

**Social Economy
in Rural Areas**

Thematic issue edited by:
Barbara Kiełbasa, Elena Horská

**SOCIAL
ENTREPRENEURSHIP
REVIEW**

VOL. 2/2025

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ul. Rakowicka 27, 31-510 Kraków

ISSN: 2720-7277

The online journal is the primary and reference version.

ISSN: 2081-321X (printed version 2007–2020)

eISSN: 1898-7435 (online version, since 2007)

All articles are double-blinded, peer-reviewed by at least two independent reviewers.

The detailed list of reviewers is published on our website once a year.

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All articles published in SER are tagged with an identification number employing the Digital Object Identifier (DOI) System.

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The journal is available at ser.uek.krakow.pl

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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 Palanicsa, which addresses the problem of marginalization and the renewal of rural communities. The article "Land Tenure and Population Exchange: *Intermarginal Disintegration* in the Ormánság" analyzes the socio-historical conditions underlying the disintegration of villages in southern Hungary. Palanicsa 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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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Just Energy Transition and Business Models: Seeking a Strategic Management Tool for Energy Communities

Szymon Caban

Abstract: **Background:** Energy communities (ECs) are emerging as key actors in the shift toward a low-carbon and inclusive energy system aligned with the principles of just energy transition (JET). However, conventional business model tools often fail to reflect ECs' social missions, democratic governance, and environmental goals.

Research objectives: This study aims to evaluate the suitability of existing business model frameworks for analyzing ECs and to identify the components necessary for models aligned with JET.

Research design and methods: I conducted a qualitative literature review, examining sources to compare conventional and alternative business model frameworks based on criteria derived from JET principles.

Results: The analysis found that classical frameworks, such as the business model canvas (BMC), are insufficient for ECs, while alternatives like the triple layered business model canvas (TLBMC), social enterprise model canvas (SEMC), and value mapping tool (VMT) better address ECs' hybrid organizational logic.

Conclusions: Business model innovation must integrate social, environmental, and participatory dimensions to support ECs in advancing a JET.

Keywords: energy community, just energy transition, business model, cooperative governance

JEL Codes: L26, Q42, O35

Suggested citation:

Caban, S. (2025). Just energy transition and business models: Seeking a strategic management tool for energy communities. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 1, 9–24. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.01>

1. Introduction

The ongoing challenge of achieving climate neutrality and decarbonization has placed the energy sector at the heart of socioeconomic transformation. The Stern Report (2007) marked a turning point by framing climate change as a systemic market failure requiring urgent and coordinated responses. Yet, we cannot understand energy transitions solely as technical or environmental processes. They also entail a social focus, particularly in rural areas where livelihoods depend on agriculture and local resources (Olmedo et al., 2023). Rural regions face challenges of energy poverty, economic exclusion, and depopulation. Addressing these issues demands inclusive approaches that link equity, participation, and community ownership to the wider goals of the energy transition. In recent years the notion of a just energy transition

(JET) has emerged as a guiding principle in both academic discourse and policy frameworks. It emphasizes the need to ensure that the transition to a low-carbon economy is inclusive, democratic, and beneficial for all stakeholders (McCauley & Heffron, 2018). Confined within social entrepreneurship, JET appears as an important mechanism of socio-environmental change in its community-led forms (Markman et al., 2019; Fagerberg & Hutschenreiter, 2020).

Energy communities (ECs), which are grassroots, democratically governed, and mission-driven organizations, have gained renewed attention as key actors in operationalizing JET principles at the local level (Kostecka-Jurczyk et al., 2024). In rural settings, they often emerge around agricultural cooperatives, family farms, or village associations, reflecting the long-standing tradition of collective resource management. The principle of prosumerism, where producers are also consumers, is particularly relevant in farming households, which can combine food and energy production within a single socioeconomic unit. These rural organizations aim not only to deliver renewable energy, but also to ensure fair distribution of benefits, reduce household costs, and foster community empowerment (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014). Additionally, the EC movement connects with the idea of implementing the sharing economy principles as sustainable development (Banaszek, 2020).

Despite their growing significance, existing business model frameworks are not suitable to capture the ECs' hybrid economic, social, and environmental objectives. Classical tools are focused on profit maximization and customer-centric value creation, while sustainability-centered extensions do not sufficiently integrate democratic governance, social entrepreneurship, or community-based ownership structures. The aforementioned characteristics are key in describing ECs. Consequently, we lack a widely accepted analytical framework tailored to the unique role of ECs in advancing a JET, which limits both its theoretical understanding and its practical application.

The present study responds to this gap by offering a structured review and comparative analysis of the business model frameworks used to analyze social enterprises and ECs. I investigated the extent to which the existing models account for the characteristics essential to JET, such as community participation, democratic ownership, social mission alignment, and environmental accountability.

The research question that guided this inquiry reads as follows: What business model frameworks are most suitable for EC analysis in the context of a JET? To address this question, the study had two objectives:

- to map the current state of business model management tools in the literature related to social enterprises and ECs;
- to identify the core components necessary for a business model framework aligned with the JET principles.

This research stemmed from the growing need for tools to support the ECs as part of a broader transition toward inclusive and sustainable society. Its contribution lies in offering a synthesis of existing models and advancing the conversation on how we can reimagine business models to support social innovation and energy democracy through usage of the right business tools.

In the study, I employed a qualitative literature review as the primary method. I drew upon academic articles, policy documents, and empirical typologies to compare various business model frameworks, using criteria derived from the JET literature.

The article proceeds as follows: First, I review the relevant literature on business models, ECs, and social enterprise frameworks. Second, I outline the research method and materials.

Third, I present the results of the comparative analysis and discuss their implications for theory and practice as well as offer suggestions for future research. As a conclusion, I provide a synthesis of my findings.

2. Literature Review

Energy Communities

Energy communities have become increasingly crucial to the European Union's (EU's) vision of a decentralized, low-carbon, and citizen-driven energy system. The EU's Clean Energy for All Europeans Package contains a legal definition of ECs as entities that enable citizens, local authorities, and small enterprises to jointly engage in energy production, consumption, and sharing (Agency for the Cooperation of Energy Regulators, n.d.). We can also categorize the ECs as innovative organizations helping solve societal and economic issues (Markowicz, 2019). Their legal form ranges from cooperatives to nonprofits or limited liability companies. Nevertheless, in all cases, their governance must be democratic and the primary focus must rest on the delivery of environmental, economic, or social community benefits rather than on financial profit (European Commission, n.d.). However, we might consider this view shortsighted, as Yunus et al. (2010) argue that despite such propositions of measuring the entity's actions through financial, social, and environmental benefits, ultimately only one bottom line usually matters: financial profit.

Nonconventional energy initiatives receive different labels across countries (Huybrechts et al., 2024). For instance, they operate as social renewable energy communities and grassroots initiatives in the Netherlands, citizen participation initiatives in Austria, ECs in Greece, and energy cooperatives in Germany and Poland (Dóci et al., 2015; Hatzl et al., 2016; Fajardo & Frantzeskaki, 2021; Veenman et al., 2021; Huybrechts et al., 2024). This linguistic plurality reflects institutional diversity, but from a management theory perspective, it dilutes construct clarity and obstructs the development of cumulative knowledge (Suddaby, 2010).

Importantly, the European Commission has addressed the differences in nomenclature within Europe, nesting those organizations and initiatives under the EC term:

Energy communities allow local communities to join forces and invest in clean energy. Acting as a single entity means energy communities can access all suitable energy markets on a level-playing field with other market actors. Under EU law, energy communities can take the form of any legal entity including an association, a cooperative, a partnership, a non-profit organization or a limited liability company (European Commission, n.d.).

Standardizing the nomenclature under the European Commission's framework provides both analytical and practical benefits. It enhances construct validity by anchoring diverse local forms within a clearly bounded category. This allows actors to compare cases across geopolitical and social settings without losing sight of EC's essential attributes. Moreover, it enables managerial and financial relevance. Recognition within the EU framework gives ECs access to funding mechanisms, policy instruments, and legal protections.

Therefore, this article adopts the label EC not merely for terminological consistency, but also as a theoretical construct that aligns with the JET principles. This framing supports a more disciplined analysis of business models and organizational forms that bridge the domains of social entrepreneurship and community energy governance.

Although ECs serve as socially empowering entities, we categorize their activities as business-related (Huybrechts et al., 2024). Therefore, they need management as business units while incorporating social and environmental dimensions. To achieve that, we should consider the usage of business models as simplifications of real systems or as a redesign of an organization strategy (Zott et al., 2011; Massa et al., 2017; Sparviero, 2019).

The growing institutionalization of ECs across Europe reflects their alignment with the theoretical and practical logics of social enterprises. Social enterprises are hybrid organizations that operate at the intersection of civil society and the market, combining commercial tools with a mission-driven orientation (Defourny & Nyssens, 2010). They display three defining characteristics: a clearly articulated social or environmental mission; participatory governance involving stakeholders or community members; and reinvestment of profits into the organization's goals rather than their distribution to shareholders (Santos, 2012; Bocken et al., 2016).

Energy communities meet the aforementioned criteria. Their activities aim to accelerate energy transition while promoting energy justice, reducing emissions, and strengthening local resilience (Becker, 2017). Since the ECs' organizational principle often mirrors that of cooperatives, they share similar enterprise resilience in turbulent environments such as societal and economical challenges (Tkacz et al., 2015). They often utilize democratic governance based on the one member – one vote principle derived from cooperative models. This ensures that control remains distributed among participants rather than concentrated in the hands of capital investors (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014). Moreover, ECs tend to reinvest their surplus revenue in community projects, infrastructure development, or further expansion of clean energy capacity, reinforcing their role as embedded social actors rather than profit-maximizing firms (Vancea et al., 2017).

Energy communities possess unique organizational features that make them distinct from conventional businesses and traditional nonprofits. They operate as distributed energy producers, relying on technologies such as solar photovoltaics, wind, or biomass to meet local needs. In rural areas, these models often become embedded in agricultural practices, where farms diversify into energy production as a strategy for economic stability. Their structure allows them to pool financial and social capital from a broad base of stakeholders, thereby creating collective prosumerism in which participants are simultaneously producers, consumers, and co-governors of local systems (Dóci et al., 2015; Brown et al., 2022). Beyond environmental outcomes, this integration strengthens rural livelihoods through community-based services, promoting social innovation and redistributing value across vulnerable rural groups (de Vidovich, 2024). Additionally, the core characteristics supporting organizations such as ECs can add to combating social capital discrepancies as described by Wiczerzak (2018).

What distinguishes ECs within the broader social enterprise landscape is their potential to operationalize JET principles at the community level (Manjon, 2025). As organizations committed to equitable participation and sustainability, they prove ideally positioned to address issues of energy poverty, democratic deficit, and environmental degradation (van Bommel & Höffken, 2021). However, this introduces managerial complexities: ECs must balance economic viability with social legitimacy, navigate regulatory asymmetries, and sustain active member engagement over time (Kostecka-Jurczyk et al., 2024).

Despite their practical and theoretical relevance, ECs remain under-integrated into the mainstream management discourse. The dominant conceptual tools used to analyze business models, such as the classical business model canvas (BMC), typically cannot seamlessly capture business relations within ECs. Scholars such as Wierling et al. (2022) discuss the issue in ques-

tion. Existing research by Dilger et al. (2017) and Mazzarol et al. (2018) explores how we can modify the BMC to match the EC context. Consequently, we need a deeper engagement with management theory to understand, support, and scale these organizations.

Business Model

The concept of a business model entered the lexicon of management theory in the late twentieth century, evolving from serving as a mere tool for identifying market propositions to representing managerial ideas guiding organizational operations (Chesbrough & Rosenbloom, 2002; Amit & Zott, 2007; Gibson & Jetter, 2014; Wronka-Pośpiech, 2017). At its core, a business model describes the logic by which an organization creates, delivers, and captures value, considering both internal and external conditions affecting its success (Osterwalder & Pigneur, 2010). The widespread adoption of business models has facilitated reflection and research, particularly their applicability beyond traditional commercial entities (Kožuch, 2013; Wronka-Pośpiech, 2017).

The field of business model innovation has expanded significantly, with tools such as the BMC by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) becoming the dominant frameworks for organizational analysis. However, these classical tools were designed for profit-maximizing firms, and their structure relies on customer-centric value delivery and financial sustainability (Yunus et al., 2010). As such, they fall short in capturing the unique governance structures, social missions, and stakeholder inclusivity that characterize ECs and other forms of social enterprises. This gap represents a serious limitation in the ability of researchers and practitioners to understand, design, and evaluate business models that aim to align economic, environmental, and social goals.

Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) acknowledge these limitations of early business models, proposing modifications to the classic BMC in line with Elkington's (1994) triple bottom line (TBL) framework. Their TBL-BMC model proposes a foundation for sustainable development by encouraging organizations to pursue integrated value creation across three domains: economic, social, and environmental. Recent literature proposes extended or alternative frameworks, such as the triple layered business model canvas (TLBMC) (Joyce & Paquin, 2016). Still, we lack a widely accepted analytical framework tailored specifically to ECs. Moreover, despite its acknowledged role in facilitating equitable energy transitions, social entrepreneurship remains insufficiently integrated into dominant business model analyses.

A widely accepted tool in this domain is the BMC developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010). The original BMC consists of nine building blocks: *value propositions*, *customer segments*, *customer relationships*, *channels*, *revenue streams*, *key activities*, *key resources*, *key partners*, and *cost structures*. Due to its visual and intuitive nature, the BMC became a mainstream tool in organizational planning, strategy design, and value creation analyses. While this conventional BMC serves effectively as a strategic management tool for commercial businesses, its limitations require adaptation or reconsideration. Adapted frameworks might provide an improved foundation for organizational forms such as ECs, where economic and socio-environmental missions intertwine. The BMC can serve as a useful analytical framework for ECs after its critical adaptation to incorporate their distinct social and environmental purposes.

