



SHERPA  
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Interfaces

## MAP Position Paper

# SOCIAL DIMENSION OF RURAL AREAS



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## 1. Summary and key messages

The purpose of this activity was to find out, on the example of selected **social networks**, how and how successfully they work in rural areas in Slovenia and, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with them, to check **which social issues** the rural population faces, how they might be solved, and which are the **knowledge gaps** in this field.

Socio-economic and cultural relations in the countryside are changing rapidly. Traditional relationships and social roles of family members, the young and the elderly, are changing. On most farms, agriculture is not a sufficient source of livelihood, and there are not many other available sources, especially in remote areas of the countryside. Pensions are often low (especially among the farming population) and people are burdened (also emotionally) with real estate, the ownership of which limits them in obtaining social assistance; they often lack information as well, do not know where to turn, or do not want to do so. The chain of social hardship thus generally originates in material hardship, which can be accompanied by other negative phenomena. The elderly are particularly exposed, as well as women; young people are leaving in large numbers, and those who stay often face loneliness and addiction.

Slovenia has a functioning public health and pension system, and a relatively wide range of social policy measures. With the exception of the farmers' pension insurance system and support for young farmers under the Common agricultural policy, there are no specific measures aimed at the rural population. The presented research indicates that pronounced social issues especially occur in remote areas. They are only partially discovered and solved by the public social policy system due to their specificity and spatial dispersion. The difficult social issues of the Slovenian countryside require a thorough overhaul of the social policy for the countryside, which will take into account its specificities - i.e., in many cases, attachment to agriculture, ownership of often dilapidated real estate, poorer access to information, an older (and less educated) population on average, and lower readiness to seek outside help. At the least, the following is needed:

- improvement of public social support (pension system, social support and scholarships) and basic infrastructure,
- information, awareness-raising and knowledge transfer support (information offices for legal and social assistance, campaigns for dialogue and de-stigmatisation) and
- institutional changes in social policy towards rural areas (inclusion of the European Social Fund into CLLD and general strengthening of the social pillar of agricultural policy, strengthening of the adoption of good projects in the field of providing social services into the public system and strengthening of interdepartmental cooperation).

**Social relations** are decisive in dealing with challenges and activate opportunities in different environments, including in rural areas; analytically, they are defined relatively comprehensively by social networks, norms of reciprocity and feelings of trust, i.e., **social capital**. In the field of **social networks**, there is considerable leeway for the expansion of their activities with more generous public and project support, including the uptake of certain public services (e.g., legal, psychotherapeutic or informational assistance). Many good ideas do not come to fruition due to the increasing difficulty of obtaining funds, the necessary professionalisation of applications, as well as the exclusion of certain stakeholders. It is also common for successful projects to fall through after public funding is concluded if organisations are unable to ensure continued operation. Possible support for their operation could therefore be in the form of support for professionalisation, project application and simplification of administrative requirements for tenders. It would be possible to further improve their connectedness with the help of some, at least partially, formalised form of permanent cooperation, e.g., in the form of joint secretariats, which would help coordinate both substantive work and administration and communication with public authorities.

In addition to substantive issues, there are numerous gaps in the **databases and research of rural areas** at the national level. The first problem that arises when making research (and policy) recommendations



about rural areas is that they are not even properly defined. Statistical data, especially on social issues, and quality of life indicators exist, but they are aggregated at the level of administrative units (municipalities, statistical or cohesion regions), and we do not have a clear definition of what constitutes rural areas in Slovenia. At the same time, research is conducted on various aspects of the quality of life in rural areas, but it is partial and lacks systemic funding; in addition, the field of rural social science in Slovenia is significantly undernourished in terms of the multidisciplinary competencies required to deal with this complex issue. We present some basic research questions and areas where data gaps need to be filled.

- What are the differences in the socio-economic situation between rural areas and cities? How much hidden poverty is there? How to reach those who do not seek help? What is the situation of those who could not pay contributions for pension insurance – how are they provided for?
- What is the position of marginal groups in rural areas? How many are there and what kind of support do they need?
- What is the situation in the field of gender equality in rural areas?
- What are the possibilities of deinstitutionalising social services, especially for the elderly and single mothers?
- How to place the social issues of rural areas into public policies in this area, especially into the mechanisms of measures of the Common Agricultural Policy?

It should be pointed out that many problems that occur in rural areas are not limited to it, but are part of broader societal issues. In particular, this pertains to issues of poverty and social exclusion.

## 2. Introduction

In the starting points of discussions of rural development in national and European political documents and initiatives, the importance of considering all three, i.e., environmental, economic and social aspects of sustainability, is well-established. In concrete policies and measures, however, the relations between these aspects are most often not balanced. From the point of view of measures and financial resources, the most attention was originally given to production-related and economic issues, and in the last decade the importance of environmental content is growing markedly, while social content received the least attention of public policies in the field of rural areas.

An image is created that people in rural areas need, above all, new knowledge and technological solutions and financial incentives to cope with the challenges brought on by climate change, the globalisation of markets, economic crises and other problems. These solutions are expected to ensure their quality of life and well-being that go beyond environmental and economic dimensions. However, behind everything that happens in rural areas, both in preserving the environment and in achieving economic results, there are always people. Some are very successful, while others are less successful, even marginalised for various reasons, including specific spatial, demographic, social and cultural patterns that exist in rural areas. In order for communities in rural areas to survive, function and contribute to the expected "resilient rural areas" (Long-term vision for rural areas by 2040), it is necessary to deal with them - to pay attention to the phenomena that limit the quality of life and satisfaction of the people there, and take action.

As scientific findings prove, for coping with challenges and activating opportunities in different environments including rural areas, **social relations are decisive**. They are analytically defined quite comprehensively by **social networks, norms of reciprocity and feelings of trust - social capital** (Portes, 1998; Coleman, 1990). Communities possessing greater stocks of social capital are considered to be more connected with each other and with other entities, and perform better than communities with less of this resource.

The aim of this report was to find out how social networks function in rural areas in Slovenia, using the example of selected social networks, and to check, based on interviews with them, which social issues burden the rural population.

In doing this, we were mainly looking for answers to the following questions:

- *What are the key challenges and what are the needs in the social field for the inhabitants of the Slovenian countryside?*
- *What are the characteristics and challenges of various established social networks in the Slovenian countryside? How are they involved in social services in rural areas?*
- *What are the existing public social policy measures for rural areas and what are the examples of local stakeholder measures that address the social needs of the rural population?*
- *What public measures do these networks recommend for implementation at the local and national level? How can the Slovenian government and the EU support this?*
- *What are the knowledge gaps and what kind of research projects are needed in order to improve public policies that address social issues in the Slovenian countryside?*

We sought answers through a discussion with representatives of four selected social networks. At the meeting of the MAP SVARUN (June 2022), the following organisations were selected:

- The **Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia (AFWS)**, which deals with the issues of rural women.

- The **Association of Slovenian Rural Youth (ASRY)**, which represents the interests of young people in agriculture and the countryside.
- The **Slovenian Rural Development Network (SRDN)**, which includes representatives of Local Action Groups and other interested institutions dealing with rural development.
- **Karitas** as one of the central humanitarian organisations in the country.

All the selected networks carry out numerous and extensive activities, and they are also looking for new directions of action, including in the field of social issues (of course, this is a key activity of Karitas). In addition to the selected networks, many other humanitarian and volunteer organisations are also very active in the countryside, such as the Red Cross, the Firefighters Association of Slovenia and other non-governmental organisations. Regardless of their great importance and contribution to the quality of life in Slovenian rural areas, we believe that the selected organisations comprehensively cover the spectrum of potential social issues and enable the acquisition of facts and explanations that are sufficient for the preparation of this position paper.

