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# Social innovation and (social) impacts: an exploratory study for assessing the impacts of social innovation

The ENRD Evaluation Helpdesk's Good Practice Workshop  
20th October, 2021

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Centro de Investigação  
e Estudos de Sociologia



  
This project has received funding from  
the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme  
under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 721999

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# Content of the presentation

- The RurAction framework
- The Early Stage Researchers (ESR) project (part of RurAction that produced the methodological framework for assessing the impact of social innovation)
- How the methodological framework was developed: background, dimensions of impacts, data collection
- Conclusions

# Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action (RurAction framework)

- an integrated research and doctorate programme funded by the European Union in the Horizon 2020 Marie-Sklodowska-Curie actions Innovative Training Network
- intersection of rural development, social innovation and social entrepreneurship research
- focus on problems in rural regions in Europe and the impact of social entrepreneurship regarding the development of innovative solutions
- cooperation between social enterprises and academics
- raising public awareness on the regional and national level regarding rural development issues



Consortium consisting of 9 universities and academic partners and 5 social enterprises



# Objectives of the ESR project which produced the methodological framework for assessing the impact of social innovation

## **The underlying objectives for the ESR 10 project include:**

- To develop a transparent conceptual framework for analysing social innovation
- To interlink social innovation and regional development theories
- To develop a set of indicators that could allow one to assess the impacts of these social innovations on regional development

## **Leading to the following key research questions:**

- How do social innovations influence regional development?
- How can the impact of social innovations in regional development be assessed?

# Background to the methodological framework for assessing the impact of social innovation

- The questions on how SI can contribute to and can impact the development of rural regions still remain only partially answered
- The issues associated with the impacts produced by SI projects revolve around how impacts can be assessed, due to the variety in types, scales and level of impacts, raising the question on the possibility of such SI impact assessment
- Local development associations and local action groups running SI projects in rural regions are important actors of SI
- While recognising the importance of assessing the impacts of SI, such initiatives still find it challenging to exercise the assessment of SI impacts due to the variety of challenges

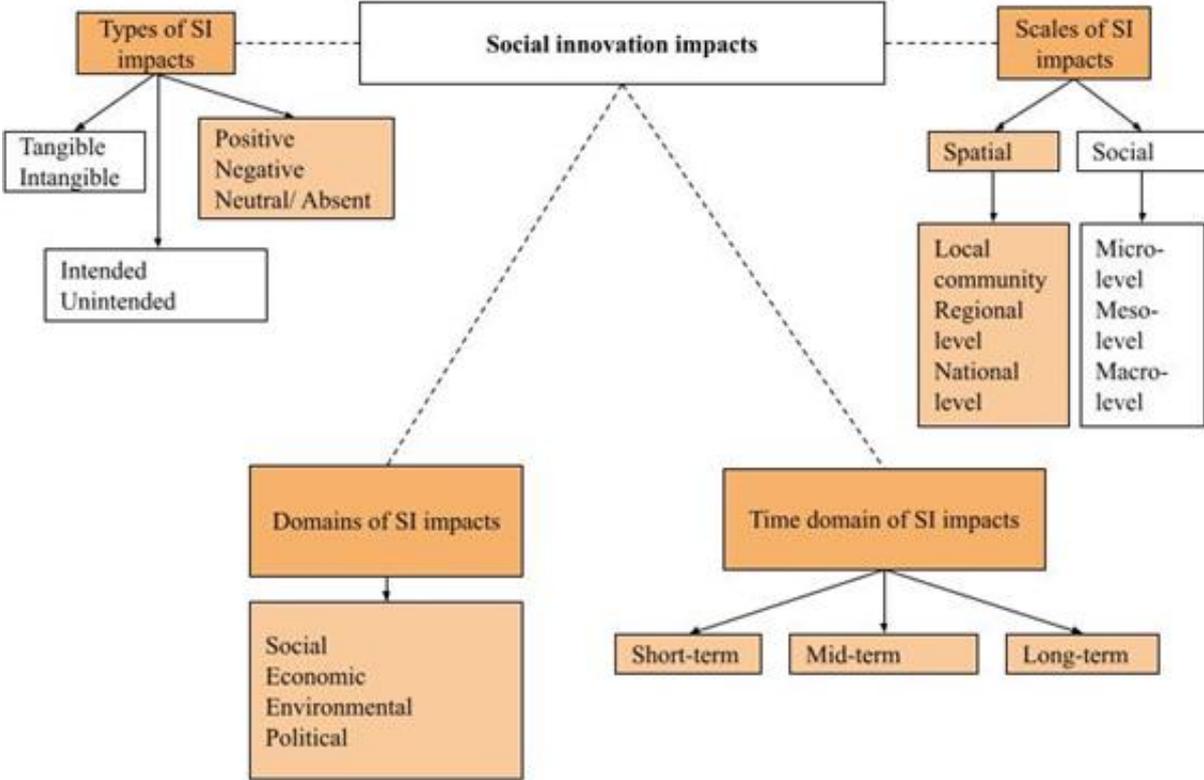
# Dimensions of social innovation impacts