The BMC presents considerable limitations when applied to nonprofit organizations. Its emphasis on value capture and profit orientation does not adequately account for the broader social, environmental, and community objectives that are central to mission-driven entities. The conventional BMC primarily targets profit-oriented organizations focusing on delivering

customer-centric value and financial performance and often neglecting the nuanced dimensions of social impact and stakeholder involvement (Yunus et al., 2010; Sparviero, 2019). As its primary shortcoming, researchers identify the inadequate reflection of value beyond economic outcomes, particularly when dealing with organizations aiming for broader socio-environmental objectives (Joyce & Paquin, 2016). In rural contexts, these limitations become even more pronounced. Business models ought to capture multifunctional realities where rural entities serve as sites of both food and energy production, cultural traditions and community identity shape organizational practices, and women's associations play a pivotal role in sustaining community-based initiatives (Musunguzi et al., 2023). Without incorporating these dimensions, conventional frameworks risk underestimating the complexity of ECs as rural social enterprises.

In response to these limitations, Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) introduced variations of the original BMC, notably the third-party-funded model (TPFM) and the TBL model (Wronka-Pośpiech, 2017). The TPFM addresses scenarios where recipients of value differ from funders, typically seen in nonprofit organizations dependent on external financial support. The TBL model integrates economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability, explicitly aligning the business strategy with principles of sustainable development as initially proposed by Elkington (1994).

Further adaptations have emerged to better capture the complexities faced by social enterprises. The social enterprise model canvas (SEMC), developed by Burkett (2013), explicitly incorporates components like *beneficiaries* and *social impact*, which resonate strongly with social enterprises' core logic of mission-driven value creation. Such refinements indicate the necessity to differentiate customer value propositions from broader societal contributions, ensuring alignment with mission-centric organizational designs.

A comprehensive approach by Lee (2015) integrates governance and sustainability explicitly within the business model framework, suggesting six components crucial for social enterprises: *value proposition*, *legal and governance structure*, *market scope*, *networked activities*, *resources*, and *sustainability*. This model recognizes that social enterprises must balance their strategic and operational objectives, aligning organizational governance and market strategies with mission-driven goals.

Another noteworthy adaptation is the circular economy value proposition (CEVP) framework proposed by Bocken et al. (2013). This model emphasizes the creation of environmental and social value by identifying the value actually created, missed, destroyed, or captured across stakeholder groups. It is particularly relevant for rural and community-based enterprises that rely on resource efficiency, closed-loop systems, and collaborative value creation.

Additionally, the sustainable business model (SBM) archetypes developed by Bocken et al. (2014) provide a typology of strategies through which organizations can embed sustainability into their business logic. Maximizing material and energy efficiency, creating value from waste, substituting with renewables, and adopting stewardship roles offer pathways for social enterprises to systematically design business models that align economic viability with environmental stewardship and social inclusion.

3. Research Method and Materials

This study employed a qualitative literature review approach to explore the existing business model frameworks relevant to ECs explicitly within the JET context. I chose a literature review for its suitability in addressing complex and multifaceted research questions, particu-

larly in emerging and interdisciplinary fields where exploratory synthesis is more appropriate than quantitative aggregation (Snyder, 2019). The rationale behind adopting this approach lies in its flexibility to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives and provide conceptual clarity about how existing business models align with the characteristics specific to ECs (Tranfield et al., 2003).

The objective of this qualitative review was twofold. First, I aimed to comprehensively map the existing business model frameworks that explicitly address social enterprises and ECs. Second, I wished to critically evaluate these frameworks through criteria derived from JET principles. This approach ensured a systematic yet flexible analysis that effectively contributes to scholarly discussions and managerial practices relevant to community-led energy initiatives.

The methodological framework of this research comprised two primary stages. At the first stage, I employed a structured search strategy within Scopus databases using specific search terms related to ECs, social enterprises, cooperative business models, and sustainability-oriented business frameworks. The selection process focused on peer-reviewed articles, academic monographs, book chapters, and policy documents. The timeframe of the selected publications spanned from 2000 to 2025.

At the second stage, I applied a qualitative content analysis to identify and categorize the core components of selected business models. This analytical process involved categorizing the literature insights through finding intersections with the JET principles derived from previous scholarly contributions. This approach facilitated a structured comparative assessment of the frameworks' strengths and limitations regarding their suitability for ECs.

The primary materials included peer-reviewed journal articles sourced from established academic journals such as *Energy Research & Social Science*, *Journal of Cleaner Production*, and *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*. I also added foundational theoretical works like Osterwalder and Pigneur's (2010) book *Business Model Generation* to ground the study within the established business model theory. Moreover, my study incorporated relevant gray literature, particularly policy reports and documentation from the European Commission, to provide regulatory and practical insights into the operationalization of ECs within the EU's energy policy context (European Commission, n.d.). Finally, I reviewed empirical case studies focused explicitly on energy cooperatives in Europe (Brown et al., 2022; Wierling et al., 2022) to validate the practical relevance and applicability of identified models.

The selection of business model frameworks for a detailed analysis followed specific criteria aligned explicitly with the JET principles. These criteria ensured that the chosen models reflected the ECs' unique characteristics. Specifically, I selected the models based on the following criteria:

- social inclusiveness and democratic governance: models explicitly incorporating democratic decision-making, cooperative governance structures, and community participation as foundational elements (Dilger et al., 2017);
- social and environmental impact integration: frameworks clearly articulating measurable social and environmental value propositions, demonstrating alignment with sustainability and equity-oriented strategic objectives (Joyce & Paquin, 2016; Giourka et al., 2025);
- stakeholder orientation: models emphasizing multi-stakeholder engagement and management, enabling clear mapping of value creation and distribution across diverse stakeholder groups, including local communities, cooperative members, and regulators (Bocken et al., 2013);

- economic viability and reinvestment mechanisms: models featuring explicit mechanisms for economic sustainability, financial transparency, and reinvestment of profits back into community welfare and sustainable energy initiatives (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014).

These criteria collectively facilitated the selection of the most relevant business model frameworks for ECs, enabling this study to contribute meaningfully to both academic discourse and practical application in management practice.

4. Results and Discussion

The evolving landscape of energy cooperatives as an EC form has led to increased academic interest in their unique organizational structure and value propositions. The BMCs such as the one developed by Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010) remain foundational, yet they often omit the community-oriented and social dimensions characterizing ECs. Thus, scholars have proposed various adaptations and alternative frameworks specifically tailored to capture cooperative-specific characteristics, governance structures, and community-focused value creation. This growing diversity of approaches is not merely technical; it also reflects a paradigmatic shift in business model scholarship from a market-centric lens toward one that acknowledges plural forms of value (Joyce & Paquin, 2016; Sparviero, 2019). Table 1 presents a comparative overview of selected business model approaches relevant to EC analysis.

The presented business model frameworks specifically address the integration of social and environmental missions, offering analytical advantages when applied to ECs. The TLBMC proposed by Joyce and Paquin (2016) extends the traditional BMC by explicitly including social and environmental dimensions. The TLBMC comprehensively captures value creation beyond financial outcomes, assessing the cooperative's performance in environmental stewardship, lifecycle impacts, and community benefits. Similarly, the SEMC developed by Sparviero (2019) incorporates elements central to social enterprises, such as stakeholder engagement, governance mechanisms, social impact, and economic viability. Another notable framework is the value mapping tool (VMT) presented by Bocken et al. (2013), which allows organizations to visualize the value created, missed, destroyed, or captured across multiple stakeholders. This approach is particularly relevant to ECs that involve complex stakeholder interactions and social value creation beyond market-based profit considerations.

Empirical applications of these models to ECs further illustrate their utility. For instance, Brown et al. (2022) employed a typological framework similar in orientation to the TLBMC and the SEMC to analyze energy cooperatives across Europe. Their study categorizes energy cooperatives into four distinctive business model types based on their governance structures, value propositions, and community engagement strategies. For example, collective cooperatives display democratic governance, strong community participation, and distributed ownership, clearly resonating with the social and governance components captured by Sparviero's and Joyce and Paquin's frameworks. Their analysis underscores the importance of mapping value creation pathways among cooperative members, investors, local communities, and policymakers. It demonstrates how social and environmental missions shape strategic choices and cooperative structures.

In alignment with the JET principles, a business model framework suitable for ECs should incorporate several core components. Community participation and democratic governance must be integral, reflecting cooperative principles of collective decision-making and shared ownership (Dilger et al., 2017). The social and environmental value propositions require explicit

Table 1. Overview of Selected Business Model Approaches Relevant to EC Analysis

Authors	Year	Model name	Core components	EC relevance
Osterwalder & Pigneur	2010	Business model canvas (BMC)	Value proposition, customer segments, channels, customer relationships, revenue streams, key resources, activities, partners, costs	Lacks explicit social and community dimensions
Yunus et al.	2010	Social business model (SBM)	Social problem, social value proposition, social impact, sustainability, reinvestment	Captures mission-driven community logic
Bocken et al.	2013	Value mapping tool (VMT)	Value created, captured, missed, and destroyed across stakeholders	Relevant for stakeholder-centric and impact analysis
Huybrechts & Mertens	2014	Social enterprise business model archetypes	Market-based, hybrid, solidarity-based archetypes	Relevance for hybrid governance and cooperative logic
Joyce & Paquin	2016	Triple layered business model canvas (TLBMC)	Economic, environmental, and social layers: impact, community benefits, lifecycle considerations	Integrates social and environmental layers
Massa et al.	2017	Business models for innovation	Narrative structures, cognitive frames, strategic flexibility	Relevant for understanding evolution and innovation in cooperatives
Dilger et al.	2017	Cooperative-specific business model	Investor-oriented, prosumer-oriented; community vs market orientation; members' roles, promotion	Explicitly tailored to energy cooperatives
Mazzarol et al.	2018	Cooperative and mutual enterprise (CME) business model	Customer segments, value propositions, channels, relationships, revenue streams, key resources, activities, partnerships, costs	Cooperative-specific adaptation of BMC
Sparviero	2019	Social enterprise model canvas (SEMC)	Stakeholders, social impact, governance, economic viability, community needs, revenue streams	Designed explicitly for social enterprises
Brown et al.	2022	Typology of energy cooperative business models	Collective, lead, project-based, experimental types; ownership and governance logic	Specifically developed for energy cooperatives
Wierling et al.	2022	Statistical business model typology for energy cooperatives	Nine types, including feed-in tariff, electricity sales, leasing, contracting, coordinated purchasing, share purchasing, system management, and e-mobility	Directly applicable; empirically derived from German energy cooperatives

Source: Own elaboration.

articulation with clear indicators integrated into strategic goals and performance metrics (Giourka et al., 2025). Frameworks should clearly recognize and manage multi-stakeholder engagement, addressing interactions and value exchanges among community members, investors, and regulatory bodies (Mazzarol et al., 2018). Finally, given ECs' dual focus on eco-

conomic sustainability and social impact, business models should incorporate mechanisms for continuous reinvestment of financial surpluses into local community initiatives and sustainable practices, reflecting a commitment to long-term socio-environmental wellbeing (Huybrechts & Mertens, 2014).

These core components collectively support an approach to business modelling for ECs ensuring alignment with the JET principles and enhancing organizational capacity. Utilizing frameworks such as the TLBMC, the SEMC, and the VMT enables researchers and practitioners to systematically address the distinctive organizational characteristics and mission-driven orientations of ECs within the energy transition landscape.

Research has confirmed that while the traditional BMC remains influential, its structure lacks the flexibility to adequately capture the nature of ECs. We have seen the BMC applied to traditional for-profit ventures as well as to organizational forms such as public sector institutions, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and social enterprises (Gibson & Jetter, 2014; Wronka-Pośpiech, 2017). The classical BMC with its nine economy-centric components fails to account for cooperative governance or the reinvestment of value into local communities. Those elements are fundamental to ECs as JET catalysts. This misalignment necessitates the adoption or development of alternative frameworks that integrate social and environmental viewpoints. The analysis revealed a shift in focus toward more nuanced models that extend beyond market-based considerations.

Three frameworks stand out for their utility: the TLBMC, the SEMC, and the VMT. The TLBMC, developed by Joyce and Paquin (2016), enhances the standard BMC by adding environmental and social layers that assess lifecycle impacts, community benefits, and ethical dimensions. This model seems particularly well-suited to ECs, which simultaneously operate as energy producers and socially embedded actors. The SEMC, proposed by Sparviero (2019), introduces components such as stakeholders, governance, and social impact. Finally, Bocken et al.'s (2013) VMT complements this by enabling organizations to identify the value missed or destroyed across stakeholder groups, which becomes particularly relevant in cooperative settings, where equitable distribution is critical.

Empirical work reinforces the aforementioned theoretical insights, as Brown et al. (2022) demonstrated the applicability of adapted frameworks in their typological analysis of energy cooperatives across Europe. They grounded their categorization in factors such as ownership logic, governance design, and value proposition orientation. For instance, cooperatives, characterized by shared ownership and participatory governance, mapped closely to the TLBMC and SEMC components. Similarly, Wierling et al. (2022) offered a typology of German photovoltaic cooperatives, identifying distinct configurations associated with varying levels of community participation and stakeholder engagement. These cases underscore the practical need for models that go beyond economic abstraction to reflect ECs' social embeddedness.

The findings support the identification of four core components underpinning any business model framework aligned with JET. In rural contexts, these components assume specific meanings. Community participation and governance build upon traditions of collective farming and village solidarity. Social and environmental value propositions extend beyond energy to include food-energy linkages and rural heritage. Multi-stakeholder engagement must recognize the roles of farmers, rural NGOs, and local governments. Finally, reinvestment mechanisms often support rural infrastructure, social farming projects, or local initiatives, ensuring that economic gains directly contribute to reducing exclusion and sustaining development.