The position paper was built in the following stages:

1. Based on the material prepared by the SHERPA consortium, a discussion paper was prepared for Slovenia, which includes a review of the literature and opens questions for further analysis relevant to Slovenia (April-May 2022).
2. Definition of the approach based on the discussion material, selection of social networks and creation of a questionnaire for discussions with representatives of social networks (May-June 2022; the key milestone was the meeting of the MAP SVARUN on June 2, 2022).
3. Conducting in-depth interviews with representatives of the networks (3 ASRY, 5 AFWS, 2 SRDN, 3 Karitas, in the period June-July 2022; each interview lasted 2-3 hours). Preparation of draft position paper (July-August 2022).
4. Verification of positions at a workshop at a special event with a wider circle of stakeholders within the framework of the international agri-food fair AGRA (August 22, 2022), update, adoption and dissemination of position paper (September 2022).

This position paper begins with a presentation of highlights derived from the scientific and professional literature. Then, it presents its results across three parts. In the first part, the position paper presents individual networks and try to outline the key social issues of the Slovenian countryside; in the second part, it discusses public policies in the field of support for social networks and social issues; and in the third part, it develops recommendations for improving public policies and filling research gaps in the field of social issues in rural areas. The last part of this position paper is devoted to the conclusions.

### 3. Social Networks and Social Issues in Rural Areas - Starting Points

#### 3.1. Social Networks in Rural Areas

Interest in studying social capital, defined as a combination of social networks and trust in interpersonal relationships, is considerable among researchers in Slovenia. According to the data of the national library information system Cobiss, 284 publications have been published in Slovenia on the topic of social capital in the last 30 years, since this phenomenon gained international importance. Among the scientific disciplines dealing with this topic, sociology dominates, followed by economics, pedagogy, economic policy and economic systems, and other sciences. When considering social capital in relation to rural areas, the number of scientific publications is considerably more modest – only 10 publications in the period 2007-2022. Below we summarise their main findings, and we consider some study products (Master's theses) in relation to the assessment of two questions: What is the state of social capital and its various forms in the Slovenian countryside? Which factors are increasing its stock and which ones are decreasing it?

Analysis of data from the Slovenian public opinion survey 2013 (Rebernak 2016), which included a representative sample of respondents from urban, suburban and rural areas, indicates a low level of social capital in village communities. Stocks of social capital are on average lower in rural areas compared to urban areas in terms of general trust (trust in other people, their honesty, the need to be wary in relationships with others), as well as in terms of trust in institutions (church, media, political parties, state authorities, legal system, army, police, banks, humanitarian organisations, EU institutions), with respondents from both groups expressing trust values below the normative average (i.e., low trust). Larger reserves of social capital in rural areas compared to urban areas were manifested from the point of view of social networks: in belonging to various organisations, especially associations, in which rural residents are more active.

The connection between stocks of social capital and the functioning of associations (number of associations in the area, number of inhabitants who are members of associations, cooperation between associations, financial support of municipalities to associations) is also confirmed by more detailed studies of rural areas, either comparative (Potočnik Slavič 2009, 2018) or focused on individual areas (Podmenik 2014; Vidmar 2019). The listed studies confirm the importance of associations as a generator and indicator of the stock of social capital in the countryside, which capital is attributed the power of promoting (neo)endogenous development of the countryside. At the same time, these studies also shed light on the differences in the social engagement of the population in individual rural areas, which are considerable. They are most often related to geographical and historical factors, political changes, lack of economic capital, proximity to borders and demographic emptying.

Research on social capital in rural areas in Slovenia also distinguishes between bonding, bridging and connecting social capital, and points to the effects of the unbalanced occurrence of these different types of capital on rural development. As the study of the development potential of rural tourism in three villages in the Municipality of Cerkno (Mavri and Černič Istenič 2014) showed, binding social capital alone, though abundant in the observed area, is insufficient for the initiation and expansion of such activities; development of connections with actors outside the local communities is also needed. Projects aimed at preserving and developing natural and cultural heritage, on which rural tourism depends, are professionally and financially demanding to the extent that local communities are unable to carry them out on their own. Therefore, regional networking and cooperation with governmental and professional institutions is essential, while the activities of municipalities and development agencies are also expected. The research by Rodela and Šmid (2007) on the experience with establishing the Goričko Landscape Park also conveys a similar message. It showed that social networks and the interconnection of actors across local and national borders promote the process of social learning, the distribution of knowledge and ideas, and the rise of entrepreneurial culture, which are essential for significant economic shifts in rural areas.

Research in the field of pedagogy and andragogy (Močnik 2009, Mermolja 2012, Del Gobbo and Bogataj 2014) confirms the importance of informal education, especially study groups, which have a tradition in the Slovenian countryside, for expanding social networks and strengthening bridging and connecting social capital.

The principles of the LEADER approach include promoting the creation of various types of social capital, with the aim of empowering the local population, especially in stagnant and structurally weak rural areas, to implement developmental projects in various areas of the rural economy and consequently improve the quality of life. Research in Slovenia reports (Potočnik Slavič 2022, Černič Istenič and Erhart 2021, Vidmar 2019) that the LEADER approach is a good basis for networking and strengthening social capital – trust and social learning – by creating conditions, i.e., infrastructure, such as meeting places and activities that enable new partnerships, the exchange of ideas and the implementation of joint projects. However, they also emphasise that for the actual empowerment of the local population, in addition to the stock of social capital, it is necessary to take care of the institutional, administrative and financial capacity of rural areas as well as a scientific critical reflection of what has been achieved. Here, a small number of identified scientific publications, especially in recent years, calls for a more in-depth study of incentives and obstacles for the accumulation of social capital as a condition for good relations in rural areas in Slovenia (Podmenik 2012, Perpar et al. 2013, Logar 2020). At a national level, we are witnessing significant changes in the support networks of the population – the economic recession and the aging of the population have increased the share of the population without sufficient support from formal and informal sources (Iglič 2019), but there are no recent analyses of the situation in rural areas, especially in remote areas.

### 3.2. Social Issues in Rural Areas

In addition to the concept of social capital, other concepts have been developed in sociology and broader social sciences, to help study **how and to what extent the environment, both physical-spatial and social, affects the life possibilities and outcomes for people**. Among them, the concepts of **quality of life**<sup>1</sup> and **social well-being** are particularly well-established. They are linked to the concepts of social capital and **social exclusion**<sup>2</sup> or deprivation (Fahey et al. 2004). By operationalising these concepts, it is possible to define socially disadvantaged/excluded individuals and groups, taking into account the objective and subjective aspects of their lives in different social contexts.

The first European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS), which focused on the comparison between urban and rural areas, was conducted in 2003 by the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in 28 countries, including Slovenia (Pichler et al. 2006). In terms of content, it covered six areas: employment, economic resources, family and households, community life and social participation, health and health care, and knowledge, education and training. In general, the results of the first (2003), second (2007) and third (2012) measurements (Shucksmith et al. 2009; Eurofound 2014) showed that the differences

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of quality of life has three main characteristics. It focuses on the life situations of individuals and their perceptions (micro concept); it is multidimensional and encompasses several areas of life and their mutual influence; it combines objective information about living conditions with subjective views and attitudes to provide a picture of overall well-being in society (Fahey et al. 2004; adapted from Shucksmith et al. (2009)).

<sup>2</sup> The term is generally used to denote processes and situations of exclusion of individuals and groups from the opportunities, benefits and rights (social, economic, political) that are usually available and expected in so-called western society. The concept of social exclusion is inextricably related to its opposite - social inclusion or inclusion in society through participation in the social, economic and political system, in important resources and institutions (Trbanc 1996). It is a multidimensional concept, broader than the concept of poverty, that takes into account exclusion from working life - unemployment; exclusion from the consumer society - classical poverty; exclusion from society (lack of social contacts) - isolation and exclusion from mechanisms of power and influence - cultural marginalisation (Cvahte 2004).



between cities and rural areas in all these areas are small in richer European countries (including Slovenia), while in economically poorer countries, such as Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey, they are more pronounced.

However, the comparison between urban and rural areas within individual countries by individual indicators revealed complex patterns; in different countries, urban areas performed better according to the selected indicators, in other countries rural areas performed better, and vice versa. Slovenia was placed in a group with a mixed pattern. In fact, analysis for Slovenia showed that rural areas fare worse than urban areas in terms of ability to cover monthly living expenses, social exclusion, risk of poor mental health and general dissatisfaction with life. At the same time, they are better in terms of material deprivation (possession or lack of durable life goods) and dissatisfaction with housing. No differences were observed regarding trust in local government and health.

