** (PROVIDing smart DELivery of public goods by EU agriculture and forestry) and **InnovAfrica** (Innovations in Technology, Institutional and Extension Approaches towards Sustainable Agriculture and enhanced Food and Nutritional Security in Africa) is that the adoption of state-of-the-art/smart farming technologies is a complex process that depends on several factors. Among the most important, are the economic and socio-demographic characteristics of farmers and their farms (e.g., farm size, production type, age, education, income, access to credit and extension), and the intangible characteristics of farmers (e.g., cognitive perceptions and feelings of fear or aversion to new technologies). The possible solutions to handle these obstacles are seen in the implementation of networking opportunities through enhancing community networks (e.g. peer-to-peer communication), fostering more comprehensive and interactive knowledge exchange through online platform tools (e.g. the development of information and decision support system IS/DSS), and through the multi-actor participation in regional innovation hubs. In addition to these



approaches, the recommendations of these projects also emphasise the need to involve the end users of the tools, who are mainly farmers, in the process of design and evaluation. This builds farmers' trust and helps to improve the usability and usefulness of these tools.

The **FARMWELL** project (Improving Farmers' Wellbeing through Social Innovation) focuses on the impact of a number of societal challenges, and in particular the socio-cultural dislocation of rural areas, **on the well-being of farmers, farming families and rural communities**². The main challenges facing the farming population are ageing, low farm incomes/poverty, gender imbalances in power and identities, and the fact that many farm workers undertake undeclared and precarious work. One of the specific problems identified is also the high workload (e.g. long working hours, difficulties to take holidays and reconcile family and work commitments), which has, among other things, a negative impact on the development of social networks and, consequently, on social and mental well-being of farmers. This problem is further reinforced with the limited provision of social services in rural areas, especially for vulnerable groups, such as the poorer sections of the rural population, farm workers with undocumented employment status, women, and migrant agricultural workers. In addition, the project results revealed that farming communities are being confronted with a process of societal alienation, resulting in lower levels of trust, lower social capital and stronger feelings of loneliness that is turning farms into the 'lonely islands'. This feeling of alienation is linked to a lack of bargaining power and powerlessness in the day-to-day management of the farms, which is influenced by the developments in the global food market and the inconsistency of agricultural policy at national and European levels. Similar to the studies conducted at the global level (Younker and Radunovich, 2022; Yazd et al., 2019; Perceval et al., 2018; Arnautovska et al., 2015; Alston, 2012), the case studies conducted as part of this project confirm that farmers are highly vulnerable to mental health problems for the reasons mentioned above. These are exacerbated by farmers' (self-)stigma and their unwillingness to seek help. Therefore, social innovation interventions in this regard are urgently needed, which are intended to be addressed in further phases of the project.

A more positive perspective on agriculture and well-being of farmers is present in the **NEWBIE** project (New Entrant netWork: Business models for Innovation, entrepreneurship and resilience in European agriculture) that is dealing with new entrants (NEs) in farming. The project's findings show that the main motivations for NEs to enter agriculture are passion, self-fulfilment, family tradition, market opportunities and climbing the career ladder from worker to self-employment and entrepreneurial independence. Emotional arguments and enthusiasm are named more often than the rational ones, like financial motivations. The project also shows that the most often used business models of NEs belong to differentiation (niches, short value chains, Unique Selling Proposition), on-farm non-agricultural diversification (agri-tourism, social and pedagogical resources), and Alternative Food Networks (Community Supported Agriculture, producer-consumer-cooperatives). Advisory services as well as personal contacts and networks (associations, working groups, social media) build the most frequently used support channels of NEs to gain inspiration for running and developing their farm business.

² More information on Improving the mental, physical and social wellbeing of farmers by making social innovations more accessible can be found in: Social capital in Poland: https://farmwell-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D-2.3_POLAND.pdf; Social innovation in Belgium: https://farmwell-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D-2.3_BELGIUM.pdf; Farmers and farming wellbeing in Italy: https://farmwell-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D-2.3_ITALY.pdf; Mental wellbeing, health and relationships in Hungary: https://farmwell-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/D-2.3_HUNGARY.pdf Smart solutions database: <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/social-innovations/>.



3. Public goods provisioning and social networks

The importance of **social networks** in strengthening farming activities is also highlighted in projects that address **barriers to farmers' participation in agri-environmental programmes**.