These components' presence not only enhances strategic coherence, but also operationalizes the JET ethos, positioning ECs as transformational actors rather than as marginal entities.

Building on the comparative analysis, I propose a synthesized framework for EC business modelling. This framework integrates the complementary strengths of the TLBMC, the SEMC, and the VMT. Therefore, a synthesis of these tools provides the conceptual foundation for what we may term an energy community business model framework (ECBMF). It aligns with the four core dimensions identified in this study:

1. Community participation and democratic governance. Drawing on SEMC and cooperative governance theory, this dimension emphasizes decision-making structures that distribute authority across members and stakeholders. It underscores rules such as the one member – one vote principle and transparency in financial and operational decisions. These elements ensure that ECs' governance models embody procedural justice, which is an essential element of JET.
2. Social and environmental value propositions. The TLBMC contributes here by extending the classical notion of value creation into environmental and social layers. We define an EC's value through energy generation and financial returns, but also through community benefits such as energy poverty reduction, local job creation, and emissions mitigation.
3. Multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms. The VMT framework provides analytical depth for mapping value creation, capture, and exchange among diverse stakeholder groups. Within ECs, stakeholder engagement represents a continuous process of negotiation and balancing community objectives with regulatory and market constraints.
4. Reinvestment strategies for community benefit. A recurring feature in both social enterprise and cooperative models, reinvestment mechanisms ensure the channeling of financial surpluses or energy savings back into local communities. This aligns organizational sustainability with social reproduction and building resilience.

I intend these four dimensions to serve as interdependent layers of a single model. The ECBMF serves as a meta-framework integrating governance, value creation, stakeholder relations, and reinvestment flows. Its practical utility lies in enabling ECs to articulate and visualize their hybrid logic through a structured yet flexible model.

The proposed ECBMF synthesizes the most relevant analytical tools for hybrid organizations, while recent empirical studies substantiate its theoretical grounding. For example, Giourka et al. (2025) demonstrated how social innovation tools facilitate participatory governance and co-creation of value in Greek ECs, offering practical pathways for embedding JET objectives within organizational processes. Their findings echo this article's call for integrating social and environmental missions into managerial instruments. Kostecka-Jurczyk et al. (2024) provided evidence from Polish municipalities, showing that energy cooperatives contribute both to decarbonization and to local economic security. Their research underscores the necessity of using frameworks that balance financial, social, and participatory indicators, which goes in line with what the proposed framework seeks to achieve.

Essentially, the literature and model review undertaken in this study reveals both the limitations of classical tools and the emergence of frameworks capable of capturing the full scope of EC operations. The path forward involves adopting these models and refining them further, in line with empirical evidence and policy developments. In doing so, management scholarship can play a crucial role in enabling ECs to fulfil their transformative potential within the broader energy transition.

5. Conclusions

In this article, I set out to explore the applicability of existing business model frameworks to the organizational logic of ECs, particularly in the JET context. By examining a diverse range of models and assessing them against the JET principles, my study responds to a growing need within management scholarship to account for organizational forms that defy conventional constructs. The findings demonstrate that while classical tools offer a foundational language for business modelling, they remain insufficiently equipped to address the characteristics of ECs, especially those operating in rural regions.

A key contribution of this study lies in identifying alternative frameworks, namely the TLBMC, the SEMC, and the VMT as more suitable analytical tools for ECs. The aforementioned models incorporate elements such as community governance, social impact, and environmental stewardship, making them far more aligned with the nature of ECs. Empirical applications such as those by Brown et al. (2022) and Wierling et al. (2022) support this shift, which illustrates how adapted frameworks can capture the varied configurations and operational strategies of ECs across Europe. Importantly, when viewed through the rural lens, these models also provide analytical capacity to understand how ECs embed energy transition within the broader rural development.

Moreover, this article distilled four core components that any effective business model framework for ECs should include: community participation and democratic governance; clear articulation of social and environmental value propositions; multi-stakeholder engagement mechanisms; and reinvestment strategies that prioritize community benefit. These elements serve not only as analytical criteria but also as guiding principles for the design and scaling of ECs as legitimate actors in the energy transition. Stakeholder engagement extends to farmers, women's associations, and municipalities. The value reinvestment often supports rural infrastructure, care farming, or intergenerational inclusion (Musinguzi et al., 2023). Together, these features situate ECs not merely as energy actors, but also as catalysts of rural resilience and social innovation.

Beyond its analytical scope, the study offers practical implications for both scholars and practitioners. For scholars, it recommends greater inclusion of sustainability and social justice perspectives in management theory. For practitioners and policymakers, it provides a conceptual toolkit for designing, evaluating, and supporting ECs in ways that align with their normative goals and legal obligations within the European regulatory landscape.

The synthesis proposed here can serve as a diagnostic and design tool for ECs. Community leaders may use the identified four-block structure to assess their governance and value creation mechanisms. Policymakers can apply it to evaluate project proposals aligned with the JET objectives. In both cases, the proposed ECBMF operationalizes the abstract principles of justice and participation into practical business model elements.

From the managerial perspective, this study contributes to the broader understanding of how we can adapt business model tools to organizations operating at the intersection of sustainability, energy innovation, and social entrepreneurship. By highlighting the misalignment of conventional models and offering viable alternatives, the analysis supports practitioners in adopting frameworks that reflect the embeddedness of ECs in rural communities. For policymakers, the findings underscore the importance of designing institutional and financial support mechanisms that recognize ECs as rural social economy entities capable of addressing energy poverty and mitigating depopulation trends (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). For researchers,

the study recommends conducting a more systematic investigation of rural social enterprises as integral actors in the energy transition.

However, I also recognize my study's limitations. The analysis remains primarily conceptual in nature and relies on a literature review. Future research should include empirical testing of the identified frameworks across diverse rural and urban ECs to validate and refine the proposed components. Additionally, I realize a need for dynamic modelling approaches that can capture the evolving nature of ECs as they adapt to regulatory, economic, and demographic changes. Comparative analyses across regions would be particularly valuable for identifying best practices in integrating ECs into rural development strategies. While not fully systematic, this review applies structured and transparent criteria to ensure the reliability and relevance of sources.

My study reaffirms the critical role of ECs in achieving a JET, with particular emphasis on rural areas. By linking renewable energy generation with agricultural livelihoods and community-based traditions, ECs embody a form of rural social innovation that addresses both energy and development challenges. Therefore, business model tools that integrate rural livelihoods, cultural identity, and participatory governance are essential for scaling these initiatives as legitimate actors in rural development. The path forward calls for a closer alignment between management theory, social economy practice, and socio-environmental transformation. Business model innovation, tailored to the specificities of rural communities, enjoys a unique position to enable ECs to realize their transformative potential.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

None reported.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Income as a Selected Indicator of the Social Economy in Human Life

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Abstract: **Background:** Income constitutes a very important indicator in the social economy. The level and sources of income determine the level and quality of life of rural inhabitants.

Research objectives: The research aimed to examine the impact of Poland's accession to the European Union on changes in the income levels of households across basic socio-economic groups, as well as rural and urban residents, during the period 2004–2023.

Research design and methods: An examination was conducted of the results of the household budgets conducted on an annual basis by the Statistics Poland (GUS) between 2004 and 2023. The determination of changes and income relationships was achieved by employing the index of variation, the coefficient of variation (Vi), and Spearman's rank correlation.

Results: There was a decrease in income disparities between farming families and non-farming families, which indicates a process of income convergence. A negative annual dynamic of changes in income was observed only in the case of farmers' income. Farmers' incomes also displayed the highest variability among the studied groups.

Conclusions: Poland's integration with the European Union (2004–2023) was a period in which factors favorable to the growth of agricultural incomes prevailed. Despite this improvement, families associated with agriculture displayed lower income levels, worse living conditions, and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to other socio-economic groups.

Keywords: income inequalities, farmers' households, EU integration, social economy, Poland

JEL Codes: D; D1; D71; J24

Suggested citation:

Chmielewska, B. (2025). Income as a selected indicator of the social economy in human life, *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 25–39. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.02>

1. Introduction

Poland's accession to the European Union in 2004 positively influenced the standard and quality of life of rural residents. Their basic determinant was the change in the income level and its sources. Income is of great importance in shaping the standard and quality of life of every person. It influences their decisions regarding the fulfilment of needs, both basic for their existence, i.e., food, clothing, and housing conditions, and higher-order needs, important especially for the development of the whole family, such as access to social services, including health care and education for children, and modern communication technologies. Participation in culture and recreation, position on the labor market, and the state of the natural environment are also important.

The analysis concerned primarily changes in the level and structure of household income, as a basic factor important for the achievement of social economy goals. Income is a financial resource that one can use to purchase goods and services, which consequently impact

the ability to meet human needs and shape the conditions and quality of life. During Poland's integration with the EU, the impact of the social economy expanded. This came with a gradual improvement in the income situation of families. The greatest improvement concerned farming and rural families. The disparity in the level and quality of life between households living mainly from non-agricultural sources and those living mainly from farming was decreasing. We assessed the economic situation of households based on the results of research on the level and structure of income sources, trends in changes over time, and the comparison between socio-economic groups of households. The results of the research allowed for a general conclusion about the positive impact of Poland's membership in the EU on the agricultural sector and the standard of living in the countryside. This was indicated by the decrease in the income disparity between farmer households and other basic economic and social groups. However, the groups still display income differentiation.

2. Literature Review

The social economy is a sphere in which economic activity serves to achieve social goals. Social policy aims to secure the existence and basic material and non-material needs of individuals and families and to equalize the life chances of those groups of society that are economically inefficient and socially weaker. Social support is a complex network of interpersonal relationships that provides the individual with help, understanding, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. In practice, it manifests itself as emotional care, advice, material and physical assistance, and psychological support. Therefore, a very important area of activity encompasses obtaining funds for the implementation of social goals (Ministerstwo Rodziny, Pracy i Polityki Społecznej [Ministry of Family, Labor and Social Policy], 2025).

The resources acquired for the implementation of social goals can be immaterial and material. This article focuses on material issues, i.e., families' financial situation, because it determines the implementation of social economy tasks. The analysis covers the level and changes in household income, especially among farmers, during the period of Poland's integration with the European Union. The specification of the socio-economic group of farmers results from the specificity of this sector of the economy. Economists indicate that agriculture is a specific type of manufacturing activity, which in many segments is definitely different from industrial activity. Czyżewski and Poczta-Gajda (2011, p. 25) state that "agriculture, as a raw material branch, is distant from the final buyer in the chain of flows. It is not about spatial distance, but economic distance." Moreover, Woś (2000, p. 13) writes that "the competitive position of agriculture is 15–20% worse in relation to non-agricultural sectors of the national economy. This can also be interpreted as a measure of the disparity situation of agriculture or its competitive ability on the internal market." Czyżewski and Maruszczak (2005, p. 127) add that "the problem of depreciation of the agricultural sector by the market mechanism is manifested by the fact that agriculture does not realize the entire added value that it creates," and the market mechanism is not able to cope with the problems of agriculture, in particular the issue of peasant income. The negative effects of this state of affairs indicate that the agricultural sector itself, as a weaker partner compared to non-agricultural sectors in a market economy, needs various forms of support, particularly financial assistance. This applies to both farms and households (Czyżewski & Matuszczak, 2012; Chmielewska, 2004; Michna, 2002; Woś, 2003; Zegar, 2000).

Furthermore, the literature on the subject indicates that the agricultural support policy should also include the innovation process, because in the rapidly changing reality, it is neces-

sary to modernize production, which will help reduce costs toward the socially optimal level (Ruttan, Hayami, 1972).

Poland's integration with the EU impacted the economic, and social situation in Poland. Technical and social infrastructure in rural areas developed, which contributed to the creation of new jobs and improved the living standard of the rural population. This is a necessary and expected change. The situation of Poland's most numerous farms, i.e., small and medium-sized, improved significantly. As Chmielewska and Zegar (2004, p. 32) note, "these farms drew income from the cultivated land, from subsidies and from non-agricultural work on the rural labor market or in a nearby city. These may not have been fully satisfactory amounts, but they provided social security for many smaller, poorer farmers."

As Klepacki (2005) notes, the financial situation of farming families is correlated with the farms' structure. He predicted that

In Polish agriculture alone, three groups of farms will develop. One is small farms located near non-agricultural workplaces, run by people who do not associate their future with agriculture, although they treat their farms as a place to live, with a certain sentiment, or as an investment of capital. The second group are intensive farms, with a growing area, investing, run by increasingly better educated farmers, open to knowledge, closely linked to the market or processing. The third group will be large-area farms, engaged in simplified large-scale production, easy to mechanize, requiring small labor inputs, e.g., production of cereals, oil plants, and legumes (technologically uniform) (Klepacki, 2005, p. 85).

According to Adamowicz (2005, p. 122), "in agriculture, we can expect a more distinct formation of the following three sectors: commercial agriculture, multifunctional agriculture and social agriculture." Twenty years of integration have confirmed that changes in the agrarian structure of Polish agriculture follow the predicted trends.

In Poland, a significant number of families with low income from the farm remain connected with semi-subsistence, unprofitable farms. Agricultural economists warned that, without securing adequate income for the agricultural population, each farmer would have to seek work outside their farm. Therefore, in connection with the agricultural sector, multi-activity has an important role to play as an additional source of income for families connected with agriculture (Błąd, 2011; Turowski, 1992). Wilkin (2009) even drew attention to the need to "take care" of the multifunctionality and multi-activity of the agricultural sector and rural areas.

In shaping the income situation of the population, shaping the non-agricultural labor market is important. This creates the possibility for rural residents to acquire new skills to perform various, often new professions. In the social economy, there will be an "increasing demand" for multi-skilling as a potential source of supplementing the modest family budget, as well as a factor that promotes social and professional reintegration, providing social services and counteracting social exclusion. The level of infrastructure in residents' local areas and immediate surroundings will be the primary determinant of their income and social integration (Chmielewska, 2024; Chmielewska & Zegar, 2024; Zegar, 2011).