The complexity of measuring the social position of individuals and groups in a spatial context is also confirmed by other research conducted in Slovenia. Based on data from the "Quality of life in Slovenia 1984" survey, Verlič-Dekleva (1986) concluded even during the time of the previous socio-political system, that the Slovenian countryside was characterised by **material pauperisation (poverty) and social marginalisation (inactivity) of the population**, which are not the same for all groups. Traditional social differences arising solely from the character of the place of residence no longer exist, but are rather the result of the concentration of certain social groups in certain environments: "The poor are not poor because they live in the countryside, but because they are poorly paid and because they have little social power" (ibid. 103). A large proportion of the lower and inactive socio-economic groups of the population are concentrated in the countryside, but they partake to a lesser extent in the goods of the general social standard, to which they contribute their share. According to this research, a specificity of the Slovenian countryside is also that it has an **underrepresented age group from 22 to 44 years old**, i.e., the most active part of the population, which is the most capable and active in terms of income and is socially integrated, while **older age groups dominate**, especially those aged 65 and over. The problem is not only age, but also the **social composition of the population**: most of them work in **physically demanding, difficult professions**, and do not have time and energy for social engagement, because they are exhausted from hard work. A **lower level of education**, typical of the Slovenian countryside, is also associated with less autonomy at work, fewer opportunities for advancement and poorer political and social integration. At the same time, a larger proportion of rural residents are religious than in urban areas.

Social exclusion means unacceptance of an individual or a group of people by the social environment. It deprives people of their fundamental rights and binds them to poverty, deprivation and intolerance (Hvalič Touzery 2010). It may be based on race, ethnicity, language, culture, religion, gender, age, social class, economic or health status. As research indicates, social exclusion is also related to where the individual lives and works. Trbanc (1996) defined the **profile of a socially excluded person in Slovenia** based on the consecutive survey Quality of life in Slovenia 1994: "Retrospective study 1974-1994". This is an older, poorly educated person who lives in a small place (village), alone or in an extended family, either (most often) lives and works on a farm or is unemployed or occasionally does paid work, or only as a housewife. In a representative sample of the population, 38.4 % of such persons were recorded. **Social exclusion in Slovenia is thus more concentrated in rural than in urban areas.**

Research in the field of rural sociology has drawn attention to specific indicators of the farmers or rural social exclusion and poverty (Barbič 2005: 59):

- Spending money and investing in non-material standard (education, culture, sports, holidays and entertainment) are low, despite potential savings.
- Farms where only elderly people live and have no heirs are unpromising as economic units, therefore a decrease in the standard of living of those who live on them can be expected.

- Farms whose successors cannot get a partner to create a family, which is essential for the farm's existence and progress, are also unpromising. Loneliness, alcoholism and depression are inevitable companions of single farmers.
- Disease or the absence of care for elderly sick farmers often pushes them to the very fringes of society, even to the very threshold of survival.
- Difficult access to settlements and/or individual farms is manifested in poor transport and communal infrastructure.
- Deficient health, educational and cultural infrastructure in itself puts farmers and other rural residents of all generations in an inferior position compared to residents of urban and semi-urban settlements.
- Absence or limited opportunities for social life particularly marginalise young people from rural areas, who do not have the opportunity to meet their peers, and rural women, who are traditionally confined to the family circle.

Studies in the field of social anthropology, such as the qualitative part of the research "Recognition and treatment of victims of domestic violence in the context of health care" (POND) (Knežević Hočevár 2016), reveal the **mental framework of thinking and action** of people in the Slovenian countryside, which **increases their vulnerability, social exclusion and reduces their quality of life**. Based on in-depth conversations with medical and professional staff who work with victims and perpetrators of violence, the characteristics of rurality are revealed – a high level of tolerance for domestic violence (both physical and psychological) and, consequentially, weak reporting. The source of these characteristics lies in entrenched gender discourses and constructions of femininity and masculinity, in which patriarchal patterns of power, subordination and a culture of shame are prominently reflected. At the same time, victims of violence in rural areas face a lack of help from professional services (social work centres, health services, police, judiciary, educational institutions), not only because of geographical distance, but also because experts are oftentimes familiar with both the victims and the perpetrators of violence in families, which limits them in their function. Because the countryside is inhabited by different groups of people, such an explanation, according to the author of the study, cannot be uniform for the entire countryside, but it can be a basis for explaining other social problems in the countryside, such as poverty:

*"Poverty is increasingly hidden. In general, people from other cultural areas find it much easier to ask for help, and are also less likely to hide their poverty. Meanwhile, the indigenous Slovenian population, especially in the suburbs and in the countryside, often hides its poverty and finds it difficult to seek help, especially if one has to expose oneself in any way. In the mentality, poverty is often seen as a sign of incompetence, except in the case of obvious misfortune."* (Jerebic 2008).

## **SOCIAL INSURANCE SYSTEM FOR FARMERS IN SLOVENIA**

In Slovenia, farmers insurance is granted to anyone who:

- performs agricultural activity (is a member of a farm),
- is not in school and is not a recipient of an old-age, early retirement, widow's or disability pension,
- is medically fit to carry out agricultural activity (this is determined by the occupational medicine service at the farmer's request before inclusion in social insurance) and
- has an income from agricultural activity per insured family member of at least EUR 4,894.06 per year.

An individual who does not meet the income threshold can still enter social insurance voluntarily.

Persons who are included in social insurance because of agricultural activity (farm-insured persons) are insured for old age and potential disability, for health insurance rights and for rights arising from parental care insurance. However, they are not included in unemployment insurance, as the legislation does not allow for that.

The extent of rights of farm-insured persons is not the same for everyone, but rather depends on the method and moment of inclusion in the insurance and the duration of the insurance. The insurance base, contribution rate and final number of contributions also depend on the method of inclusion. Farm-insured persons, who are compulsorily included in pension and disability insurance, are entitled to all types of pensions, and they are also entitled to all rights based on remaining working capacity (rights to vocational rehabilitation, transfer, disability compensation, etc.), an annual bonus and a bonus for help and service. The scope of rights for voluntarily insured persons depends on the duration and scope of the insurance; the narrowest scope does not allow for the right to a partial pension and disability allowance, and only exceptionally allows for a bonus for help and service. There are also differences in the scope of health insurance rights, and regardless of the method of inclusion, everyone has a right to parental care insurance.

In the last period, some innovations in the field of pension insurance were adopted. Notable above all is the rise in the lowest pensions for farmer insured persons, which before the change amounted to EUR 270 or less; now they are entitled to a pension of at least EUR 409.70. The amounts of widow's and family pensions were also increased, and the purchase of farm years was arranged. Although this is a positive development, most retired farmers still receive a pension below the poverty line. However, this is a wider problem that includes not only farmers but also other pensioners.

There is an anomaly in the social insurance system, namely the contribution that the holders of secondary activities on the farm, who are otherwise not insured as farmers, are obliged to pay. They are burdened by almost EUR 480.00 per year due to health insurance contributions alone; the majority of this amount (360.00 euros) is allocated to the contribution, which otherwise does not bring rights. Since the amount of the contribution is disproportionate to the income, many farms do not reach the annual income that would cover the mandatory contributions and costs. Ever since the introduction of this contribution, the KGZS has noticed a decline in the number of secondary activities on farms, especially those that do not bring high profits, but are traditional on farms in terms of content and important for the existence of agriculture in Slovenia. In particular, this contribution adversely affects the economy and development of smaller farms.

