

Social Economy in Rural Areas

Scholars increasingly recognize the development of the social economy in rural areas as a central pathway in research on sustainable development, social cohesion, and public policy innovation. In the face of growing challenges, such as depopulation, an ageing society, energy transition, climate change, and income inequalities, the social economy functions not only as a tool for redistribution and support but also as a space for experimenting with new cooperation models and solidarity-based economies. Rural areas, long defined by their peripheral status and limited access to public services, are increasingly becoming sites of social and economic innovation.

The development of the social economy in rural areas is gaining particular importance in the context of seeking durable and inclusive development models that take into account both local conditions and global socio-economic processes. Under conditions of growing territorial disparities and limited access to public services, social economy entities perform an integrative function by strengthening social capital, activating rural residents, and fostering the development of local agency. The social economy activities in rural areas also enable the effective use of endogenous resources, such as local knowledge, cultural heritage, and environmental potential, thereby contributing to the diversification of local economies and strengthening community resilience to crises. Its role in integrating the activities of various actors – local governments, non-governmental organizations, civic initiatives, and the private sector – within a bottom-up and territorially embedded approach is particularly significant.

This special issue of *Social Entrepreneurship Review: Social Economy in Rural Areas* consists of ten articles. The volume presents diverse dimensions of social transformation processes in rural areas based on research conducted in Poland, Portugal, Finland, Canada, and Hungary. The articles presented illustrate the multifaceted nature of socio-economic transformations taking place in rural areas, emphasizing the importance of the social economy as a tool for local development. The authors analyze both institutional frameworks and grassroots community initiatives that foster social cohesion and innovative forms of cooperation. The cross-sectional character of the research enables the identification of good practices and the formulation of conclusions that are valuable for policymakers, practitioners, and scholars engaged in rural development studies.

The special issue opens with an article by Szymon Caban, who explores the theme of energy transition in the rural context in "Just Energy Transition and Business Models: Seeking a Strategic Management Tool for Energy Communities." According to Caban, energy communities, operating in the form of cooperatives, associations, or foundations, represent a new type of social economy entity, combining democratic governance with environmental and educa-

tional objectives. He proposes to reinterpret traditional business models, arguing that strategic tools must take into account the logic of social and environmental values. In his view, a just energy transition is not only a technological process but also a social one that means building local communities around the ideas of self-sufficiency and responsibility.

Next, in the article "Income as a Selected Indicator of the Social Economy in Human Life," Barbara Chmielewska addresses income as a key indicator of the quality of life of rural residents. Based on twenty years of data from Statistics Poland (GUS), Chmielewska analyzes the impact of Poland's integration with the European Union on the level and structure of household incomes. The results confirm that European integration has contributed to reducing income disparities between agricultural and non-agricultural households, although it has not eliminated them entirely. Chmielewska emphasizes that income represents not only an economic dimension but also a social one. It reflects the capacity of individuals and families to participate in social life, access public services and culture, and thus achieve full inclusion in the social system. From this perspective, the social economy emerges as an important factor of integration and cohesion, providing mechanisms that can offset the effects of market inequality.

The presence of formal and informal groups that pursue various goals primarily oriented toward non-financial benefits constitutes a crucial element in building social capital in rural areas. In "Country Housewives' Associations as Social Economy Entities and Their Areas of Activity in Poland," Anna Calik-Kaczor discusses rural women's associations and highlights their role as significant actors within the social economy. Based on legal frameworks, a literature review, and survey results, Calik-Kaczor presents the scope and forms of activity undertaken by these associations, from social integration and education to the preservation of culinary heritage and business-related initiatives. Calik-Kaczor combines analytical insight with practical recommendations and provides a coherent diagnosis and directions for further development.

Marta Amaral, as well as Sandra Saúde, Sandra Lopes and Anna Rodrigues, and Sandra Bailoa and her co-authors further explore the issue of sustainable rural development. Analyzing Portugal's agricultural region of Alentejo, these authors demonstrate how alternative forms of tourism, such as slow tourism, agritourism, and community-based tourism, can serve as catalysts for the revitalization of rural areas, job creation, and the preservation of cultural heritage. In their view, slow tourism becomes a tool for restoring authenticity and building relationships between visitors and residents. Sandra Bailoa and her co-authors note that by integrating economic activity with social objectives, agritourism contributes to the emergence of new forms of family and shared entrepreneurship. In this context, it is worth referencing Monika Hoschek's article "Home or Abroad? Following Tourism Choices in Hungary," which analyzes the social and economic determinants of Hungarian tourism choices. Hoschek highlights the differences between domestic and international tourism, demonstrating that travel decisions not only depend on financial means but also reflect the lifestyle and the cultural capital of a given society.