Multifunctionality and multi-professionality constitute part of the process of adaptation of farming families to the changing environment and serve as an opportunity for them to achieve income and social sustainability. Farmers, especially those with small or medium-sized areas, should not be satisfied with the production of agricultural raw materials only. They should expand the scope of their activities not only to include services, but above all to actively participate in the subsequent stages of refining their production (Chmielewska, 2013).

3. Research Method and Material

The basic source of empirical data was the results of household budget studies. The annual household budget surveys (HBS) by Statistics Poland (GUS) serve as a source of information on the level and structure of income and expenditure of the surveyed households, food consumption, housing conditions, and subjective assessment of the financial situation. Based on the results, one may conduct various analyses on the living conditions of the population and identify factors influencing the differentiation of the financial situation of specific groups of households. The subjective scope of the HBS includes, among others, two groups of households largely related to agricultural activity. The first of them are households in which the dominant income comes from agriculture (the social and economic group – farmers). The second group is households that obtain any income from using a farm (the key condition is the fact that they use a farm, and not belonging to this socio-economic group distinguished on the basis of the criterion of the type of dominant income).

The category examined was disposable income (household's available income). It is intended for expenses and an increase in savings, so it is a basic indicator determining the level and quality of life. The structure of its sources was the basis for dividing households into socio-economic groups. The criterion was the exclusive or predominant (over 50%) source of income: for employees, it was hired work, for farmers, an individual farm, for the self-employed – self-employment outside agricultural activity, for retirees and pensioners – social benefits, mainly retirement or disability pensions (GUS, Household budgets, 2024).

Disposable income is the sum of current household income from individual sources reduced by income tax advances. Disposable income includes monetary and non-monetary income, including natural consumption (consumer goods and services taken for the needs of the household from an individual farm in agriculture or self-employed business activity) and goods and services received free of charge.

Income from an individual farm in agriculture is the difference between the sales value of agricultural production (including natural consumption) and subsidies related to the use of the farm, and the current expenditure on agricultural production and taxes related to running the farm.

We aimed to analyze changes in the level and sources of household income as one of the important factors of the social economy strategy. We conducted the study based on the results of household budgets conducted annually by the Statistics Poland. The budget study played an important role in the analysis of the standard of living of the population. It was the basic source of information on income, expenditure, quantitative consumption of food, and other aspects of the living conditions of specific population groups.

The household budget study uses a representative method, which allows for generalization, with a certain precision, of the obtained results to all households in Poland. The basic empirical sources are the cyclical results of household budget surveys, available in the publications of the Statistics Poland, primarily in: household budgets, income, and living conditions of the Polish population, EU-SILC survey report (European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions), rural areas in Poland and signal publications, as well as literature data, existing data (desk re-search), and generally available mass (public) statistics data of the Statistics Poland and Eurostat.

Household budget studies distinguish the following income sources:

1. Earned income
2. Unearned income
3. Being dependent.

Since 2005, household budget studies have classified households into five basic socio-economic groups of the country's population according to the primary (over 50%) source of income. These are:

- Employee households – hired work in the public or private sector. In this group, Statistics Poland additionally distinguishes two subgroups: (1) employees in blue-collar positions and (2) employees in non-blue-collar positions;
- Farmer households – using an individual farm in agriculture;
- Self-employed households – self-employed outside an individual farm in agriculture or performing a freelance profession;
- Retiree and pensioner households – retirement or disability pension; Within this group, the Statistics Poland distinguishes two additional subgroups: (1) retirees and (2) pensioners;
- Households living on unearned sources – unemployment benefits, other (apart from retirement and disability pensions), financial, and non-financial benefits. Due to the small number of households in this group and its large internal differentiation, data for households living on unearned sources were not published.

The number of members determines the size of a household. The published household budget data distinguishes single-person and multi-person households: 2-, 3-, 4-, 5-, and 6 or more people.

The results of the household budget survey serve, among others, for:

- Analyses of the level and differentiation of living conditions of the basic socio-economic groups of households and the reasons for this differentiation, and
- Analyses of the level and differentiation of living conditions of the basic groups of households in a dynamic approach.

The study on the assessment of changes and verification of the above-mentioned assumptions (hypotheses) concerned the period related to Poland's integration with the EU. Where necessary, the indication of the phenomenon and the availability of comparable empirical data refer to the years 2004–2023 (X1...X20). The study used the method of statistical and econometric analysis.

To prove the hypotheses, we calculated the following indices (measures) of changes in disposable (nominal) household income:

- Average dynamics in Poland and for six basic and two additional economic and social groups, namely: farmers, employees (including workers and non-workers), self-employed, retirees, and pensioners (including retirees and pensioners);
- Income parity in relation to the eight groups mentioned above;
- Changes in the income structure of farmers' households in the years;
- Relationships of income changes in selected economic and social groups using linear relationships;
- The characteristics of income changes were performed using annual dynamics, and the coefficient of variation (V) calculated from the formula:

$$V = s/\bar{x} * 100\%$$

in which:

s = standard deviation, and

\bar{x} is the arithmetic mean

- Income relations examined using Spearman's rank correlation and linear regression, which allows for determining not only the strength of the relationship but also the direction of covariation.

Household budget surveys play an important role in analyzing the standard of living of the population. They serve as the basic source of information on income, expenditure, quantitative consumption of food, and other aspects of the living conditions of specific population groups. However, non-random errors affect the results, especially in income, which tends to be underestimated, and in specific expenditures, which tend to be overestimated. Due to differences in methodological solutions, there are discrepancies between the results of the household budget survey and macroeconomic data. Therefore, the results of the household budget survey mainly serve to analyze the relative differentiation and structure of income, expenditure, and consumption by households, depending on socio-demographic characteristics and other cross-sections used, such as by the class of place of residence.

4. Results and Discussion

The study focuses on characterizing changes in the level and structure of disposable household income and demonstrating statistical relations between the income of farmer households and other household groups. The research results apply to the policy of implementing the social economy in rural areas.

Level, structure, and income relations

In 2023, the nominal, average monthly disposable income in farmer households amounted to PLN 2,477 per person and was 352% higher compared to 2004 (PLN 541). In other socio-economic groups of households, the nominal increase in disposable income was lower and amounted to: in households on average in the country by 264%, employees on average by 240%, workers in blue-collar positions by 307%, employees in white-collar positions by 180%, the self-employed by 254%, pensioners and annuitants on average by 231%, pensioners by 201%, annuitants by 253% (Table 1 and Table 2).

Table 1. Average monthly disposable income per person in households in 2004–2023 (current prices, in PLN)

Year	Households								
	Grand total	of farmers	of employees			of the self-employed	of retirees and pensioners		
			total	in			total	of retirees	of pensioners
				manual labor positions	non manual labor positions				
In PLN per person per month (current prices)									
2004	735	541	782	558	1.069	935	779	869	612
2010	1.193	1.025	1.199	896	1.592	1.468	1.181	1.245	926

Year	Households								
	Grand total	of farmers	of employees			of the self- -employed	of retirees and pensioners		
			total	in			total	of retirees	of pension- ers
				manual labor positions	non manual labor positions				
In PLN per person per month (current prices)									
2015	1.386	1.046	1.387	1.081	1.761	1.739	1.438	1.510	1.438
2020	1.919	1.854	1.934	1.620	2.216	2.238	1.894	1.941	1.522
2021	2.062	2.008	2.048	1.736	2.302	2.487	2.051	2.096	1.638
2022	2.250	2.328	2.251	1.912	2.533	2.540	2.239	2.281	1.809
2023	2.678	2.447	2.662	2.270	2.992	3.313	2.580	2.616	2.162
Dynamics of changes in nominal income in percentage terms in the years 2004–2023 in percentage terms									
<u>2023</u> 2004	364.3	452.3	340.4	406.8	279.9	354.3	331.2	301.0	353.3

Note: own study based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

Table 2. Dynamics of average, nominal, and monthly disposable income in socio-economic groups of households (current prices)

Year	Households						
	Grand total	of farmers	of employees		of the self- -employed	of retirees	of pensioners
			manual labor positions	non manual labor positions			
year 2004 = 100%							
2004	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
2010	162.2	189.4	160.5	149.0	157.0	143.2	151.2
2015	188.5	193.4	193.6	164.8	186.0	173.7	234.8
2020	261.0	342.6	290.1	207.4	239.3	223.3	248.6
2021	280.4	371.2	310.9	215.4	265.9	241.2	267.5
2022	305.9	430.3	342.4	237.0	271.6	262.5	295.4
2023	364.3	452.3	406.8	279.9	354.3	301.0	353.0

Note: own study based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

In the period after accession, there was a significant reduction in the income disparity of farmers compared to other groups of households. The nominal disposable income of farmer households in 2004 was 74% of the income of the average household in the country, and in 2023 – 91%. In the period after accession to the European Union, there was a downward trend in the income disparity of farmer households compared to the income of other socio-economic groups. However, the level of disposable income fluctuated in the period under review, which showed in changes regarding the disparity level (Table 3).

Table 3. Relationships between the level of average monthly disposable income per person of farmer households and the income of other household groups in the years 2004–2023 (current prices, income parity index*)

Year	Grand total	Employees			Self- -employed	of retirees and pensioners		
		total	in			total	in	
			manual labor positions	non manual labor positions			retirees	pensioners
Parity index: farmers' income/income of individual other household groups (%)								
2002	100	97	132	70	82	96	84	122
2003	87	82	114	60	73	83	74	105
2004	74	69	97	51	58	69	62	88
2010	86	85	114	64	70	87	82	111
2015	75	75	97	59	60	73	69	73
2020	97	96	114	84	83	98	96	122
2021	97	98	116	87	81	98	96	123
2022	103	103	122	92	92	104	102	129
2023	91	92	108	82	74	95	93	113

Note: own study based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets); * Income parity: the ratio of the average monthly (per person) disposable income of farmer households to the average monthly income (per person) in the household of individual socio-economic groups in %.

In the analyzed period, the greatest disparity in farmers' income occurred regarding employees in non-manual positions and the self-employed. On the other hand, compared to employees in manual positions and pensioners, in most years, farmers' incomes dominated. In 2023, farmers' nominal incomes were 7.8% higher than employees in manual positions and 13.2% higher than pensioners. However, they were lower in relation to the remaining groups, namely employees in non-manual positions (by 18.2%), the self-employed (outside an individual farm) (by 26.1%), and pensioners (by 6.4%) (Table 3).

Income sources

In the period after accession, the income structure changed. It primarily involved a decline in the share of agricultural income and a rise in income from other sources, as Figure 1 shows.

The share of income from agriculture amounted to 67.4% in 2005 (before integration, the value of the indicator was higher and amounted to 75.6% in 2002). In 2023, the percentage amounted to 66.3%. Notably, this period was characterized by fluctuations in the share of income from work on the farm. In the period after integration, the highest value of the indicator (above 70%) was for the years: 2007, 2010, 2013, and 2021. The lowest was in 2016 (62.2%).

In the income structure of a farming family, the share of income from hired work was 9.6% in 2005. The following years were characterized by an upward trend in the value of the indicator to 13.9% in 2015 (the highest value), followed by a decline to 12.0% in 2023. In the years 2005–2023, the share of income from self-employment decreased (from 1.3% to 1.1%), but it increased with regard to income from social benefits and insurance (from 18.8% to 19.9%).



Figure 1. Changes in the structure of disposable income in farm households in 2005–2023

Note: own study based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

We adopted the year 2005 due to the change in the division of household groups and the resulting lack of data comparability.

Compared to other groups of households, farmers' households obtained a lower or similar share of income from the main source of income. In 2023, in farmers' households, income from an individual farm in agriculture accounted for 66.3% of disposable income per person, while in employees' households, income from the main source of income, i.e., hired work, accounted for 82.6% of total disposable income, and in self-employed households, income from the main source of income, i.e., self-employment, accounted for 67.2%.

For farming families using farms with small areas of agricultural land, subsidies play a smaller role in shaping their disposable income. In the group of farm households, which constitutes the research sample of household budgets, the share of subsidies in agricultural income is at the level of several percent (e.g., 15.9% in 2015). This results from the fact that the research sample of budgets consists of farm households, of which about 2/3 use small farms with an area of agricultural land up to 20 hectares.

Relationships of changes in disposable household income

During the period under review, incomes in all professional groups increased. However, we also observed different characteristics of the annual relationship, which distinguish agricultural incomes. First, farmers' income is characterized by the strongest (both positive and negative) annual changes in income in the professional groups under review. Second, we noticed a negative annual dynamic of changes in the amount of income observed only in the case of farmers' incomes (in 2009, 2011, 2014, and 2015) (excluding 2005, when there was a slight decrease in incomes in the group of employees in general) (Figure 2).

Third, farmers' incomes also displayed the highest variability among the groups studied, and the coefficient of variation was 43.5%, which indicates high variability. We observed a similar, but noticeably lower value of the coefficient of variation in the group of workers ($V = 40.8\%$). The lowest variability was characteristic of incomes in the group of employees in non-manual positions, and the value of the coefficient was relatively low. Table 4 presents the details.