The project **CONSOLE** (CONtract SOLUTIONs for Effective and training delivery of agri-environmental-climate public goods by EU agriculture and forestry) was driven by the need to promote innovation in the sustainable delivery of agri-environmental-climate public goods (AECPGs) and to improve the implementation of innovative contract solutions for their delivery. To this end, it was adopted an approach of knowledge and experience sharing among relevant stakeholders (farmers, foresters, experts, and project partners) in the communities of practice (CoPs)³ through virtual contacts. A vibrant CoP with active participation of its members is seen as a crucial tool for evaluating and testing improved and novel voluntary measures for the delivery of AECPGs.

Financial aspects are the most studied factors influencing decisions on willingness to provide ecosystem services (ES). However, the **SUPER-G** project (Developing SUsustainable PERmanent Grassland systems and policies) has highlighted the complex interaction of factors at different

³ Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell: communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly (Wenger 2004).

levels that influence, promote or hinder the decision-making process in the provision of ES. Thus, external factors such as biophysical factors, the political context and general social norms shape the decision-making context. Intermediate factors such as policy characteristics, agri-environmental programmes, governance issues, farm structure further bridge the area between the influence of context and the influence of local, internal factors such as perceptions and values and attitudes of farmers. These factors are variable and can change over time and between different scales and groups, e.g. farmers' beliefs might be influenced by the views of society as a whole and those of neighbouring farmers, which influence their image of a 'good' farmer (an expression of pride and self-esteem). Finally, process factors such as cooperation, knowledge sharing, participation and advice and guidance influence the way in which decision-making is facilitated.

The **HNV-Link** project (High Nature Value Farming: Learning, Innovation and Knowledge) underlined the importance of strengthening social networks in the case of social invisibility of High Nature Value (HNV) farmers, supporters of high diversity of wild species and habitats. Their voice has not been heard in the EU and national policies mainly because their networks were under-professionalised, under-organised, fragmented and under-resourced. In order to ensure that their interests are reflected by national and EU decision-makers, multi-actor networks such as 'HNV-Link drive innovation & policy change' has been set up connecting research, policy and practice actors through CoPs and brokering platform to foster co-innovation (sharing social, technological, etc. innovations/practices). It supplies practical tools and recommendations for agri-food stakeholders to reach agricultural production, environmental and socioeconomic objectives.

The **LIFT** project (Low-Input Farming and Territories - Integrating knowledge for improving ecosystem-based farming) has highlighted that cooperatives, rural social institutions that complement public policies and private initiatives, can play an important role in strengthening the economic sustainability of farms and promoting the adoption of environmentally friendly practices. By reducing information gaps and market uncertainty, they often provide farmers with a variety of economic advantages. In addition, farmers' decision to join a cooperative can be linked to non-monetary factors such as the acquisition of training and technical support, access to social services and the building of social capital (trust). As this project has revealed, the functioning of cooperatives varies between EU countries, e.g. in some former socialist countries they are 'by-products' of economic objectives, while in others non-profit activities are still very present and play a safety net role in poor rural areas. In general, however, there are few studies that explicitly examine the social role of cooperatives.

The **UNISECO** project (Understanding and improving the sustainability of agro-ecological farming systems in the EU) has focused primarily on environmental and economic aspects in examining the drivers and barriers to the further development and implementation of agroecological approaches in EU farming systems, in order to identify and facilitate more effective management strategies. Indicators related to the social dimension, such as quality of life, were also addressed. However, they were included as income generation outcomes, whereas the sociological literature (e.g. Daly and Rose 2007; Fahey et al. 2005) shows that this concept is a multidimensional and complex concept that does not depend only on the income of an individual or the ownership of a certain type and amount of machinery, as has been done in this project. This approach demonstrates that concepts developed in the social sciences are used superficially and taken for granted by natural scientists and technicians, which leads to important aspects of people's lives, such as e.g. their working conditions, being overlooked as demonstrated by the FARMWELL project.