Source: KGZS

## 4. Results of the Analysis and Positions

### 4.1. Needs and Challenges

#### 4.1.1. Social Networks in Rural Areas – Description, Organisation and Mission of the Organisations in Question

##### ***Rural Women – The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia***

The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia, which connects women farmers and other rural women, was founded in 1995 with the aim of raising awareness of women's rights. The membership, which currently operates within 35 societies, counts 3,000 members (down from about 10,000 some decades ago). Their activities include various social events and competitions, trainings and seminars, excursions and professional meetings. They also strive to preserve rural settlements and cultural heritage, and raise awareness about problems such as violence, cancer, psychological problems, etc. Their core activities also include advocacy, with networking at the national and international level; thus, the association is, among other things, a member of the Slovenian Alliance for Agriculture, an informal association of 14 Slovenian agricultural non-governmental organisations established in 2021, which strives for a better position of farmers in society. There is no umbrella organisation of farm women at the international level. The central problems of AFWS are its non-professional (volunteer) organisation, the gradual aging of its members, and the fact that younger people are disinterested in activism and are shifting away from agriculture. The non-professional structure of the organisation is an especially large obstacle when applying for tenders.

##### ***Rural Youth – The Association of Slovenian Rural Youth***

This is an umbrella organisation of 39 societies that connects 3,000 members. It was founded in 1988 as the Association of Slovenian Farmer Youth (ASFY), and was succeeded in 1993 by the Association of Slovenian Rural Youth (ASRY). The purpose of its creation was to establish a farmer professional organisation that would connect farmers, youth and the profession. Part of their activity is organising social events such as quizzes, farm games, youth exchanges, and they play an increasingly strong role in the field of advocacy and empowerment of farmers. They also organise practical trainings, awareness campaigns. They open up new topics, such as the helplessness of the countryside, where they highlight and seek solutions for the psycho-social issues of farmers, especially the young population in the countryside. Their operation has become more systematic, structured, focused and strategic in the last 10 years. Thus, it is now divided into four basic pillars: young farmers and agricultural policy, youth policy and rural development, youth work and informal education, and international cooperation. The organisation is increasingly professionalising and growing through projects. Before them, therefore, is the renewal of the rules of financial operation and the systematisation of jobs. They are an active member of the Alliance for Agriculture, the Youth Council of Slovenia (the umbrella national association of youth organisations founded in 1996), and at the international level, the organisations Rural Youth Europe (RYE), the European Council of Young Farmers (CEJA) and the International Farm Youth Exchange (IFYE).

##### ***Connecting Local Stakeholders in Rural Development – Slovenian Rural Development Network***

The Slovenian Rural Development Network (SRND) was founded in 2002 and is therefore celebrating its 20th anniversary this year. It includes 33 out of 37 Local Action Groups (LAGs) and some other institutions and individuals (50 members). It acts as a connector and information exchange centre, and connects and represents LAGs in communication with the state and represents their interests in the formulation and implementation of LEADER/CLLD policy. The association operates in four areas: information, training and promotion; national info-point for Community-Led Local Development (CLLD); collaboration, advocacy and networking at the national level; international cooperation. Within the framework of these functions, it

informs its members about the activities carried out by the association, key events in the field of CLLD and of the Rural Network, it organises various events in the field of rural development (e.g., LAG meetings, co-organises Slovenian rural parliaments and participates in European rural parliaments, among other things). SRND is a member of the international associations European Network for Rural Development (ENRD), European LEADER Network for Rural Development (ELARD) and PREPARE – Partnership for Rural Europe. Their structure is non-professional, they do not have employees, but they do have a professional operation (employees from LAGs) and use external contractors according to their capabilities for administrative matters; they are facing a lack of financial resources for the organisation's needs. They need to expand their activities to various issues of rural development, so that they do not become only a representative of LAGs.

### **Humanitarian Organisations in the Countryside – Karitas**

The first Caritas was founded in 1897, eventually growing into an international network that was officially recognised in 1954. The mission of Caritas follows the mission of the Catholic Church to serve the poor and promote charity and justice around the world (Caritas, 2022). Caritas Slovenia (Slovenska Karitas), founded in 1990, is a network that is generally based on the spatial network of the diocesan organisation, under which volunteer organisations operate at the level of local parishes. In 1990, three diocesan Caritas were also founded – Ljubljana, Koper and Maribor, and later Novo mesto (2006), Murska Sobota (2007) and Celje (2007). By the end of 2012, 444 Parish, Deanery and Regional Caritas were established. Three institutes were also established to implement specific social programs.



*Figure 1: Karitas structural scheme. Mednarodna Karitas = Caritas international; Evropska Karitas = European Caritas; Slovenska Karitas = Caritas Slovenia. ŠKMS = Diocesan Caritas Murska Sobota. ŽK = Parish Caritas. Source: Diocesan Caritas Murska Sobota (<http://www.karitasms.si/website-builder/o-nas>)*

The foundation of Caritas' operation is voluntary work - in 2012, 9,413 permanent volunteers worked in Parish Caritas (Caritas, 2022). There can be 1,000 or more volunteers in one diocesan Caritas, but the number is gradually decreasing; at the level of smaller local groups (parish Caritas) in rural areas, there may be 10 or fewer female volunteers. The volunteers are predominantly women, mostly middle-aged and older. The organisation is trying to acquire younger volunteers, but is generally not concerned about excessive loss of members.



#### **4.1.2. Social Issues in Rural Areas - Highlights of the Organisations**

##### ***Rural Women – The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia***

The women's issue is still very much alive and pressing in the countryside, especially on farms. Mainly, farmer women cannot pay for social insurance due to the preservation of traditional economic relations in the farmer family (ownership and economic power), they perform unpaid work and have no income of their own. On smaller farms, men usually took on additional work, while women stayed at home. These aspects also contribute to the fact that women no longer want to work on farms, which in turn contributes to the emptying of the countryside.

In addition, they raise more general issues such as:

- psychological and physical violence, including in the family circle and especially against the elderly,
- poverty and hidden poverty, low pensions,
- psychological pressure and poor relationships,
- lack of social services – child care, adequate care for the elderly, help at home (also 'forced' institutionalisation),
- lack of infrastructure – banks, post offices, rural schools, venues for events and education,
- problem of migrants from urban areas and weekenders who have no understanding of agriculture and are often not ready for dialogue,
- lack of solidarity – they point out that a lot of damage was done by the ban on inter-neighbourly aid,
- addictions – in addition to alcohol, people are becoming increasingly addicted to mobile phones.

##### ***Rural Youth – The Association of Slovenian Rural Youth***

An important issue they deal with is the decent life of farmers. The purchase prices do not cover the costs and even the young farmers (beneficiaries of measure M6 within the Rural Development Programme of the Common Agricultural Policy) hold jobs despite the acquired funds. There is no good support mechanism, farmers do not get access to knowledge, capital and land. There is no system of informing and counselling in these areas. Therefore, the key activity of ASRY is advocacy and thus access of young farmers to institutions.

The key issues in the area of rural development are housing (also infrastructure) and a weak labour market. In addition, they emphasise the importance of relationships, particularly in relation to the following issues:

- mutual understanding between generations, change of priorities, mental shifts in terms of changes in the organisation of work and business after passing over the farm,
- women: being trapped in stereotypes and lack of inclusion in decision making; only 20% of farm wives have their own transaction account; many are uninsured and some are abused,
- inadequate communication and mental distress of different generational groups on farms,
- mutual neighbourly pressures and bullying, stratification and division,
- lack of understanding for the characteristics of the farming population outside of agriculture, including e.g., by public systems, e.g., doctors, social workers, etc.,
- issue of siblings, which particularly stands out when it comes to inheritance.

Many of the discussed issues are - to a lesser or greater extent- also related to poverty and the inadequate system of social insurance and pensions, which affect both the young and the old. Over-indebtedness (loans)

and living from hand to mouth are common, and poverty in social ties is an important aspect too. As a matter of fact, there are fewer and fewer farms in the countryside, and thus also mutual aid.

### ***Connecting Local Stakeholders in Rural Development – Slovenian Rural Development Network***

The SNRD reports that in the Slovenian LEADER/CLLD approach, a considerable number of projects have a social character, and they are related to the mitigation of social issues of the wider rural population. The number of such projects in each LAG area depends primarily on the attitude of the leading partner towards this issue.