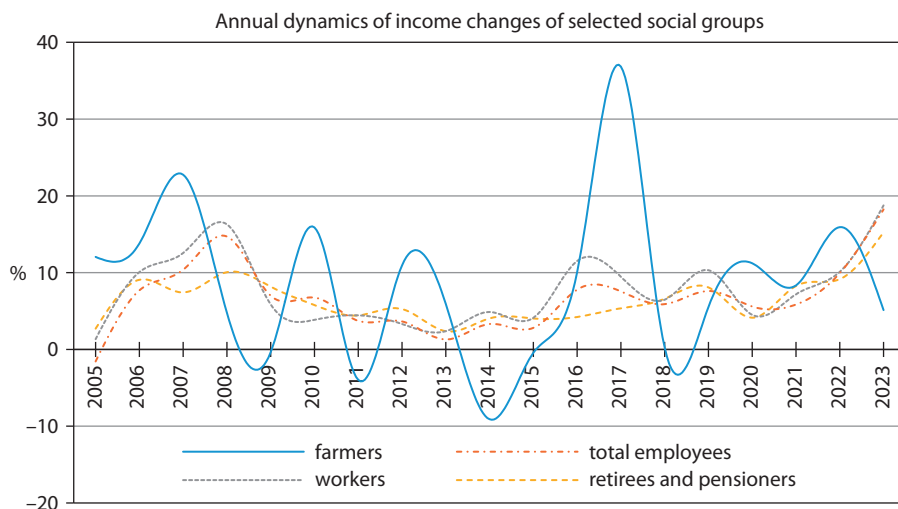


Figure 2. Dynamics of changes in nominal disposable incomes of selected groups of households

Note: own calculations based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

Table 4. Variability indices of nominal disposable household income by economic and social groups in 2004–2023

Coefficient of variation (V) of disposable income in Poland in 2004–2023				
total	farmers	employees total	in:	
			manual labor positions	non-manual labor positions
36.0%	43.5%	35.3%	40.8%	28.3%
self-employment	retirees and pensioners	retirees	pensioners	×
33.7%	34.2%	31.9%	36.3%	×

Note: own calculations based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

In the case of changes in the structure of farmers’ income, we observed several regularities in the period under review relating to sources of work. Between 2004 and 2023, the importance of all categories of sources decreased, except for hired work, which increased. The share of income from work in agriculture decreased the most, by 7.0 percentage points, while the share of income from hired work increased by 11.9 percentage points during that time (Figure 3).

Changes in the structure of income of farmers’ households showed moderately strong and significant correlation in the case of the categories “from work in agriculture” and “from hired work,” whereby the correlation was negative, i.e., with a decrease in the share of income from agriculture, there was an increase in revenue from hired work. The model was well-fitted, explaining 46% of the changes. It allowed us to assume that, on average, with a decrease by 0.68 percentage points in the share of income from agriculture, there was an increase by 1.0 percentage points in the share of revenue from hired work (Figure 4).

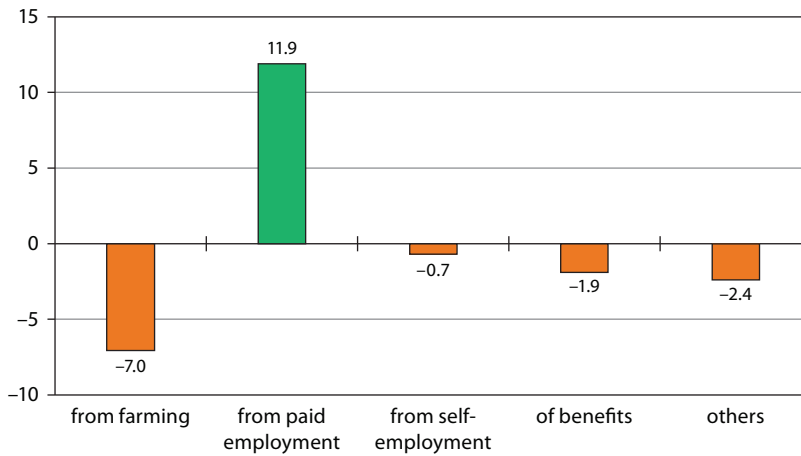


Figure 3. Change in the structure of disposable income of farmer households in percentage points in the years 2004–2023

Note: own calculations based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

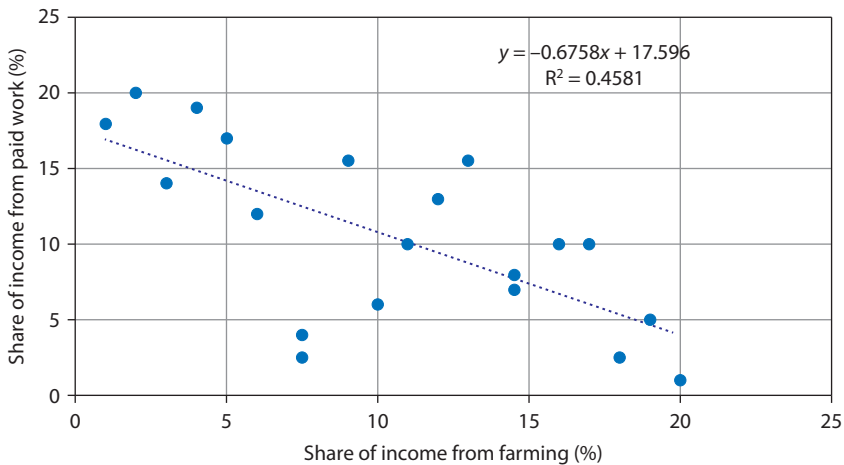


Figure 4. Relationships of changes in the structure of income of farmers’ households in the years 2004–2023

Source: own calculations based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

Table 5. Linear dependence of the structure of disposable income of farmer households

Matrix of linear dependence of farmers’ income structure				
income from agriculture				
dependency	from employment	from self-employment	from benefits	other
correlation: R =	-0.68	-0.02	0.48	0.05
regression: R ² =	0.46	0.00	0.23	0.00

Source: own calculations based on the GUS Poland data (Household budgets).

Poland's integration with the European Union (2004–2023) was a period in which factors favorable to the growth of agricultural incomes prevailed. This growth exhibited a higher rate of change than that observed in other socio-economic groups. Funds directed to the entire agri-food sector, farms and rural areas, mainly within the framework of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), positively influenced the income relations favorable to farmers. Poland became the leader in the EU in the implementation of the Rural Development Program.

In rural areas, significant economic and social progress occurred after accession. Despite this, many families operating on small areas of agricultural land still have difficulties in achieving an income that covers needs at a socially accepted level. National and EU rural development programs (RDP) provide significant support for these farms. For small farms, money directed to the development of rural areas is important, as it determines investments that develop the rural labor market. Non-agricultural jobs are being created, which makes it possible to supplement agricultural income from outside sources.

Despite the improvement in the period after Poland's accession to the European Union, families associated with agriculture showcased lower income levels, worse living conditions, and a higher risk of poverty and social exclusion compared to other socio-economic groups. Simultaneously, the importance of self-supply in agriculture is decreasing. The importance of monetary income and non-agricultural gainful activity is increasing.

In the context of European integration, agriculture deserves special attention. Although its importance in the economic structure of the country, villages, and households is decreasing, it remains ignored in social and cultural matters. It remains a factor in changes in the level and structure of household income, and therefore also in the level and quality of their life.

Poland's integration with the EU contributed to income convergence between socio-economic groups of households. This resulted primarily from the higher dynamics of income growth of rural residents than of urban residents and farmers compared to other groups of households.

5. Conclusions

Poland's membership in the EU has influenced the standard and quality of life of the Polish population, especially the inhabitants of rural areas. Income from non-agricultural sources plays an increasingly important role in shaping the income of a farming family, and this remains a permanent trend. During the integration period, agricultural populations experienced improvements in living standards, primarily through higher incomes. In 2004, the nominal disposable income of farm households was PLN 541 per person, and by 2023 it increased to PLN 2,447 per person, i.e., by 352%.

The growth dynamics of nominal disposable income in the remaining household groups was lower and the increase amounted to: the national average by 264%, employees by 240% on average, workers by 307%, white-collar workers by 180%, the self-employed by 254%, retirees and pensioners by 231% on average, retirees by 201%, pensioners by 253%. In the years 2004–2023, there was a decrease in income disparities between farming families and non-farming families, which indicates a process of income convergence. The change in income parity indices indicates this. In 2004, farmers' incomes accounted for 74% of the income of the average household in the country, and in 2023 – 91%. These are positive changes that apply to all other economic and social groups of households.

During the integration period, there were fluctuations in the income structure of farm households. The share of income from work on the farm ranged from 71.4% in 2010 (the highest level) to 65.1% (the lowest level). In 2023, it amounted to 66.3%. Simultaneously, the share of income from hired work in the farm family budget increased from 9.6% in 2005 to 10.5% in 2023. On the other hand, self-employment outside agriculture remained at a low level, from 1.3 to 1.1%. The financial situation of the farm family largely depended on social benefits; their share in total income increased from 18.8% in 2005 to 19.9% in 2023.

In the period under review, incomes in all professional groups increased, but we also observed different characteristics of changes in the annual relation, which distinguish agricultural incomes. Firstly, farmers' incomes displayed the strongest (both positive and negative) annual changes in incomes compared to other farm groups. We observed a negative annual dynamic of changes in income only in the case of farmers' income and only in some years.

Farmers' incomes also showed the highest variability among the studied groups, and the coefficient of variation was 43.5%, which indicates high variability. We observed a similar but noticeably lower value of the coefficient of variation in the group of workers ($V = 40.8\%$). The lowest variability was characteristic of incomes in the group of employees in non-manual positions, and the value of the coefficient was relatively low.

In the case of changes in the structure of farmers' income, we observed several regularities in the period under review relating to sources of work. Between 2004 and 2023, the importance of all categories of sources decreased, except for hired work, which increased. The share of income from work in agriculture decreased the most by 7.0 percentage points, while the share of income from hired work increased by 11.9 percentage points during this time.

Changes in the structure of income of farmers' households showed a moderately strong and significant correlation in the case of the categories "from work in agriculture" and "from hired work," with the correlation being negative, i.e., with a decrease in the share of income from agriculture, there is an increase in income from hired work. The model was well-fitted, explaining 46% of the changes. The model allowed us to assume that, on average, with a decrease by 0.68 percentage points in the share of income from agriculture, there is an increase by 1.0 percentage points in the share of income from hired work.

In the case of income from agriculture and income from benefits, we observed a moderate and statistically insignificant correlation, while in other categories ("self-employment" and "other") we did not notice statistically significant covariation with income from agriculture, which suggests that other factors (e.g., external factors, such as "economic conditions") determine them.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

None reported.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Country Housewives' Associations as Social Economy Entities and Their Areas of Activity in Poland

Anna Calik-Kaczor

Abstract: **Background:** The aim of the article is to present the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. The author will discuss this matter in the context of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations.

Research design and methods: The paper conducts a conceptual and theoretical analysis of the basic assumptions of social economy and entrepreneurship and of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities, and reviewed the literature in this area. The study also involved the conduction of original survey research.

Results: The research results indicate that Country Housewives' Associations are active in various areas, including social, integration, and educational. In the course of their activities, they face many barriers. Members' awareness of the social economy is at a low level.

Conclusions: The activity of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in Poland plays an important role in local communities. The scope of the article encompasses only a fragment of the reflections, and scholars may supplement it with new data over time.

Keywords: social entrepreneurship, economy, social, Country Housewives' Associations, Poland

JEL Codes: J43, J62, Q19

Suggested citation:

Calik-Kaczor, A. (2024). Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities and their areas of activity in Poland. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 40–52. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.03>

1. Introduction

The social economy, whose essence is activity based on solidarity, cooperation, and meeting social needs, has gained importance in recent decades as an alternative to traditional economic models. Poland has a wide range of social economy entities, such as associations, foundations, social cooperatives, social integration centers, or vocational activity centres. The catalog of entities also includes Country Housewives' Associations (sometimes, the name is also translated as Rural Women's Associations or Rural Women's Clubs), which are one of the oldest forms of social organizations still operating in Poland.

We aimed to present the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. Country Housewives' Associations constitute an independent, self-governing, and social organization of the rural population, aiming to support the development of local entrepreneurship and to actively improve and develop the rural environment. Moreover, the Country Housewives' Associations aim to be particularly active for women

and their families, including representing their interests and influencing the improvement of the socio-occupational situation. Therefore, the Associations also intend, among other things, to counteract social exclusion. It also concerns the situation of unequal access to rights and institutions determining the order of the expected arrangement of social functions and roles (Krawiec, 2019).

This topic was discussed in the context of the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations. Analyzing the activities of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities. An attempt was made to answer the following research questions: In what areas do Country Housewives' Associations conduct their activities? What barriers to functioning do the Country Housewives' Associations face? How do the members of the Country Housewives' Associations understand the social economy?

The article presents a literature review that includes a discussion of economic theory and the positioning of social economy within it. The theoretical section outlines the key assumptions and definitions of the social economy and characterizes the entities operating in this sector, with particular emphasis on Country Housewives' Associations as important participants in the local social economy. The subsequent part of the paper presents the results of the author's own research concerning the areas of activity of rural women's associations, the barriers they face in their functioning, and how their members understand the concept of social economy. The article concludes with a summary of the main findings.

2. Literature Review

The changes that have occurred in Poland over several decades, i.e., the nineteenth-century social movements, the First and Second World Wars, the political transformation, and Poland's entry into the European Union, have increased the demands placed on the social economy. Out of this current, social economics has emerged as an alternative approach to the control of scarce resources in the economy that distinguishes itself from traditional neoliberal models. The main objective of this trend is to combine economic efficiency with the realization of social and solidarity values. Social economy is not only a new approach to the essence of economics, but represents a specific segment of economic activity located in a triangle with sides defined by market economy, civil society, and democratic state (Hausner, 2008). The location of social economy in such a triangle assumes that it should foster the reconciliation of different rationalities ascribed to the market (allocative rationality), the state (distributive rationality), and society (solidarity rationality) (Kwaśnicki, 2005). The social economy represents a new proposal for solving social problems, and this, to some extent, constitutes the innovation of this approach (Pach, 2018).