Types

Scales

Domains

Time domains



# Methodology and data collection

## Qualitative stage

Expert interviews: 15 interviews

- Local Action groups (LAGs) managers and members
- regional development experts
- social entrepreneurs
- local politicians
- regional public administration (representative in the Upper Austrian Parliament)
- LEADER experts (LEADER forum Upper Austria)



## Quantitative stage

Online survey: 31 responses

- ADC Moura's worker/ staff member (current)
- ADC Moura's worker/ staff member (past)
- policy-makers
- external experts
- project partners
- members of extended network

# Conclusions - Challenges of impact assessment

**Absence of a unified approach to SI impact assessment:** there is no agreement on what kind of indicators or metrics might capture the SI impacts or allow for the evaluation of SI to be carried out (Nicholls et al., 2015; Cunha and Benneworth, 2020).

**(Intangible) character of the SI and its impacts:** SI consists mainly in new ideas, changes in attitudes, re-establishing practices and does not necessarily result in the development of a product (Krlev et al., 2014).

**Complex, non-linear nature of SI processes - and the issue of causality:** SI emerges within complex systems, the dynamics of the challenges and the innovation are nonlinear, uncertain, and unpredictable (Goldstein et al., 2010; Westley and Antadze, 2010) and the “cause-and-effect” means of IA are not easily applicable to SI projects (European Commission, 2014).

**Implicit rather than explicit promotion of SI:** implicit character poses the challenges on establishing clear and applicable SI impact assessment instruments.

**Disconnect between centralised promotion of SI and practical implementation:** under centralised character of decision-making on regional development, quite often the frameworks, evaluation matrices etc. do not reflect the complex reality of rural regions where most of impacts cannot be evaluated and/ or assessed.

**Focus on output and outcome reporting:** A common trend within the LDIs working in both regions, despite them referring to the existing evaluations as impact assessment, is a strong shift towards outcome or results reporting rather than on impact assessment.

# Thank you for your attention

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# Testing the tools in Baixo Alentejo, Portugal: context

## Baixo Alentejo region

- area of 8,544.6 km<sup>2</sup>, corresponding to 10.8% of the national territory
- total population of 117, 868 inhabitants (INE, 2019)
- predominantly rural region (Eurostat, 2016) and a 'moderately weak' rural region (Hennebry & Strykiewicz, 2020)
- one of the most sparsely populated Portuguese regions; population density of 13,9 inhabitants/ km<sup>2</sup> (Eurostat, 2018)

## Association for the Development of the Municipality of Moura (ADC Moura)

- non-governmental regional development association created in 1993
- main aim: supporting and promoting the sustainable development of the municipality of Moura and other areas of the region.
- constituted by 10 permanent employees and 11 non-permanent employees
- five axes of intervention: (1) institutional and organisational development; (2) social and community development; (3) rural and environmental development; (4) education and formation; (5) support for the initiative.



# Preliminary results/ observations

- Majority of respondents perceive ADC Moura's work as having positive impacts, while the perception of negative impacts is quite divided
- For all four domains of intervention - environmental, economic, social and political, - ADC Moura is perceived to have achieved positive impacts, with the responses, however, suggesting that the impact are ambiguous in the environmental and institutional domains
- The geographical scale of such impacts is said to be the highest on the local level of the municipality of Moura, with the sub-regional (Baixo Alentejo) and regional (Alentejo) levels perceived to be impacted the second and third most
- The positive effects created in the territory through ADC Moura's work could have been obtained without ADC Moura's intervention 1) but it would have taken more time 2) where other similar initiatives only partially satisfied the needs of the territory → ADC Moura as an important actor but not the sole actor of change (?)
- Further analysis is needed concerning the perception of negative impacts of ADC Moura's work in four domains (environmental, economic, social and political), as well as in territorial domain (e.g. if having negative impacts, at what geographical level)