In a similar vein, in the article "Community-Driven Food Networks as Vehicles of Rural Social Innovation," Maia Giorbelidze and co-authors show, based on the case of Canada's Cape Breton region, how food networks founded on cooperation and volunteerism can counteract social exclusion, ensure food security, and foster a culture of solidarity. Both Giorbelidze and Hoschek portray the social economy as a system that enables rural residents to regain agency and autonomy in the face of global economic processes.

Meanwhile, the studies by Sandra Saúde and her co-authors devoted to the MEOSudoeste Festival show that cultural events can act as catalysts for local community development, pro-

vided that residents are genuinely involved in the planning and evaluation processes. A common conclusion emerging from these studies is the need to design tourism not as an external product of consumption, but as a process of co-creating value with rural inhabitants.

Harri Kostilainen and Jari Karjalainen in "Institutional and Territorial Drivers of Rural Social Enterprise Ecosystems: Evidence from Finland" present the Northern European context. They analyzed three Finnish regions, i.e., Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu, which led them to conclude that the development of rural social enterprises requires institutional and territorial alignment, combining local traditions with national and EU policies. The Finnish model, based on cooperation between local authorities, non-governmental organizations, and citizens, may serve as a model for other European countries. The article emphasizes that the strength of the social economy lies in its ability to adapt to local conditions, while its effectiveness depends on a partnership-based relationship between the public, private, and civic sectors. Kostilainen and Karjalainen's concept of "institutional-territorial alignment" has a universal dimension. It highlights that systemic solutions, if not rooted in the social and cultural realities of a given region, remain ineffective. This implies that public policies supporting the social economy should evolve from the bottom up, in response to local needs and potentials.

The special issue concludes with a study by Attila Palanca, which addresses the problem of marginalization and the renewal of rural communities. The article "Land Tenure and Population Exchange: *Intermarginal Disintegration* in the Ormáság" analyzes the socio-historical conditions underlying the disintegration of villages in southern Hungary. Palanca argues that structural factors such as the system of land inheritance and a lack of institutional adaptation can lead to long-term stagnation and depopulation of regions. The text highlights the importance of property reform and community-based forms of management as prerequisites for rebuilding social ties and local resilience.

The analyses presented in this issue confirm that the social economy in rural areas plays an integrative role across diverse spheres of local life - from energy transition and food security, through sustainable tourism and cultural events, to social entrepreneurship and land resource management. The authors of the articles demonstrate that the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on their embeddedness in the local institutional, cultural, and territorial context, as well as on the genuine involvement of residents in decision-making processes. The collected studies clearly indicate that sustainable rural development requires a bottom-up approach in which the social economy becomes not only an instrument of public policy but also a space for rebuilding agency, solidarity, and the long-term resilience of local communities.

In summary, all the articles presented in this special issue portray the social economy in rural areas as a dynamic, multidimensional system in which economic, cultural, and environmental elements intersect. A common thread across all the analyses is the conviction that we cannot measure rural development solely by increases in income or infrastructure investment, as intangible factors determine its sustainability. These include trust, cooperation, a sense of community, and the capacity for self-organization. The authors of the presented studies demonstrate that the most compelling social innovations emerge within local environments, where the social economy becomes an effective tool for balancing global processes. We are witnessing a clear paradigm shift from policies based on central interventions toward endogenous models in which development stems from the mobilization of local resources and social capital.

As thematic editors, we hope that the articles presented in this issue will provide readers with inspiring reflections, in-depth analyses, and a new perspective on the role of the social

economy in rural development. We also believe that the research findings and case studies presented will serve as an impetus for further academic debate, as well as a valuable source of knowledge for policymakers and practitioners involved in shaping local development policies. Enjoy your reading!

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