According to the Act of August 5, 2022 on Social Economy, we should understand the concept of social economy as the activity of social economy entities for the benefit of the local community in terms of social and professional reintegration, creation of jobs for people at risk of social exclusion, and provision of social services, realized in the form of economic activity, public benefit activity and other paid activity. Many researchers have attempted to characterize and define the solidarity economy, which they usually did by referring to the values that constitute the reference point for the operation of entities in this sector, their specific goals, and the legal forms proper to them (Hausner, 2008). According to Kaźmierczak and Rymśza (2007), we can understand social economy as a tool for the economic and social mobilization of neglected local communities/areas and as a form of increasing the participation of their

members/residents in economic exchange and public life. In this understanding, the social economy constitutes a space for generating alternative, non-state solutions. It is not conceived as an idea and a path of rejection of the market and the state, but as a path of systemic evolution. On the one hand, it serves as a practical means of addressing social problems on a local scale (neighborhood and solidarity economy, local public benefit services); on the other hand, it functions as a mechanism for deeper system-wide changes, including those relating to the market economy (corporate social responsibility) and the state (co-management, public-social-private partnerships) (Hausner, 2008).

The state plays a key role in the development of the social economy, both in terms of shaping an appropriate legal and institutional environment, actively contributing to the formation of such macro-social conditions that generate the soil for the organic growth of social economy initiatives and entities (Hausner, 2012). However, the key action for the development of the social economy in Poland should be an institutionalized multi-stakeholder (actors of various types) and multi-level (operating at various levels of the territorial organization of the state) partnership. Such a partnership implies mutual interaction, with a careful balance between rapprochement and autonomy, consisting of mutual respect, equal participation in decision-making, mutual accountability, and transparency (Hausner, 2012). As Wilkin (2008) emphasizes, the idea of the social economy, its building and dissemination, deserves comprehensive support. The positive aspects of the functioning of the solidarity economy go beyond the traditional criteria of economic evaluation, showing many beneficial externalities that strengthen social cohesion and democracy.

As "social economy," we understand two distinct concepts. They can be regarded as complementary concepts. The social economy refers to a sector that is on the borderline between the economy and social welfare. The social economy, in turn, refers to the economy as a whole and on the grounds of the Polish legal system, it has been included in Article 20 of the Constitution of the Republic of Poland as one of the foundations of the social and economic system of the Republic of Poland – a social market economy based on freedom of economic activity, private property, and solidarity, dialogue and cooperation between social partners constitutes the basis of the economic system of the Republic of Poland (Constitution of the Republic of Poland, 1997). According to the National Program for the Development of the Social Economy, the social economy is a sphere of civic and social activity, which, through economic and public benefit activity serves professional and social integration of persons at risk of social marginalization, job creation, provision of social services of public interest (for the general interest), and local development (NAPES).

When defining the social economy, scholars usually adopt a structural-operational approach, i.e., the main features and actors included in it are identified, namely: social economy enterprises, solidarity economy initiatives with a strong civic dimension, and social entrepreneurship (Blicharz, 2022). Another perspective is also possible in which the social economy is a sector of the economy in which the social aspect is realized and the economy is purely market-based. Such a view is closer to liberals, who see the social economy as a way of mitigating the negative effects of the market economy and social tensions and, more recently, the effects of the crisis. With such an approach, ES is closer to social assistance in its activating edition than to the economy (Węsierska-Chyc, 2013). Noteworthy, one of the key functions ascribed to the social economy is counteracting social exclusion in groups at risk of social ostracism, which includes, among others, the long-term unemployed, those with low levels of education or low qualifications, the homeless, and the elderly. By stimulating their activation and integrating

them into the mechanism of the market economy, social economy initiatives participate in levelling socio-economic disparities (Pacut, 2015, p.139). Thus, the concept of social economy aims at socio-economic order and harmonization of economic, social, and environmental goals, on the basis of this concept, at least a systemic framework can be set, a kind of systemic signpost of principles of action for all stakeholders (Mączyńska & Pysz, 2020).

The concept of social entrepreneurship is linked to the constantly developing social economy. According to Hausner (2007), the mission of social enterprises is to create a material base for the operation of civic organizations, promote alternative forms of credit, strengthen social capital, regenerate local public space, realize the idea of citizenship, and facilitate the reform of the public service sector. According to Kerlin (2008), social entrepreneurship is any private activity conducted for the public good, implemented according to market strategies, but whose main objective is not profit maximization but the achievement of specific economic and social goals, and which proposes innovative solutions to the problems of social exclusion and unemployment. For some, social entrepreneurship is a dynamic process of combining vision, implementing change, and creating (Kuratko & Hodgetts, 2004). Noteworthy, in recent years, people have combined entrepreneurship with the intention to make a difference in the environment, to improve the life of a community, or to provide value, not only in a mercantile dimension but also, increasingly, in a more or less altruistic context (Popowska, 2018).

As there is no clear definition of social entrepreneurship. There are many approaches in the literature that point to its complex and multifaceted nature. In the subjective view, the key to the solution is the social entrepreneur, who is seen as a visionary – an individual capable of identifying and exploiting opportunities to realize a social mission and find innovative solutions to the community's social problems (Pacut, 2015). The subject matter is the analysis of an organization or social enterprise. It is treated as a collective concept defining organizations that work to achieve social goals. They can take a variety of legal forms, but are united by the principles of seeking solutions based on commercial experience to achieve social goals and being able to reinvest the profits of their activities for the benefit of the community (Haugh, 2010). These entities manifest a mindset of market orientation but with a focus on achieving social objectives. The important thing here is to combine financial and economic efficiency with the social mission. There is also a process approach, which involves describing the activities and processes undertaken to create and perpetuate social value. These processes include identifying a specific social problem and developing a targeted solution, assessing social impact, and designing a sustainable business model for the venture (Stanienda et.al., 2017, p. 39).

The most popular view of social entrepreneurship is that proposed by the European Research Network (EMES) established in 1996. It conducted a research project on the emergence of social enterprises in Europe. EMES emphasizes the economic and social characteristics that should define an entity. Social enterprises combine economic activity with a social mission that aims to build local trust, activate local communities, and meet the growing demand for services. Notably, social enterprises attach great importance to their autonomy and willingness to accept the economic risks associated with their ongoing socio-economic activities (Borowska, 2013, pp. 105–114).

Social enterprises are not only economically and socially “useful,” but also provide a space to inspire action, integrate local authorities and residents as a future-oriented driver of community development.

The aforementioned Act on Social Economy contains a catalog of social economy entities, which include, among others, social cooperatives, non-governmental organizations, persons

with disabilities, or the unemployed. Among the entities, the relatively least researched to date are Country Housewives' Associations. This is one of the oldest forms of social organization that still functions in Poland. Some point to the key date of 4 March 1866, when the Rural Housewives' Association was founded in the Prussian partitioned territory, specifically in Piaseczno near Gniezno. Over the years, depending on the situation (mainly political), the Country Housewives' Associations performed different functions and were active in different organizations.

The situation of the Country Housewives' Associations in Poland was not legally standardized for many years. The Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations defined the forms and rules for the functioning of associations and the association of members. According to Article 2, the associations are organizations of a voluntary nature and independent of governmental and territorial administrative entities. The specific tasks of Country Housewives' Associations include conducting social, educational, and cultural activities in rural communities; conducting activities for the comprehensive development of rural areas; supporting the development of women's entrepreneurship; initiating and conducting activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas; popularizing and developing forms of cooperation, management, and rational methods of running households; representing the interests of rural women's associations to public administration bodies; developing folk culture, including in particular local and regional culture.

The establishment of a Country Housewives' Associations begins with an initiative, which must come from at least 10 people who live in a village, a village district within the administrative borders of a town, or a town of up to 5,000 inhabitants. The assembled group adopts the statutes, elects the founding committee in the form of a resolution, and applies for registration in the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations kept by the Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture. Country Housewives' Associations have two bodies: the members' meeting and the association's board of directors. The members' meeting of the association is the supreme body that comprises all members of the association who have not been suspended. The remit of this body includes, among other things: examining and approving the reports of the Board of Directors and discharging it; adopting the Association's directions, program of activities, and budget. In turn, the Association's Board has a mainly representative function. Notably, each Country Housewives' Association has its own statute, as it can create it on its own or adopt the model statute proposed in the annex to the Act of November 9, 2018 on Country Housewives' Associations. The model statute is based on the provisions of the Act, but in addition to that, it details the association's internal rules.

According to Article 21, the Country Housewives' Associations have their assets consisting of membership fees, donations, inheritances and bequests, income from their own activities, income from the association's assets, and public donations. In addition, §4 of the model statutes emphasizes that the assets are also increased by subsidies from the state budget and local government units. All income from the activities of the wheel is to be used for the fulfilment of the statutory objectives and may under no circumstances be distributed among the members.

One of the income sources of the Country Housewives' Associations is income-generating activities. According to the model statutes, income may come from, among other things: the sale of folk-art products, including handicrafts and folk and artistic crafts, or regional food, or the sale, rental, or lease of assets.

If the association does not have the status of a public benefit organization and the revenue from the above titles does not exceed PLN 100,000 for the previous tax year, it may also use

simplified revenue and cost accounting instead of full accounting. However, if the association does not meet the conditions of the provision, e.g., it sells products of a different type, then according to the Act of March 6, 2018, The Law on Entrepreneurs, the provisions on business activity apply and the association – becomes an entrepreneur.

In accordance with the Act and the Regulation of the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on financial support from the state budget for the associations of Rural Housewives' Associations, Country Housewives' Associations may receive financial support for a given calendar year. This is possible if the association is registered in the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations and submits an application for financial aid to the relevant Agency for the Restructuring and Modernization of Agriculture by a specific deadline. Country Housewives' Associations can also obtain funding through grants, subsidies, and competitions. Throughout the year, many public and private institutions organize initiatives that allow the Country Housewives' Associations to raise additional funds.

3. Research Method and Material

A quantitative study (survey) was conducted using a survey questionnaire (CAWI).

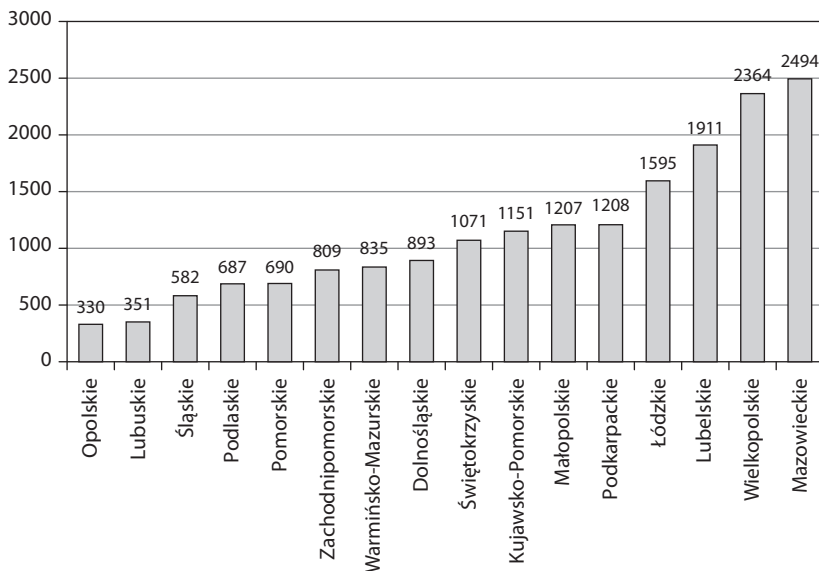


Figure 1. Country Housewives' Associations in Poland (as of May 15, 2025)

Note: based on the National Register of Country Housewives' Associations, <https://krkgw.arimr.gov.pl/>

As of May 15, 2025, there were 18,178 Country Housewives' Associations registered in Poland. Most associations were located in Mazowieckie Voivodeship – 2,494 associations (14%) and Wielkopolskie Voivodeship – 2,364 associations (13%). Lubelskie Voivodeship came third – 1,911 associations (11%), and Łódzkie Voivodeship – 1,595 associations (9%). The smallest number of Country Housewives' Associations was located in the following voivodeships: Opolskie – 330 (2%), Lubuskie – 351 (2%), and Śląskie – 582 (3%).

The respondents to the survey were members of Country Housewives' Associations from all over Poland, and the sample consisted of 464 persons. I invited women from two nationwide groups on the social networking site Facebook, which brings together members of Country Housewives' Associations, to participate in the study. The groups were the Nationwide Country Housewives' Associations Forum (23,455 group members as of March 31, 2023) and My KGW (20,484 group members as of March 31, 2023). I selected the survey sample using the purposive sampling method. The questionnaire was available online between February and March 2023. The questionnaire consisted of different types of questions, i.e., closed: single- and multiple-choice and semi-open questions.

By combining quantitative data (from the closed questions) and qualitative data (from the semi-open questions), it was possible to obtain a more complete picture of the situation and opinions of the surveyed group.

4. Results and Discussion

Respondents were asked what are the areas, in which the association they belong to is active. They could select several answers. Table 1 shows the number of indications and the percentage of responses.

Table 1. Areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations

Area of activity	Number of responses	Percentage
Social activities , e.g., organization of picnics, festivals, special events	391	84%
Integration : integration activities of the population	304	66%
Cooking , e.g., cooking, making preserves	272	59%
Manual , e.g., handicraft: reeds, knitting, technical work	199	43%
Education , e.g., organization of workshops and training sessions	179	39%
Ethnocentrism , e.g., promoting: local culture, regional products	175	38%
Physical activity , e.g., excursions, gymnastics, dance courses	130	26%
Activities for women , e.g., activities to improve the living and working conditions of women in rural areas	115	25%
Cultural , e.g., music, theatre, dance performances	77	17%
Religious , e.g., pilgrimages, trips to sacred places	30	7%
Therapeutic , e.g., mind training, music therapy	6	1%
We do not participate in any activities	2	0%
Other	0	0%

The results of the study indicate that over 84% of the respondents consider activity for the local community as the main area of activity of the Country Housewives' Associations. This is in line with the assumptions of the Act and the statutory objectives of the Country Housewives' Associations. In particular, this manifests itself through the organization of events of various nature aimed at integrating residents (an equally important area of activity of the associations, according to 66% of the respondents) and encouraging their social and civic participation.

