

# Co-constructing a new framework for evaluating social innovation in marginalised rural areas

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**Abstract** – The EU funded H2020 project ‘Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas’ (SIMRA; [www.simra-h2020.eu](http://www.simra-h2020.eu)) has the overall objective of advancing the state-of-the-art in social innovation. This paper outlines the process for co-developing an evaluation framework with stakeholders, drawn from across Europe and the Mediterranean area, in the fields of agriculture, forestry and rural development. Preliminary results show the importance of integrating process and outcome-oriented evaluations, and implementing participatory approaches in evaluation practice. They also raise critical issues related to the comparability of primary data in diverse regional contexts and highlight the need for mixed methods approaches in evaluation.

## INTRODUCTION

Definitions and interpretations of the meaning of social innovation and its breadth of implementation are emerging (e.g. Mulgan, 2007; BEPA, 2011; Moulaert et al., 2013; Anderson et al., 2014; Cajaiba-Santana, 2014; Neumeier, 2017). The SIMRA consortium defines social innovation as: “The reconfiguring of social practices in response to societal challenges which seek to enhance the outcomes on well-being and necessarily include the engagement of civil society actors” (Polman et al., 2017). Based on this definition, this paper addresses the process for evaluating social innovation and its impacts in marginalised rural areas.

SIMRA convened a Social Innovation Think Tank (SITT), comprising approximately 30 stakeholders (practitioners, scientists and evaluators), in the fields of agriculture, forestry and rural development. They are drawn from Europe and the Mediterranean area, to co-develop the conceptual and evaluation frameworks, and to define the concept of marginalised rural areas.

## METHODS

We first developed a database for collecting and analysing existing frameworks, approaches, methods and tools in the economic, social, environmental, and governance/institutional domains<sup>83</sup>. The SIMRA consortium convened a consultation with SITT

members (Bratislava, 2016), for in-depth discussion on the concept and variables of social innovation, the definition of marginalised rural areas and, specific to the objectives of this paper: (1) identification of useful approaches, based on experience and expertise of stakeholders; and (2) outputs expected from an assessment of social innovation in marginalised rural areas. The world café participatory approach used, addressed four themes: A. outcome-oriented vs. process-oriented evaluation methods; B. participatory vs. experts-based evaluation methods; C. primary and secondary data; D. qualitative vs. quantitative methods.

## RESULTS

Preliminary analysis of existing methods yielded a list of 103 frameworks, approaches and methods, and over 200 tools. 33% were applied in Europe and 28% in rural areas, with 23% specific to the assessment of social innovation. 42.3% proposed participatory approaches, 54.6% an external evaluation, and 24% their application for self-evaluation. 66.3% of frameworks and methods proposed adopted indicators, while 27.9% considered use of counterfactual analysis. Criteria for the evaluation included relevance (44.2%), efficiency (35.6%), effectiveness (48.1%) and impact (58.7%). Equity, capacity, and sustainability were also cited. A third of

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<sup>83</sup> Led by University of Padova, the first phase included: International Center for Research on the Environment and the Economy (Greece), University of Foggia (Italy), European Forest Institute (Finland), Agricultural Economics Research Institute (The Netherlands), James Hutton Institute, Rural Development Company (UK), Accademia Europea per la ricerca applicata ed il Perfezionamento Professionale Bolzano (Italy), Centre Technologic Forestal de Catalunya (Spain), University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (Austria).

these methods adopted software tools for Social Network Analysis, mapping and others.

In discussions of **process-oriented vs. outcome-oriented evaluation methods**, the relationship between process and outcome was considered key for measuring tangible and intangible elements of SI, and identifying factors contributing to success or failure of initiatives. Ex-ante evaluation was considered in 16.5% of the methods analysed, yet stakeholders perceived its importance for the selection of case studies (Figure 1). It was recognised that: (i) different starting points for SI challenge assessment of outcomes and results; (ii) while different contexts mean that SI in one country may be standard practice somewhere else.

Discussions on **participatory vs. experts-based evaluation** supported the use of participatory processes (also led by experts) to legitimate, increase ownership, adoption and implementation. The use of participatory approaches was also seen as crucial for assessing the 'feeling' or intangible values of those involved in social innovation, through indicators for the measurement of trust, involvement of the community in innovative approaches, connection to other actors, and the level of acceptance and exchange of new practices. One risk anticipated was loss of stakeholder interest due to a lack of follow-up. Participants also highlighted the importance of evaluating the impacts of social innovation through actual changes in policy. The group suggested it was important to understand "how to follow a story", and look at long-term impacts.

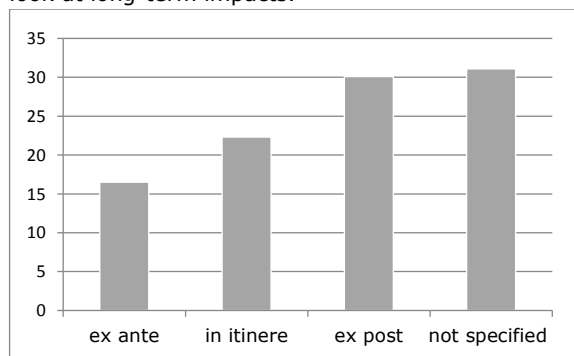


Figure 1. Evaluation typologies in the methods assessed.

In discussions about **primary vs. secondary data**, discussions highlighted the importance of primary data to identify the specific context of social innovation due to a lack of specific secondary data. Stakeholders suggested adopting: (i) focus groups and participatory methods; (ii) semi-structured interviews; (iii) long-term survey for studying pre- and post-conditions; (iv) stakeholder analysis, emphasising the importance for gathering soft data on interactions, attitudes, opinions and activities carried out. Emphasis was given to the adoption of critical approaches and capacity for reflection to address the role of subjectivity. Key conclusions were that: (i) data should be comparable; (ii) triangulation

should be used to verify quality of quantitative and qualitative data; (iii) data should be publicly available.

In discussions of **qualitative vs. quantitative methods**, SITT members agreed that evaluation methods and tools should be tailored to: (i) needs and purpose of the evaluation; (ii) type of project being evaluated; and (iii) object of measurement, e.g., whether it is a process or a result. Qualitative and quantitative approaches were identified as complementary and suitable for use in evaluations. Whilst qualitative methods are not always popular among evaluators, they provide in-depth information from the practitioners' level to policy makers and funders. Finally, it was noted that for small or new and innovative projects, it may be difficult to measure their long-term impacts.

#### CONCLUSIONS

These preliminary results show congruence between the methods analysed and the guidance provided by SITT members. More specific questions, related to how to measure the emergence of SI, its promotion and adoption, as well as its outcomes on wellbeing, are to be addressed in the next steps. The integration of results from the scientific analysis and the guidance provided by the SITT, will form the basis for the evaluation methods and tools adopted in the SIMRA case studies, which are scheduled to be analysed in 2018.

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