These projects emphasise that the loss of quality of life in rural areas also depends significantly on the abolition of unprofitable infrastructure – post offices (and postmen, who may also have a significant social function), ATMs and similar ones, which would be relatively easy to change in a short time. Furthermore, they see more and more problems and dilemmas when dealing with especially younger groups of seniors, which they try to cover within the framework of their projects (animation, movement, mobility, day care, on-call childcare, etc.). This group falls out of public care, as state social care through homes for the elderly deals only with the oldest population due to a lack of capacity, but not with retirees who are still active and represent a large idle social capital. They are also a great potential for various autonomous and locally specific projects implemented within the framework of the LEADER/CLLD approach.

In the social field, various LAGs in Slovenia mostly work with the elderly as well as young people, and the contractors are various employment centres and associations covering individual groups (e.g., single mothers, farmer women associations).

SNRD representatives also highlighted the problem between urban and rural and the farmer-newcomer relationship, in relation to which LAGs could help with mutual understanding through joint activities and by preventing the formation of closed groups.

### ***Humanitarian Organisations in the Countryside – Karitas***

The interlocutors highlighted the great importance of hidden hardships in the face of low pensions and unemployment, as well as loneliness. They cite cases where people cannot pay bills for years, do not have health insurance and do not see a doctor. According to them, generally it can be said that the percentage of people in need is growing, but crises predominantly come in waves (e.g., during migration due to wars in the Balkans or job losses due to the closure of major companies or due to Covid). In cases where people remain unemployed, tensions arise in families, especially in intergenerational households, where we can observe a combination of low (farm, factory) pensions and unemployment, mutual recriminations and the pushing aside of the elderly.

In agriculture, the young leave unprofitable farms, while the elderly remain alone. There are also more and more cases where adult men (40-50 years old) live with their mothers and are not even looking for work. Addiction, especially to alcohol, is relatively common, but not ubiquitous. In terms of significant differences with the city, they mention that people in cities are quicker to seek help with paying bills and food, while in villages there is a bit more of personal reluctance to seek help, perhaps also due to social pressure, but on the other hand there is more solidarity. It should be emphasised that there is a significantly larger information gap in the village; people who need help are at a loss, they do not know how and cannot obtain the necessary information, what to do in individual cases, how to arrange things or access available support.

Regardless of having good access to people in the field, there are always cases they cannot get to them. Roma represented a distinct problem in some communities; communication with them is particularly difficult and requires an adapted approach and ongoing learning.

## 4.2. Public and Private Support and Activities

Table 1 – Examples of actions carried out by local stakeholders

Organisation	Action title	Description	Link
The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia	Women – the pillar of health (including men's)	Organisation of training and lectures on health and interpersonal relationships, including prostate cancer	<a href="https://med.over.net/zenske-v-boj-proti-moskemu-raku/">https://med.over.net/zenske-v-boj-proti-moskemu-raku/</a>
The Association of Slovenian Rural Youth	imPOTENCE (neMOČ) of the Countryside	Workshops to raise awareness of the importance of mental health, and empower stakeholders to recognise mental distress and deal with it	<a href="https://zspm.si/nemoc-podezelja/">https://zspm.si/nemoc-podezelja/</a>
Caritas Slovenia	MIND – Migrations. Connectedness. Development..	Raising awareness of development issues and their impact on the phenomenon of migration	<a href="https://www.karitas.si/projekt-mind-migracije-povezanost-razvoj/">https://www.karitas.si/projekt-mind-migracije-povezanost-razvoj/</a>
Slovenian Rural Development Network	Adults above 50 as an instrument for rural development	Participation in the project and organisation of a seminar in Slovenia on the topic of adult education with the aim of better utilisation of the social capital of the elderly in rural areas	<a href="http://www.drustvo-podezelje.si/capacities">http://www.drustvo-podezelje.si/capacities</a>

### 4.2.1. Social Networks in Rural Areas

#### ***Rural Women – The Association of Farmer Women of Slovenia***

Representatives of the organisation participate in the Council for Agriculture, as well as in the special Council for Women in Rural Areas, consultative bodies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food (MAFF). They also receive some funding from the ministry. However, they would like to see more cooperation between the state social system and non-governmental organisations, more understanding of agricultural activity within the framework of the social welfare system, and interdepartmental cooperation. There is no strong inter-institutional cooperation, but some associations have good connections with local communities (municipalities). They also talk to the Agricultural and Forestry Chamber of Slovenia (AFCS) and are well connected within informal networks, e.g. Alliance for Agriculture.

They try to raise awareness about the problems of rural women, as well as broader issues, through advocacy, organising and participating in various lectures, seminars, workshops and excursions. Surveys have also been carried out in the past and they have their own SOS telephone. However, this association does not have its own experts and professional organisation, so the big problem is the lack of a systemic source of funding; they are partners in projects, but they do not have the capacity to apply independently.

#### ***Rural Youth – The Association of Slovenian Rural Youth***

ASRY has representation within the Council for Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the Republic of Slovenia (an advisory body of the line ministry, which also has an important coordinating role in agricultural policy), and it also works closely with AFCS and the Public Agricultural Advisory Service (JSKS) within it, with which they cooperate in various activities. They also cooperate with the Agency for Agricultural Markets and Rural

Development (ARSKTRP) in terms of rapprochement between the institutions. They receive permanent funding from the MAFF and the Office of the Republic of Slovenia for Youth. What they miss is a more respectful and creative attitude from the state, including turning the words spoken about the importance of young people and various promises into concrete actions and measures, as well as thinking outside the framework of the capital.

They see as their main advantage that they have a respectable (significant) critical mass and media presence, a quality program (they know where they want to go), and at the same time, their membership also sees a benefit for themselves and for individual associations due to their strong advocacy function. They strive to raise awareness among children in schools, a large part of the membership is young (15-25 years old) and they organise various games and excursions for them, and for those over 25 who take over farms and start to be interested in agricultural policy, they offer appropriate support. When they took over the activities of representing for young farmers, they also acquired a considerable number of young people who are otherwise not members of the organisation, but take ASRY as their advocacy organisation. This broadened the range of issues the network deals with, while at the same time such an approach strengthened their competence and public profile. By establishing communication with non-farmers (newcomers), they also manage to mitigate conflicts.

Consolidation of the current scope of operations and further professionalisation are more important to them than further expansion of activities. The positive results of strategic consideration from years ago (preparation of the program in 2020, when they outlined the work for the future and structured it into areas) and then strategic action in the creation of structures and processes of operation are showing. In terms of the strategic nature of their operations, they are a good example for others, as they note that mutual and binding strategic planning is necessary for the operation of the organisation, which in practice is also reflected in regular work meetings where open issues are resolved.

### ***Connecting Local Stakeholders in Rural Development – Slovenian Rural Development Network***

The operation of the SRDN is largely dependent on projects. There is no permanent source of funding to expand their activity. As in some other EU member states, the network for rural areas at MAFF could be outsourced, which would allow it to be more substantive and involved in the work of organisations in rural areas. The representatives of the association highlighted the broader framework of the LEADER/CLLD, as this is the primary task of the SNRD. They cooperate with MAFF and also receive some resources for the organisation from it (less and less). In doing so, they note that the broader and more comprehensive policy of rural development is still excessively the stepchild of agricultural policy and is always in the last place among the priorities of the relevant ministry. The area is addressed due to 'compulsion' from above (from the EU level), whereby this depends to a certain extent on the respective government. This subordination is reflected in the low share of funds for LEADER/CLLD and also in the loss of already agreed funds when confrontation with agricultural policy stakeholders.

In addition to the MAFF, there is good cooperation with the community of municipalities (which, on the other hand, appropriate CLLD funds to implement infrastructure projects) and, if necessary, with other departments (Ministry of Economy, Technology and Development – MGRT, and Service for Regional Development and Cohesion - SVRK). The European Social Fund (ESF) and the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs (MDDSZ) should enter the CLLD system. The problem that occurs at the state level is weak interdepartmental coordination and negative competence disputes ('shifting of responsibilities' from ministry to ministry), which also relates to inadequate competences and databases of the administrative apparatus (lack of appropriate measures, indicators, etc.).