A significant number of Country Housewives' Associations are active in the culinary area. According to 59% of respondents, the preparation of traditional dishes and preserves constitutes not only part of the statutory activity, but also an important source of income. Associations can sell products at local events, fairs, or directly in the associations' headquarters. Significantly, culinary products are also the subject of numerous competitions, as a result of which associations can obtain additional funds for the development of their activities.

Approximately 43% of respondents considered the manual area to be an important element of the activities of Country Housewives' Associations. This category is large and encompasses a variety of activities that associations can realize in different dimensions, including decorations, income-generating activities, or workshops.

The workshop dimension is linked to the educational area of activity of Country Housewives' Associations indicated by 39% of respondents. Through educational activities, the associations not only fulfil their statutory objectives, but also raise funds for further development. These activities are aimed at educating residents and promoting local activation and development. They can be free of charge (e.g., for schools and local communities) or paid (e.g., for organized groups). For 38% of the respondents, Country Housewives' Associations perform an important ethnocentric activity of promoting regional culture and traditional products.

Another area of activity for Country Housewives' Associations is physical activity, declared by nearly 26% of respondents. These activities often receive financing in the form of grants or funds. The target audience is primarily senior citizens. In this context, the activities of Country Housewives' Associations contribute not only to local development, but also to social economy objectives through the integration of people at risk of social exclusion.

Notably, one of the statutory objectives of the Country Housewives' Associations is activity for women. In total, 25% of respondents indicated this aspect. Through numerous initiatives, the Country Housewives' Associations contribute to improving women's quality of life in rural areas, strengthen their participation in the life of local communities, and promote their personal and professional development.

In summary, the activities of Country Housewives' Associations cover a wide spectrum of activities, from social integration, education, cultural and physical activities, to support for ethnocentrism and activities for women. The implementation of these activities contributes to the all-round development of local communities, supporting both cultural, economic, and social aspects.

There are barriers to the activities of any organization. They can have a different range of impact, i.e., high (they affect the organization's activities to a significant extent); medium (they are a barrier that affects the organization's activities, but not to a significant extent), and low (they affect the organization, but do not significantly affect the organization's activities).

We asked respondents what were the main difficulties faced by the associations they belong to. We analyzed the collected answers, and below we present the percentage of indications.

The largest number of respondents (50%) indicated low member involvement as one of the key problems in the organization's activity. Commitment is a multidimensional concept, but in the context of the functioning of this type of organization, it plays a key role in ensuring smooth operation. The second key problem mentioned was the lack of interest in the associations' activities on the part of the local community, as indicated by 35% of respondents. As the associations' activities mainly cover the area of a given locality, cooperation with local authorities becomes extremely important. However, 32% of respondents declared a lack of support from representatives of the authorities, such as the mayor, councilors, or the head of the munic-

ipality. Another challenge for the functioning of the associations is the problem of financing activities, indicated by 29% of respondents. In turn, 28% of the respondents pointed to a lack of information regarding support opportunities for the organization, such as grants, training, or projects.

Table 2. Barriers to the activities of Country Housewives' Associations

No.	Barrier	Percentage
1.	Low involvement of members, e.g., due to lack of time	50%
2.	Lack of interest from the local community	35%
3.	Lack of support from local authorities	32%
4.	Problems with financing the activities	29%
5.	Lack of information about opportunities for KGW, e.g., grants, training	28%
6.	Difficulties in attracting new members	20%
7.	Small number of members	16%
8.	Internal conflicts or disagreements among members	15%
9.	Low income from activities	14%
10.	Lack of ideas for new activities	10%
11.	We have no difficulties	8%
12.	Competition from other associations	6%
13.	Lack of premises	6%

Problems with a moderate impact on the organization's activities included those related to the internal structure and functioning of the association. In this group, respondents mentioned difficulties in attracting new members (20% of respondents), the small number of members (16%), internal conflicts or misunderstandings (15%), and lack of ideas for new activities (10%). Furthermore, 14% of respondents mentioned the low income generated from activities. Although the listed barriers do not pose an immediate threat to the activities of the associations, their long-term impact can lead to growing organizational problems, such as permanent conflicts or even the break-up of the association.

Problems with a lesser impact on the functioning of the organization include competition from other associations, as noted by 6% of respondents. This is particularly noticeable in the case of associations operating in neighboring towns. Moreover, 6% of respondents indicated the lack of their own premises as a significant obstacle to their activities. Notably, 8% of the respondents declared the absence of any difficulties in the activities of the association, which may indicate the efficiency of their organization and adaptation to local conditions.

The Country Housewives' Associations members were also asked about their understanding of the social economy. I asked a one-choice question and to indicate the most important association.

In total, 33% of respondents indicated that for them, the social economy is a way of defining an economic activity that combines social and economic objectives. In turn, a total of 23% of respondents see the social economy as a method of dealing with social problems and working for the benefit of society. For 15% of respondents, the social economy encompasses a range of entrepreneurial activities to activate those outside the labor market, i.e., those at risk of social

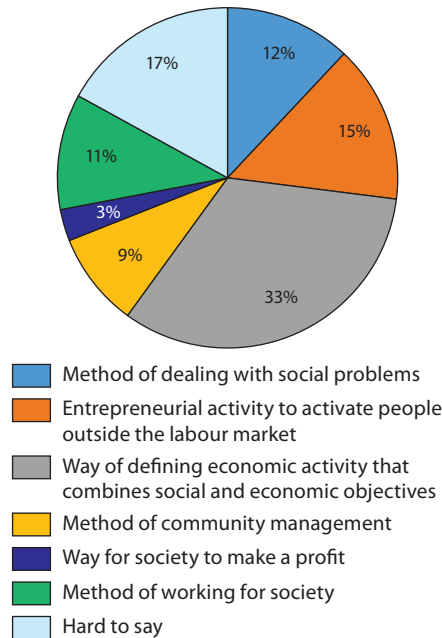


Figure 2. The concept of social economy as understood by members of Country Housewives' Associations

exclusion. According to 42 respondents (9%), it is a way of community management, and for 3%, the solidarity economy is an opportunity for society to make a profit. Unfortunately, not everyone has a high level of awareness of the social economy, as 17% of the surveyed group had difficulty answering this question. This may indicate a low awareness of the social economy among Country Housewives' Associations members.

5. Conclusions

The main objective of this article was to reflect on the areas of activity of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland and their role in local communities. Considering individual aspects, we can conclude that the results answered the posed research questions. The presented research results show that the activity of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in Poland plays an important role in local communities. Detailed results of the study proved that:

1. Country Housewives' Associations conduct their activities in various areas, and these are mainly social, integration, culinary, and educational activities. In addition to fulfilling their mission and statutory objectives through these activities, the associations can also generate income from their activities, which they can then use for their own activities. As time goes by and new opportunities arise, it would be good for associations to broaden their horizons and thus their offerings and open up new avenues of social activity.
2. Associations also face many barriers. The biggest ones include low member involvement; lack of interest from the community and local government; problems with funding activities; lack of information about opportunities for associations, e.g., grants, subsidies; difficul-

ties in attracting new members. Many of these problems relate to the internal organization of the association's work and require solving through dialogue. Associations should also be bold and clearly communicate their needs directly to the responsible institutions.

3. Awareness of the social economy among members of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland remains low. The concept of social economy evokes various associations among respondents. Therefore, it would be worthwhile to educate members of Country Housewives' Associations as social economy entities in this area and thus present the opportunities that such membership gives them.

Although the study provides important data on the activities of Country Housewives' Associations in Poland, it also displays some limitations, which one should consider when interpreting the results. The research sample was unrepresentative, and, therefore, we cannot generalize the results to all Country Housewives' Associations in Poland. The respondents were selected randomly, but the limited number of participants and the diversity of organizations in terms of size, location, or scope of activities may have affected the data obtained. An additional limitation of the study is the possible selection bias, in that people more involved in the activities of the associations may have volunteered to participate in the study, which may have influenced the perception and evaluation of the problems studied.

The identified limitations point to the need for further research that considers a more representative sample and a broader spectrum of factors influencing the functioning of the associations. Nevertheless, the obtained results provide valuable conclusions that can form the basis for an in-depth analysis and formulation of recommendations for Country Housewives' Associations in Poland. Therefore, further in-depth research and analytical work on this relevant and timely issue is planned.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

None reported.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

The Contribution of Agritourism to Social Innovation and Sustainable Development in the Rural Areas of the Portuguese Beja Region

Sandra Bailoa, Jorge Pires, Maria Isabel Valente, Joaquim Gomes

Abstract: **Background:** Nowadays, agritourism constitutes an alternative activity to traditional agriculture, fostering socioeconomic dynamics and promoting social innovation in rural territories.

Research objectives: This study aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in rural areas of the Beja region (Portugal).

Research design and methods: Methodology followed a qualitative case study approach, involving eight microenterprises. The study involved the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews with the companies' managers to validate a theoretical model based on two key propositions. These premises assume that agritourism businesses contribute to social innovation and the region's sustainable development.

Results: The results show a consensus on the environmental, economic, and social contributions of agritourism, while perceptions regarding social innovation revealed some variability. Nevertheless, the analysis validated the defined propositions.

Conclusions: Findings suggest an overall positive effect of agritourism on the region, supporting its relevance as a driver of sustainable development and social innovation.

Keywords: agritourism, social innovation, sustainable development, Beja region

JEL Codes: Q01, Q13, Q56, O35, Z32

Suggested citation:

Bailoa, S., Pires, J., Valente, M. I., & Gomes, J. (2025). The contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in the rural areas of the Portuguese Beja region. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.04>

1. Introduction

In Portugal, agritourism has grown significantly, especially in the last twenty years, with the Alentejo region having a major impact on this increase (Turismo de Portugal, 2025; EY-Parthenon, 2020). Agritourism development resulted from the diversification of agricultural activities following changes in the E.U. Agricultural Policy, which changed from a model that encouraged production to a model focused on the multifunctionality of agriculture, sustainable agricultural practices, and support for rural development (European Council, 2025). In the Beja region, wine tourism, gastronomic routes, and later olive tourism and other activities in rural areas boosted agritourism. Additionally, the region offers a rich, diverse, and tranquil land-

scape that offers a vast historical and cultural heritage with authentic and sustainable experiences that are attractive to tourists (Fáisco et al., 2021). In recent decades, we have witnessed an increase in national and European rural development policies that have favored tourism and, in particular, agritourism (Gôja et al., 2021). Notably, this growth results also from an increase in demand for sustainable tourism and financing lines that supported the modernization of infrastructures adapted to demand (Turismo de Portugal, 2025). In Baixo Alentejo, this type of tourism has grown in response to the need to revitalize rural areas, offering a business model that contrasts with mass tourism. This approach aims to protect rural spaces, enhance cultural and natural heritage, and address the growing demand for authentic and sustainable experiences.

In this context, social innovation is a differential that ensures that agritourism not only brings economic income to the activity but also brings concrete benefits to local communities (Partanen, 2024; Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2020). Several studies demonstrate that social innovation has a significant and multidimensional impact on agritourism. It allows for potentializing synergies in rural areas, thus fostering cooperation within the territory, environmental and heritage preservation, cultural and local identity, territorial cohesion, social responsibility, sustainable transformation, and rural development. Consequently, agritourism contributes to regions' economic development. Studies show evidence of these contributions in several countries around the world and across different geographic areas (Ćirić et al., 2021; Chiodo et al., 2019; Ciolac et al., 2019; Dickes et al., 2020; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Sangnak et al., 2025; Triani & Bangun, 2025; Partanen, 2024; Pitarch-Garrido, 2022). An agritourism project with social innovation should actively engage communities in activities that promote local culture, heritage, and identity. It should offer events and activities for tourists focused on traditions and traditional activities that allow for experimentation or active participation, such as gastronomic experiences and flavor tastings. The project should also enhance the visibility of these activities by actively showcasing them through its digital promotion of agritourism.

The development of agritourism in the Beja region shows how local companies find innovative solutions in the process of the region's economic renewal. However, the tourism's rapid growth raises concerns about its sustainable development and contributes to integrating local communities through social innovation projects and programs. Thus, we aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in the rural areas of Beja region, Portugal.

This research involved a qualitative analysis based on eight case studies. Their selection resulted in a sample with a non-statistical typological representation of agritourism companies in this region. Moreover, the literature review allowed us to define two key propositions that assume that agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainable development in the rural areas of the Beja region. We collected interviews with people responsible for the companies, and we transcribed the most relevant aspects of the interviewees' responses to confirm the established assumptions.

The study is structured into five sections. The second section presents the literature review, the third section presents the research method and material, the fourth section presents the results and discussion, and the fifth section presents the main conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Agritourism and Social Innovation

Social innovation has multiple definitions, but in general, scholars define it as a transformative process that contributes to social change based on community involvement as well as to improving social cohesion through collaborative efforts of multiple actors (Mosedale & Voll, 2017; Moulaert et al., 2013, 2005; Fontan et al., 2005). Within the scope of agritourism, this concept must integrate all actors participating in the creation of social innovations and should not focus only on some perspectives of social innovation (Wirth et al., 2022). According to Trunfio and Campana (2019), only with the inclusion of different actors, such as local companies, local communities, political or institutional actors, and tourist destination management organizations, is it possible to identify the resources and opportunities for social innovation in each tourist location. On the other hand, Moulaert et al. (2013) state that studies in tourism primarily examine social innovation as a way of contributing to economic value. Although economic aspects are significant, this focus narrows the perspective on the broader potential of social innovations. Social innovation in tourism should involve new forms of cooperation between individuals or organizations, generating and implementing new ideas that advance the development of tourist destinations and regions. These innovations should also positively impact society, improve the quality of life, and/or change social or power relations (Ayob et al., 2016). Social innovations can be decisive in contributing to improving and transforming the organizational structure of tourist destinations (Trunfio & Campana, 2019).