4. Bridging the rural-urban gap by promoting cultural activities

The **RURITAGE** project (Heritage for Rural Regeneration) activities are rooted in the concept of Cultural and Natural Heritage (CNH), which envisages and promotes a better integration of built and tangible, natural and intangible assets in policy and planning actions. The aim is to enable new perspectives on the role of CNH in **connecting and influencing society** (de Luca et al., 2021), the economy, politics, ecology and opening up new opportunities, especially for rural areas. CNH has a number of potentials for rural areas, which can also have economic impacts (job and income generation). The project envisaged that the interpretation, valorisation and management of CNH for these purposes could be mobilised through Community-based Heritage Management and Planning (CHMP). An activity rooted in the idea that rural communities and stakeholders are made up of a wide range of actors and citizens who need to be properly involved in the development of local restoration plans. The CHMP methodology foresees a series of activities for the effective co-creation of rural regeneration plans, implemented through the establishment of so-called Rural Heritage Hubs (RHHs). RHHs are social spaces or communities of stakeholders at local level, embedded in physical spaces (multi-purpose centres). Through these hubs issues are discussed, knowledge is transferred and ideas are exchanged through organised events (meetings, festivals, presentations, libraries, internet place, wellness spot, language courses, movie nights, handcrafts workshops, business meeting centre, tourist meeting point, etc.) for different key stakeholder groups, including vulnerable groups such as migrants and people with disabilities. The hub coordinator (a kind of socio-cultural animator) plays an important role in these activities. They are key to establishing and developing relationships and trust between the actors involved. Their role is supported and reinforced at strategic level by the relevant promoters, such as municipalities, NGOs, (geo)parks, LAGs and 'local leaders' such as schoolteachers, priests, doctors, farmers, artists, influencers or any other respected and recognised person at the local level that can create trust and social capital.

The **RURALIZATION** project (The opening of rural areas to renew rural generations, jobs and farms) has also emphasised that rural areas and their specific heritage (e.g. craft activities) can foster the development of creative activities, even though they generally have a lower level of economic development compared to cities and the weighted shares of creative activities are also lower. However, the project also stressed that creative activities in rural areas are not only linked to tradition, but also to processes such as the arrival of new inhabitants from the cities, especially young people. If properly integrated into the rural environment, new inhabitants can, with their knowledge and technological skills, serve as a kind of conduit (mediator for activating linking social capital) for the transfer and exchange of creativity from the cities to the countryside and vice versa.

The **DESIRA** project (Digitalisation: Economic and Social Impacts in Rural Areas) addresses the obstacles to the transition to development in rural areas and argues that the adoption of, for example, new telecommunications technologies in rural areas is largely due to socio-cultural and demographic problems, particularly related to ageing and low population density. Traditional values and negative attitudes toward innovation, as well as distrust and fear of all parties perceived to be outside the rural area (i.e., financiers, regulators, and ICT providers) are also obstacles that manifest the problem of weak bridging and linking social capital.



5. Social inclusion of migrant population in rural areas

The opportunity to generate and deliver social innovation in demographically disadvantaged rural areas, including mountain areas, through migrant acceptance and integration programmes is the theme of the **MATILDE** project (Migration Impact Assessment to Enhance Integration and Local Development in European Rural and Mountain Areas). This project has confirmed that this process is challenging and complex in general and in rural areas in particular. Nonetheless, by building bridges and strengthening social capital between permanent residents and migrants (involving different groups according to reasons for emigration, nationality, religion or ethnicity, gender, age, etc.) it is possible to create favourable conditions for both sides. This project identified the following challenges and opportunities relevant for rural areas:

- Many immigrants face both structural and everyday racism. The involvement of third-country nationals (TCNs) as volunteers in clubs and associations (e.g. as lay interpreters) is a key turning point for access to local society in terms of cultural and social capital. This benefits not only migrants but also the society. However, it is not easy for migrants to start (e.g. voluntary activities) due to their lack of knowledge of the local language. How immigrants integrate into a rural environment depends heavily on their foreign language skills and those of the native population. NGOs have a key role to play in this as they have a lot of experience in the field of integration, multiculturalism, and active anti-racism. Opportunities for interaction facilitated by mediators were identified as essential for social cohesion in rural areas.
- Similarly to SIMRA, the MATILDE project showed that strengthening social links between long-term residents and migrants could keep basic services running in remote areas and increase their access by recruiting professional staff, such as social workers, teachers and health workers, also in smaller villages. Moreover, under national refugee legislation, mountain communities could request that these jobs be at least partially paid for by

state subsidies. Such opportunities could have a positive impact on the sustainability of communities, both in the short term, by keeping services running, and in the long term, by keeping these areas attractive to potential newcomers. The knowledge gained by local actors for the benefit of refugees can benefit other migrant groups and potentially vulnerable local populations.