In addition to the narrow sectoral approach, the centralisation of policy is a key problem in the formulation of a broader concept of rural development policy. In the social field, this is visible in the fact that in the periphery, as a result, individuals and entire groups fall out of the social network and are left without basic services, but it is also related to the lack of vision and structure at the national level. An important part of

LAG projects has a social aspect (200 in total!); social goals are also written in all 37 strategies. A lot of work is done with the young and the elderly. Unfortunately, many projects dry up after the LEADER/CLLD measure funding ends because the public system does not take them over. There would be more social projects, but the associations representing various social groups are poorly staffed. In the future, it can be expected that due to greater administrative complexity and the need for prior financing of project activities, many societies that currently carry out good social projects in rural areas will no longer exist.

### ***Humanitarian Organisations in the Countryside – Karitas***

Caritas is an organisationally and financially extremely well-organised network in the countryside. The representatives highlighted their activities and experiences, and especially the aspects of cooperation with public organisations in the social and humanitarian fields.

The Caritas network carries out very diverse and locally specific direct aid activities, adapted to the scale of the problems and the needs of people in distress, such as payment of monetary expenses (e.g. heating, electricity, health insurance), food aid (distribution, soup kitchen), educational assistance, visiting and talking to disabled and elderly people (alleviating loneliness), psychological and emotional support, provision of accommodation, clothing and footwear, rental of disability aids and provision of support services (legal, medical assistance, speech therapist). They also organise trainings, e.g., training for help at home and for working with groups. In the event of exceptional events (migrants, Covid, Ukrainian crisis), they have a great capacity for large-scale engagement, scouts occasionally help them, and sometimes also teachers from elementary schools and students in the context of optional school content. They reach people in different ways; they highlighted the information of visiting nurses, who in Slovenia work with individuals with medical care needs, and also have a good insight into the situation on the ground.

The interlocutors emphasise the importance of the vision and idea of what the employees and volunteers will do for the continued good functioning of the organisation. This is especially true for project-oriented young people. For young people, they also have Young Caritas (Mlada Karitas), holiday programmes and 16 intergenerational groups.

In terms of cooperation with public institutions, the interlocutors mentioned receiving food for distribution from the European Union and solid cooperation with centres for social work, where the possibility of exchanging information is limited both because of the confidentiality of personal data and because of gaining trust and personal relationships with aid users. They also cooperate relatively well with schools. They are mainly financed by voluntary contributions and internal resources, they have more difficult access to public resources (not least because they carry the stigma of a religious organisation, even though they help everyone, not just religious people), among other things, because they are not embedded in the system. They wish for additional public projects, because more could be done with additional public support. They are extending their activities to individual legal, social and health support services, but there are no systematic public resources for this and most activities remain at a volunteer level.

### **4.2.2. Social Issues in Rural Areas**

**Socio-economic and cultural relations in the countryside are changing rapidly.** Traditional relationships and social roles of family members, the young and the elderly, are changing. On most farms, agriculture is not a sufficient source of livelihood, and there are not many other sources of livelihood, especially in more remote parts of the countryside. Pensions are often low (especially low among the farming population) and people are burdened (also emotionally) with real estate, the ownership of which limits them in obtaining social assistance; they often **do not have information either, do not know where to turn, or do not want to**. The **chain of social hardship thus generally originates in material hardship**, which can be joined by other negative phenomena. **The elderly are particularly exposed, as well as women; young people are leaving in large numbers and those who stay often face loneliness and dependency.** Below we briefly highlight the key sets of social issues in the Slovenian countryside, as



we were able to summarise them from interviews with the participants of the 4 presented rural networks and workshop, conducted during the fair AGRA.

### ***The Economic Situation and Rural Poverty***

Many farms, as well as other traditional rural households, are in **a weak economic position, which is generally the cause of various forms of social issues and hardships** in the Slovenian countryside. In the most exposed remote parts of the countryside, as much as ten percent or more of households can be classified as socially extremely endangered (applies at least to the area of north-eastern and south-eastern Slovenia, additional research is needed). Among them, in extreme cases, we also find households whose members do not even have the means to pay for health insurance and electricity, and are facing high interest and judicial enforcements due to a few unpaid bills. The occurrence of poverty in the countryside is also strongly linked to the loss of jobs (examples of the collapse of larger industrial companies in Pomurje). The amount of humanitarian aid distributed in the form of food has thus been increasing over the years.

**Rural poverty is often hidden** because it is difficult for people to admit it. Humanitarian organisations play an important role in its discovery, but it is made more difficult by the disappearance of certain public services, such as the post office, where there was at least a certain degree of physical contact.

The quality of life, especially in more remote parts of the countryside, also depends significantly on infrastructure such as shops, banks and schools. Their absence increases social distress and loneliness, and accelerates the emptying of these areas. The **preservation and re-establishment of infrastructure** was significantly emphasised by all interlocutors, both in the interviews and in the workshops.

In the field of agriculture, less profitable, smaller farms face a vicious circle, which is partly the result of eternal price pressures on the one hand, and on the other several positive feedback loops: **farmers who are not guaranteed any right to their own resources (pocket money) after the transfer do not pass on farms, and many therefore do not develop**. Often, such farms also do not compete (successfully) in tenders for investment funds due to the large administrative burden. The **disproportionate administrative burden for farmers in general** was also highlighted in relation to the performance of activities and the enforcement of social insurance rights. According to some interlocutors, the transfer of farms is also hampered by the consequences of obtaining funds within the framework of this agricultural policy measure, which are counted as an increase in assets and consequently reduce entitlement to other (social) policy measures. Since, in their view, these are basic funds for the activity, but not for increasing assets, they proposed additional benefits for young farmers taking over the farm, such as exemption from paying taxes, benefits for paying for kindergarten and the like.

### ***Physical and Mental Health, Addictions and Violence***

In rural areas, significantly **poorer access to health and other services**, including psychotherapists, is common. At the same time, **information about aspects of mental health is worse, and the topic is still a relative taboo**, so people do not know how to seek help and do not talk, but rather resort to addictions (alcohol, food, other drugs), and problems are also reflected in various forms of **psychological and even physical violence** that is present within families, also with a special inter-gender and inter-generational note. Entrenched **patriarchal patterns**, in which one person has the upper hand and the others are forced to follow 'command', still strongly define relationships on farms, even (or especially) in transfers to young transferees when the transferors are unwilling or unable to pass on also business decision-making or dialogue cannot be established.

Often the **mental state is associated with poverty and a sense of helplessness**; there were more cases of suicides of over-indebted farmers. Here, too, the origin of problems can lie in **intergenerational conflicts** sometimes also related to in-laws or new members of the farms, who may bring with them different habits and views.

The aspect of **loneliness, especially among the elderly**, related to leaving the countryside or abandoning farming due to unprofitability, was strongly emphasised. A distinct social phenomenon is also the occurrence of single men (sometimes even younger ones) who live alone on a farm or with their parents, usually mothers, with all the consequences for the quality of life and the rise of social hardships, which can be even more pronounced after the death of their mothers, when these men are not capable of living independently.

### ***Individual Social Groups***

#### **Women**

The women's issue and the issue of **gender equality** in rural areas, especially on farms, remains, is often hidden and only takes on new forms. Public systems do not detect this issue and have no direct measures to solve it. Economic helplessness or dependency is very present - most farm wives (80% according to the participants' estimation) have no transactional account of their own, or their own income, property or savings. A significant portion of them is excluded from the pension system. The position in the family is often unequal and subject to social stereotypes; women are rarely the holders of the farm as 'a woman is not someone who works on a tractor', and at the same time, relatively strong feminisation is taking place in the field of education for the agricultural profession.

The invisible work of women is still strongly present, underestimated and taken for granted. Some interlocutors mentioned prenuptial and partnership agreements as one of the potential solutions, as well as de-tabooisation of this topic.

Single mothers with school-age children are a particularly sensitive category in rural areas.

#### **Rural youth**

**The quality** of life in the countryside discourages many. Non-agricultural jobs are weak in most rural areas – either scarce or relatively low-paid. The weak economic situation in agriculture (mainly small and medium-sized farms) leads to hardship. On the other hand, many young people are waiting to take over the farm, but in the meantime, they do not have co-decision rights, there is no dialogue. However, after the takeover, intergenerational conflict is common due to the changes, which are perceived differently by both groups. Undefined relationships between siblings, who cannot all take over the farm, are also a problem, and solidarity between them is breaking down.

#### **Elderly in the Countryside**

This group is **particularly underprivileged** and their **marginalisation is the greatest, their social network is the weakest, and loneliness the strongest**. A weak pension system keeps elderly farmers and some factory workers in poverty without other income. After reaching a certain age, they become a burden on families, and they cannot afford homes for the elderly. Some solve their social situation by handing over their property to municipalities or the church, which can trigger social conflicts with other parts of the family who do not live on the farm, but feel entitled to the inheritance. Often, transferors are left without their own funds after passing on the farm (in the form of a pension or pocket money - rent).

Neglect stems, among other things, from digital illiteracy and therefore **poor access to information**. Social activity (e.g., day care, home visits, intergenerational cooperation, digital training, etc.) is established through various initiatives and projects (SRND, Caritas), but afterwards there is no transfer of these projects to the public system or there is a lack of funds for this.

#### **Change in the Social Structure of the Village: "Newcomers"**

Various immigrants and weekenders often come into **value (and practical) conflicts** with the 'natives', especially farmers, often over trivial matters such as the stench from manure, noise from necessary farm work and the like. These relations are especially problematic when urban dwellers immigrate (or come to the country to rest) and have certain expectations of the new environment, but are not prepared for dialogue or

compromises. There is certainly not enough dialogue between these groups, but it is expanding especially in the more developed part of the countryside, where the villages are changing their demographic structure. Due to growing pressures and social demands, some participants in the workshops even suggested that the right to farm should be included in the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia.

### **The Roma**

The Roma are a relatively **special marginal group**. Members are affected by poverty on one hand, and therefore they often ask for help, and on the other hand, its cultural specifics (at least the apparent rejection of the dominant value system and social structure) make integration into normal social systems difficult or impossible; the degree of their integration is different in different parts of Slovenia.

## **4.3. Recommendations**

### **4.3.1. Recommendations for Future Public Policies for Rural Areas**

#### ***Social Networks in Rural Areas***

All the organisations in question are ready and able to expand their activities even more strongly with more generous public and project support, including taking over certain public services (e.g., legal, psychotherapeutic or informational assistance). This is what they are all trying to do, with the ASRY standing out in particular, as it is working rapidly on the functional training of its members. Untapped potential is also evident in the organisation and provision of social services. Many good ideas do not come to fruition due to the increasing difficulty of obtaining funds, the necessary professionalisation of applications, as well as the exclusion of some stakeholders. It is also common for projects that have been implemented and proven to be of high quality and useful for users, to cease to exist after funding has been cut, if the organisations are unable to ensure continued operation.

Given that among the organisations discussed, the more successful ones (in terms of growth or decline in the number of members, clear vision and long-term survival) are those that are at least partially professionalised, it can be concluded that an important aspect of their existence is the ability to access sources of funds, either in terms of permanent public funding or in terms of public or even market projects. Possible support for their operation could therefore be in the form of **support for professionalisation, project application and simplification of administrative requirements for tenders**.

The next important aspect is the connection of the not-so-few organisations working in this field, which has been growing recently, but there is no real organised or at least partially formalised form of permanent cooperation, which is why cooperation is left to the initiative of individuals. One possible solution would be joint secretariats, which would help coordinate both substantive work and administration, and communication with authorities.

The same applies to public systems, where there is a distinct lack of inter-departmental cooperation (an example of this is the exclusion of the ESF from CLLD) with simultaneous centralisation, which is the reason why remote rural areas are most affected. Despite many good ideas and cooperation between voluntary (and other) networks and the public system, the social capital of rural areas is not adequately activated due to the flawed approaches of the public system.

#### ***Social Issues in Rural Areas***

Slovenia has a functioning public health and pension system and a relatively wide range of social policy measures. With the exception of the farmers' pension insurance system and M6 (RDP CAP measure), there are no specific measures intended for the rural population. The present research indicates that, especially in more remote areas, pronounced social hardships occur. These social hardships, due to their specificity and spatial dispersion, are only partially discovered and solved by the public social policy system. Agricultural

policy, which swears by sustainability through the European vision, only marginally addresses social aspects through partial projects, which are mainly found in the form of LEADER/CLLD measures. The latter bring quite good practice, which, however, does not become part of the public system after the completion of the projects. We see the solution in the **inclusion of the ESF in the LEADER/CLLD approach**, which would enable a better addressing of the growing (or at least increasingly exposed) social problems of rural areas.

Among the simpler proposals in the field of agricultural policy, the implementation of which would not require large legislative interventions nor disproportionate costs, are also the provision of funds for the transferors of farms, the conversion of the measure for young acquirers from a tender to a permanent one, and the **reduction of the administrative burden for beneficiaries**. In order to improve relations in the family when the farms are transferred to the transferees, it would be advisable to introduce additional counselling, in the framework of which the representatives of both generations of the agricultural holding would be explained what the transfer means from the point of view of decision-making and relations on the farm.

Conversations with representatives of successfully operating social networks clearly showed that there are pressing social issues in the Slovenian countryside that require a thorough overhaul of the social policy for rural areas, which will take into account its specifics. For instance, in many cases, relation to agriculture, ownership of often dilapidated real estate, poorer access to information, an older (and less educated) population on average, and less willingness to seek external help. Key elements:

*a) Improving public social support:*

- upgrade and improvement of the pension system for agricultural insured persons (all, mandatory inclusion of women as well)
- special forms of social support for poorer farms (or adaptation of general ones to suit; often, due to real estate, farms exceed the thresholds for obtaining social support)
- scholarship support for farm youth (similar to households in general: due to immovable property, they exceed the quotas for scholarships)

*b) Other measures to improve the quality of life in rural areas:*

- preservation or public support for basic infrastructure where the market does not provide it due to unprofitability; at the same time, additional support and stimulation of connecting, especially cultural activities in rural areas
- reducing the administrative burden for farmers (and other rural people) in exercising their rights under agricultural and other policies, which especially applies to generational renewal measures
- special and additional regional policy measures for more remote parts of the countryside (additional focus and funds)

*c) Information support:*

- information offices (info-points) for legal and social assistance (to be included in existing networks, strengthening the non-governmental sector...); SOS telephones and other forms of assistance in case of emotional and mental distress
- campaigns and groups for dialogue, de-tabooing and de-stigmatisation of social issues (poverty, health and mental problems, problems in relationships and addictions); inclusion of these topics into formal education, adapted to different rural social groups

*d) Institutional changes in social policy towards rural areas:*

- the European Social Fund should enter LEADER/CLLD;

- within the framework of agricultural policy, the social pillar should be significantly strengthened, both in terms of allocated financial resources and in terms of the data and personnel expertise of the relevant institutions (e.g. advisory services); in this, agricultural and other (social) policy measures should be clearly delineated
- good projects that organise social services should be transferred to the public system of providing these services (contribution to deinstitutionalisation)
- strengthening interdepartmental cooperation and establishing an interdepartmental working group for social issues in rural areas

#### **4.3.2. Recommendations for Future Research**

The first problem that arises when making research (and policy) recommendations about the countryside is that rural areas is not even properly defined. Statistical data, especially on social matters (e.g., IRSSV, 2021) and indicators of quality of life exist (whereas their quality should probably also be confirmed; see e.g., ESPON, 2021), but they are aggregated at the level of administrative units – municipalities, statistical or cohesion regions, but we do not have a clear definition of what constitutes rural areas in Slovenia. At the same time, research is being carried out on various aspects of the functioning of social networks in rural areas and the quality of life within individual organisations, which are partial and do not have systemic funding (Klemenčič et al., 2018; Nared et al., 2019; Nared et al., 2019; Potočnik Slavič, 2010, 2019). We already highlighted this in one of the previously formulated positions within the framework of the SVARUN junction (SVARUN, 2020). However, below we try to give some proposals for research questions or areas where data gaps need to be filled.