- Mental health issues of TCNs are a phenomenon that should be taken into account by public policy. The study found that addressing trauma and other mental health problems when dealing with health issues among asylum seekers, refugees and other migrants is one of the main integration problems. Modern treatment and support procedures are not sufficient, and more education and resources should be directed to this area. In extreme cases, untreated mental health issues can lead to other social problems. Occupational forms of therapy, which are more effective than traditional therapeutic meetings (talking therapies), should be introduced into the mental health treatment of TCNs. Mental health problems should be taken seriously as they are in most cases social and structural problems and not just individual ones. Neglecting them can have major negative consequences for society.
- Part of the key to enabling integration of immigrants is changing the attitudes of local people by learning from the immigrant lifeworld, identifying barriers and adapting and changing what they offer. However, cohesion is also threatened by the hierarchisation of immigrants and conflicts within immigrant communities. The active participation of TCNs is mostly visible in terms of intercultural and inter-religious activities. Although such participation may take the form of events, more sustainable participation is realised through the involvement of immigrants as volunteers (e.g. lay interpreters).
- The regional identity and history should be taken into account when communicating immigration as an opportunity for rural areas. General acceptance in the regions can be promoted through inter-municipal networking; while the involvement of politicians or major employers should be strengthened (e.g. by inviting them to round tables or debates). Recruitment strategies in local associations should be fostered to integrate newcomers from TCNs countries, taking into account the ageing population. In addition, bottom-up immigrant activities should be supported. Interaction between immigrants and local residents to stay in rural and mountainous areas could be strengthened by highlighting the opportunities in rural areas and countering the prevailing assumption that rural areas are 'transition places' for immigrants.

Within the **IMAJINE** project (Integrative Mechanisms for Addressing Spatial Justice and Territorial Inequalities in Europe), the changing conditions and challenges posed by newly arriving migrants and refugees in rural areas (e.g., Greece) and the views of local residents on the impact of new arrivals on their rural areas were being examined. The relevant study highlights the complexity of rural migration flows by examining different populations' narratives of rurality and well-being. The narratives of migrants and non-migrants reveal that rural well-being is closely linked to their hopes, dreams and aspirations, leading to different constructions of 'rurality'. The meaning of what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' rural life may change for natives, internal migrants, international migrants, and refugees over the course of their lives. The 'good life' in rural areas is associated with emotions, feelings and social relationships. Many locals argue that the good life consists not only of material aspects, but mainly of the interpersonal relationships that develop in a place, of sociability and belonging. For both migrants and refugees, initial hopes play an important role in the decision to migrate. Social networks help them construct 'images' of places and develop a vision of what life might be like in the place they move to.

Two other projects on migration in rural areas are currently being implemented under Horizon 2020, **Whole-COMM** (Exploring the Integration of Post-2014 Migrants in Small and Medium-Sized Towns and Rural Areas from a Whole of Community Perspective) and **WelcomingSpaces** (Investing in 'Welcoming Spaces' in Europe: revitalizing shrinking areas by hosting non-EU migrants), but the research is ongoing and the results are not yet available.

6. Conclusions

As recent policy initiatives and the review of Horizon projects show, it is increasingly important to pay attention to and consider the social dimension of rural areas. Clearly, the social relationships expressed in the concepts of social capital and networks are the foundation for successful rural interventions and improvements. MAPs need to address pressing issues in their regions, particularly the well-being and quality of life of rural populations after and in the midst of the pandemic COVID-19; their relationships with the broader society, including cities; the provision of public goods; and the issue of migration, which has been a challenge for Europe for some time but is becoming even more pressing with the war in Ukraine.

The following list of elements can be considered by the MAPs during their discussions to answer the questions as indicated in the Summary:

- Are people in your community (e.g., village, small town, etc.) connected to each other? How and in which fields?
- Is there any form of exchange of goods, services, assistance between people in your community?
- What promotes and what inhibits interpersonal relationships in your community?
- How would you rate the strength of social ties in your community? Do people trust each other or not? What are the reasons for this?
- What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had/has had on the social relations in your community?
- Do people in your community have a place to meet and do things together?
- Is there an association/organisation in your community? What is its mission? How many members does it have?
- Who, which group(s) is/are most and least socially active in your community? Is there a good social organiser, an animator, present in your community?
- Is your community sensitive to vulnerable members of the community (elderly, youth, women, migrants, etc.) and how does this sensitivity manifest itself?
- How are people in your community connected to people and organisations in other communities, other areas (e.g., nearby cities)? What makes interactions with people from other areas work and what hinders them?
- Is there an active LAG in your community? How would you assess its functioning? To what extent does it enable the needs and interests of people in your community to be articulated and heard? Is anyone who is excluded from LAGs activities?

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