##### ***Social Networks in Rural Areas***

- How to connect organisations that can provide extra-institutional social services? What is the possibility and sense of establishing a register of such organisations?
- What is the role and extent of social networks in rural areas? What types of networks do we know? How to encourage their creation?
- Rural women: what is the model of effective organising, the selection and types of activities, the approach to people and their motivation for organising?
- How to empower and provide a supportive environment for rural people in the field of mental health care?
- Possibilities of expanding the work of humanitarian organisations to services and formalised support in the implementation of public tasks in the field of social policy

##### ***Social Issues in Rural Areas***

- What are the differences in the socio-economic situation between rural areas and cities? How much hidden poverty is there? How to reach those who do not seek help? What is the situation of those who could not pay contributions for pension insurance - how are they taken care of?
- What is the position of marginal groups in rural areas (the elderly, women, immigrants)? How many are there and what kind of support do they need?
- What is the situation in the field of gender equality in rural areas?
- What are the possibilities of deinstitutionalising social services, especially for the elderly and single mothers?
- How to place the social issues of rural areas into public policies in this field, especially into the mechanisms of measures of the Common Agricultural Policy?



## 5. Conclusions

### ***The Question of Quality of Life in the Countryside Rediscovered***

Twenty-five years ago, rural sociologist Ana Barbič (1997) drew attention to the fact that Slovenian agricultural policy and its institutions, such as the Agricultural Advisory Service, did not deal either with the poverty of farmers as their target population or with the poverty of rural communities as their target areas. As already mentioned above, she also drew attention to the specifics of poverty and social exclusion of the farming/rural population, which should be measured with specific indicators in addition to those taken into account in larger surveys, such as the longitudinal Slovenian public opinion and the Quality of Life in Slovenia. Comparison between the indicators defined by Barbič based on international research and her research on the farm family and other groups living in the countryside (summarised in section 2.2) and the set of social issues stated and emphasised by the interlocutors of selected rural non-governmental organisations, gives the impression that not much has changed for the better in the last twenty-five years. Given the even larger set of problematic topics identified, it seems that there are actually more problems today. On the other hand, it is likely that the activities of the selected organisations contributed to the discussion of some topics, such as mental health and violence in the family; people speak more openly and critically about them today than in the past, even in rural areas.

In order for additional changes for the better to take place in this regard, in addition to the active operation of non-governmental organisations, changes in the operation of public institutions are also necessary both at the local and national level. In particular, it is necessary to increase their social responsibility, professionalism and dialogue at the intersectoral level, and to pay attention to the situation "on the ground"; check and refine practices, e.g., administrative obstacles and poor flow of information to beneficiaries of services, which limit the quality of life of people in rural areas, especially for the most vulnerable. As already noted, Slovenia is a welfare state and has an existing public health and social system with a relatively wide range of social policy measures. However, there is a gap between the letter on paper and the actual welfare of the people; there are many cases of unrealised rights due to the nature of work and non-inclusion in the social insurance system, e.g., in the case of the right to parental and maternity leave, care for the elderly, appropriate working conditions on farms, etc. We can assume that such and similar inconsistencies between the legal system and everyday life practice, which create hardships, stress and bad relationships among people, encourage the departure of young people from the countryside and farms, among other things.

### ***A Thorough Revision of the Social Policy towards Farm Households is Necessary***

The carried-out analysis indicates the specific expression of general social issues in forms related only to rural areas. We rediscovered the characteristic phenomena of social exclusion and poor quality of life for a significant part of the rural population. The phenomena of severe but hidden poverty, widespread gender inequality in farm households (with one of the gravest positions of women in society in general), growing conflicts in intergenerational relations, mental helplessness, loneliness and poverty of the elderly, lack of information and direct support for the affected, demand a thorough revision of public policies.

Among the proposals that require careful assessment and detailed argumentation, the question of farmers' pensions and, above all, the economic situation of farmers, organised counselling for various types of issues adapted to the rural population, and society's attitude towards the elderly in the countryside should also be highlighted.

The positions can thus also be taken as a call to the institutions and individuals involved in this debate to thoroughly reflect and change public policies in this area. We propose greater integration of European Social Fund resources and measures into rural development policy measures (mainly LEADER). Agricultural policy must also consider how and in what proportion the available funds will be allocated to the third pillar of sustainability. The research and discussion within the framework of the preparation of these positions clearly showed the importance of various issues of the quality of life of the rural population, which in many ways go

beyond the narrow framework of views on agricultural policy, so far limited only to production and recently extended to environmental aspects.

### ***Social Issues in Rural Areas are Still a Largely Unexplored Area***

Insight into the conditions on the ground and the improvement of the operation of public institutions also need professional and scientific support. As noted above, such data and records are missing. As shown by the review of completed and ongoing projects within the framework of Horizon 2020 (Černič Istenič 2022), the topics of projects covering the social dimension of rural areas at the European level were, until recently, quite modest, overshadowed by the interest and preoccupation of researchers with more environmental, agro-technological and economic managerial (innovation) topics. Recent tenders for projects under Horizon Europe indicate an awakening of interest and a greater emphasis on social issues.

International comparisons, in which researchers from Slovenia can also be involved through such projects, contribute to a good insight into the situation at the national and local level, but at the same time, projects on the mentioned topic must also be implemented and financed at the national level. This is important for obtaining even more accurate and continuous information from the field, useful for political decision-making and action, as well as for the preservation and development of academic and research staff that is highly qualified and competent for studying the social dimensions of the countryside. Unfortunately, at the moment in Slovenia such experts can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

In this position paper, we list some specific topics that should be investigated – we mention in particular the issues of intergenerational relations, gender equality, trust and willingness to cooperate. This is only the beginning of contemplation. If we, as a society, want to deal more seriously with issues of the quality of life in rural areas, we will also need to seriously consider the need for research and, above all, the creation of a critical mass of researchers and consultants who would work in the multi-disciplinary field of rural social science and help solve the complex challenge welfare of the population and quality of life in Slovenia.

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## Annex 1 – Questionnaire

### QUESTIONNAIRE FOR ORGANISATIONS - INTERVIEW ON SOCIAL ISSUES (IMPACT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON THE QUALITY OF LIFE) IN THE RURAL AREA

#### ***General information about the operation of the organisation as a social network in rural areas:***

- a. Briefly describe the operation of your organisation - method of work, organisational characteristics, number of members, socio-demographic characteristics of members (e.g., gender, age, education, place of residence, etc.), tasks of members, how long you have been working, etc.
- b. What do you consider to be your main achievements and successes? What progress do you see in the last (e.g., five) years? What would you attribute it to?
- c. Which strong points in the operation and organising of your organisation do you see as key to the success of your operation? What about the weak points? What improvements would be possible? Where do you see opportunities and threats for your operation in the future?
- d. What public policies and regulations affect the institutional functioning of your organisation and related organisations? (Here we are more interested in regulations and support from the field of non-governmental organisations than substantive policies)

#### ***Quality of Life in Rural Areas (With Emphasis on Social Issues)***

- a. As experts on the situation in rural areas, what social issues do you recognise in rural areas in general (poverty, issues of the elderly, women, young people, the situation of marginalised groups, problems in mutual relations, addictions, loneliness, mental health, limited access to services, infrastructure, etc.)? What pressing social issues do you face in your work in your rural environment?
- b. How would you rank them in order of importance? Determine the first three (In general and especially in your immediate environment).
- c. What pressing topics have you tackled in particular in the last period? Who initiated this?
- d. How, in what way do you solve or are trying to solve these issues if you deal with them directly?
- e. Through private initiatives; Through public policies (national and EU); In cooperation with public services, researchers-scientists and other organisations; with social innovation
- f. With whom do you most successfully collaborate? Did you have problems with anyone in terms of unresponsiveness?
- g. What is the success ratio of solving these issues? Which obstacles do you recognise in this? Where are the opportunities to improve the situation?
- h. How could public policies (especially EU, e.g., SKP, cohesion policy) be improved in order to improve pressing issues?
- i. What research is needed to support policies – existing or potential? Do we know enough about these issues, their incidence, policy effects?

#### ***Form of execution:***

Semi-structured interviews with selected interlocutors

Time 2-3 hours

Recording mode: recording and then summarising the spoken network.



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