Moreover, the concept of social innovation in tourism should also include other perspectives. It should not focus solely on an organizational change in tourism companies (Alkier et al., 2017); or only business models that create social value rather than economic value, which some studies call social entrepreneurship in tourism (Sheldon & Daniele, 2017); or different ways of thinking and leading to institutional change, or new value propositions, new rules, and informal cultures (Alegre & Berbegal-Mirabet, 2016; Polese et al., 2018); or only on satisfying social needs that the Government or the market have not yet satisfied (Batle et al., 2018). It should include all these different perspectives and satisfy the needs of the tourism segment, while considering and involving the community.

Generally, scholars consider agritourism a particular form of social innovation in agriculture and rural development, aiming to recompose the natural and human dimensions within the framework of a new sustainable way of doing agriculture (Chiodo et al., 2019). On the other hand, Malek and Costa (2015) argue that we may also understand social innovations in tourism as a strategy for local communities to be integrated into the planning and decision-making process within tourist destinations. Agritourism is a means for social innovation by promoting local entrepreneurship and community projects, which can lead to rural development and social change (Partanen, 2024; Yüzbaşıoğlu et al., 2020).

According to Pitarch-Garrido (2022), social innovation in tourism is characterized by the mobilization of local and external resources to change the logic of collective action and provide new responses to common problems. Dickes et al. (2020) conclude that the role of agritourism in rural revitalization contributes to economic diversification, community engagement, and environmental conservation, which together contribute to social innovation by promoting local economic development and increasing public awareness of agricultural practices.

Agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainability by promoting community involvement in the promotion of culture and natural resources, promoting tradition as

a resource for innovation, enhancing local identity, and creating value. On the other hand, agritourism promotes job creation and income diversification while empowering local communities in rural development (Sangnak et al., 2025; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Sekar et al., 2023; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020) and is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Sangnak et al., 2025). Hassan et al. (2023) argue that promoting local cultures and economies through social innovation encourages residents to engage in sustainable practices, thus preserving natural resources and cultural identities. Furthermore, it promotes community bonding and interconnection, enhancing social cohesion and cultural identity among residents.

By including specific programs in agricultural activities and also aspects related to social innovation in the communities (local traditional markets, traditional music and dances, uses and customs, gastronomic traditions, cultural traditions, artisans, local culture), agritourism increases income from agricultural activities and strengthens relationships with the various elements of the community, such as institutions, associative groups, among others. These tourism programs advance sustainable agritourism by prioritizing environmental and cultural preservation while simultaneously supporting the sociocultural and economic development of the locations, thereby being an attraction for tourists (Triani & Bangun, 2025; Roman et al., 2024; Gajić et al., 2024; Muwani et al., 2024).

Some authors argue that implementing educational programs for agritourists that involve the entire community and local leaders creates synergies that strengthen the implementation process and promotes cultural education in terms of good sustainable practices in agricultural crops and agritourism activities (Triani & Bangun, 2025). The inclusion of local communities in social innovation processes in the tourism area can enable tourists to experience the local traditions by learning from people who are knowledgeable about them, i.e., older residents known as experts in local customs, who, under the guidance of agritourism companies and local associations, promote and transmit the identity and authenticity of rural communities. This could be a differentiation strategy in the business models of agritourism companies and an attracting factor for tourists (Chiodo et al., 2019; Mulyani et al., 2022; Ruengdet et al., 2023; Roman et al., 2024; Gajić et al., 2024).

In Portugal, agritourism managers can develop innovative strategies and implement social innovation projects based on the Portugal Social Innovation 2030 support line (Portugal Inovação Social, 2025). The line enables doing it individually or in partnership with various entities inserted in local communities and thus creates a differentiating strategy in their companies that can attract tourist segments that also value companies' social responsibility.

As literature indicates a positive contribution of agritourism to social innovation and the need to deepen studies on this relationship in the Beja region, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition A: Agritourism practices positively impact social innovation in the rural areas of the Beja region.

Agritourism and Sustainable Development

Tourism sustainability refers to the environmental, economic, and sociocultural aspects of tourism development (UNEP/WTO, 2005). As various studies evidence (Ciolac et al., 2019; Cheteni & Umejese, 2022; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Dionizi & Kërçini, 2025), agritourism has been playing an increasingly significant role in promoting sustainability in rural areas, offering notable benefits while also facing environmental challenges.

In the United States, where agritourism has developed more intensively since the beginning of the century, farm owners have shown a greater commitment to sustainability compared to other types of agricultural activities. According to Barbieri (2012), this orientation has generated environmental, sociocultural, and economic benefits for local communities.

Although the economic dimension still prevails, authors such as Ndhlovu and Dube (2024) emphasize the importance of integrating environmental sustainability into agritourism enterprises to ensure their long-term viability. This aspect is particularly relevant in developing countries, where agritourism, although less widespread, presents a promising and profitable potential within the tourism sector.

Environmental sustainability in agritourism strengthens with the conservation of natural resources, the continuity of agricultural activity, and the growing environmental awareness among stakeholders (Abadi & Khakzand, 2022). In this regard, several authors such as Alves-Pinto et al. (2017), Songkhla and Somboonsuke (2013), and Sayadi et al. (2009) highlight the role of agritourism in the protection of biodiversity and natural resources.

Paniccia and Baiocco's study (2021) further supports the potential of agritourism in contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals of United Nations (SDGs), particularly through the integration of sustainable practices into tourism activities. This approach not only enhances the economic viability of farming operations (Tseng et al., 2019) but also supports environmental sustainability and the preservation of biodiversity and rural landscapes (Ciolac et al., 2019). Similarly, Cheteni and Umejesi (2022) identify agritourism as a viable strategy for sustainable rural development, grounded in local resources and strengths.

Agritourism contributes to significant environmental improvements, including the aesthetic enhancement of rural areas, the preservation of natural environments, and the increase in environmental awareness among residents and local authorities (Ćirić et al., 2021). Moreover, it helps safeguard traditional crafts, cultural practices, and agricultural landscapes, elements that are crucial for maintaining the cultural identity and ecological integrity of rural communities (Ciolac et al., 2022).

Self-sufficient and sustainable agriculture often drive the success of agritourism in rural communities, where the integration of local traditions and conservation practices attracts environmentally conscious tourists (Khamung, 2015). By emphasizing sustainability, organic farming complements agritourism, with studies showing a positive relationship between tourists' pro-environmental behavior and their loyalty to organic agricultural tourism (Xue et al., 2020). In this context, Shen et al. (2020) propose a model to evaluate the potential of organic agritourism, focusing on resources, market demand, community capacity, and value creation. Their model underscores how the integration of organic farming fosters sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and local communities.

However, some authors, such as Tiraieyar and Hamzah (2012), have identified negative impacts associated with agritourism, including environmental overload from noise, landscape disruption, and increased waste generation. While much of the literature highlights agritourism as a promising path toward environmental sustainability in rural areas, policymakers must address the challenge of balancing economic growth with environmental protection to ensure truly sustainable development (Wang & Liu, 2024).

According to Ndhlovu and Dube (2024), agritourism encourages a balanced approach to development by boosting local communities and ensuring sustainable practices in agritourism businesses, particularly in developed countries. And they conclude that in the various studies

on agritourism, the economic dimension is more accentuated than the social and environmental dimensions.

Dionizi and Kërçini (2025) emphasize that agritourism aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 12, by promoting responsible consumption and production. This model of sustainable tourism not only drives local economic growth but also enhances the financial viability of small agricultural enterprises. However, the authors highlight structural challenges, such as infrastructure limitations, which require mitigation through tax incentives, integration of local food systems, and targeted policy support.

The study by Oropeza-Tosca et al. (2024) reinforces the importance of collaborative networks between local cooperatives, academic institutions, and government bodies in ensuring the economic viability of agritourism. In the context of environmental conservation and sustainable economic development, the research shows that valuing local products, such as tropical gar in Tabasco, can be a competitive advantage. Beyond stimulating the local economy, this approach diversifies income sources and enhances market access, aligning with SDGs 12 and 13.

In the Ukrainian context, Ohorodnyk and Finger (2024) highlight that, despite its secondary role in the country's agricultural economy, agritourism is essential for diversifying farm activities. This diversification is crucial for economic recovery and long-term sustainability, particularly in the post-war period, demonstrating that agritourism can be a strategic tool for strengthening the financial resilience of rural communities.

Lak and Khairabadi (2022) discuss the economic and cultural consequences of agritourism in rural areas, identifying both challenges and opportunities. They argue that agritourism can promote local investment, generate employment, and create new revenue streams, all while preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge through tourism activities.

Nasution et al. (2023) analyzed the role of government in fostering regional economic growth through the development of agritourism clusters. Their findings suggest that strategic government intervention through infrastructure development, financial incentives, and favorable regulations plays a critical role in optimizing the economic benefits of agritourism. Saepudin et al. (2022) highlight the direct financial benefits of community-based agritourism for local stakeholders. In addition, their study emphasizes that this model encourages sustainable land use, fosters small business development, and strengthens community engagement in economic activities.

Grillini et al. (2025) analyzed the impact of agritourism on social interactions in the mountainous region of Tirol-Trentino. Their study revealed that while agritourism can catalyze sustainable agricultural transitions, such as organic farming, it may also reduce engagement between farms and the local community. The high workload associated with tourist accommodations limits farmers' participation in social activities outside their properties, potentially leading to social detachment. This challenges previous assumptions that agritourism inherently strengthens community ties and instead suggests that it might resemble isolated tourism resorts if not properly integrated with local networks. The authors call for further qualitative research to assess community perceptions and strategies to foster social capital in agritourism settings.

Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of strong links between agriculture and tourism for fostering sustainable social development. Their research suggests that agritourism accommodations incorporating agricultural activities perform better in sustainability indicators compared to those solely focused on lodging. This highlights the role of agritourism in preserving traditional knowledge and maintaining community engagement, which are essential for long-term sustainability and cultural identity. Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023)

further support the argument that agritourism contributes to local sustainability by valorizing traditional products and rural values. They argue that agritourism enhances social cohesion by reinforcing local identity and encouraging interactions between visitors and rural populations. The integration of agriculture into tourism activities helps sustain socioeconomic structures while promoting community pride and cultural continuity.

Given this evidence, agritourism presents both opportunities and challenges for social development. While it has the potential to preserve cultural heritage, foster local identity, and maintain traditional knowledge, it also requires careful management to avoid social isolation and ensure continuous community engagement. The involvement of local stakeholders in agritourism planning is essential to maximize its social benefits and promote inclusive, community-centered rural development.

Considering that most literature focuses on the positive influence of agritourism practices on sustainable development, mainly on environmental, economic, and social development dimensions, we put forward the following proposition:

Proposition B: Agritourism practices positively impact sustainable development (environmental, economic, and social development) in rural areas of the Beja region.

3. Research Method and Materials

We adopted a qualitative research strategy, grounded in a multiple-case study methodology, following the principles proposed by Yin (2018) and Easton (2000) that allow for comparative analysis across several units. We chose cases using a theoretical sampling method, designed to support analytical generalization as opposed to a statistical one.

We identified companies through the SABI (Iberian Balance Sheet Analysis System) database, which provides financial and structural information on all Portuguese firms. The research started with five companies and evolved until reaching eight cases in a continuous process of sample creation. From the database, we randomly selected the micro-enterprises, each constituting an individual case in the multiple-case design. The selection criteria included location in the Beja region, classification under CAE 55202 (rural tourism), the Code of Economic Activities, Rev.3 in Portugal, and with a CAE of at least one agricultural activity, family-run businesses known for their agritourism activity in the region. The sample was developed from the various contacts with whom it was possible to carry out complete interviews. Eisenhardt (1989) recommends using between four and ten cases in studies of this nature. Thus, the adopted sample adhered to this guideline.

We collected data through semi-structured interviews with the managers of the selected companies. We designed the interview guide based on both the literature and the Sustainable Tourism Indicator System by Turismo de Portugal, which assesses sustainability in economic, social, and environmental aspects. We based our questions on the social innovation category, mainly on the literature. We conducted the interviews took place between January and March 2025.

We transcribed the interview data and analyzed them through a cross-case comparative approach, identifying patterns and contrasts across the eight cases. This analysis served to validate the initial theoretical propositions regarding the role of agritourism in promoting social innovation and sustainable development in the Beja region. To ensure confidentiality, we decided to present only aggregate responses, grouped into the categories: "aspect present,"

“aspect somehow present,” and “aspect not present.” To validate propositions, we counted the aggregated responses to the items in each dimension, focusing on the “present” aspect category following the methodology proposed by Gomes and Madeira (2017), where authors validated a premise validated when the majority of interviewees’ answers ($\geq 50\%$) were included on “present” aspect category for all items within the dimension analyzed. Authors also considered a premise partially validated when responses concentrated mostly on the “somewhat present” category, and not validated when responses concentrated mostly on the “not present” category.

4. Results and Discussion

This section outlines the research findings. We transcribed key elements from the interviews and analyzed them to validate the theoretical propositions identified in the literature, assessing their relevance and applicability to the business reality of the Beja region. Table 1 presents the aggregate data from the interviews with company managers.

Table 1. Results of interviews

Specification	Aspect present	Aspect somewhat present	Aspect not present
A – Social Innovation			
1 – The company promotes social innovation in the region	7	0	1
2 – The company launched a socially innovative project in the last 12 months	5	0	3
3 – The company has introduced an organizational culture that encourages social innovation	5	1	2
4 – The company evaluates the impact of its actions and participation in social innovation projects	5	1	2
B – Sustainable Development			
Environmental development			
5 – The company sorts waste for recycling purposes	6	2	0
6 – The company manages optimized consumption of energy	8	0	0
7 – The company manages optimized consumption of water	7	0	1
8 – The company defines a plan for environmental management	7	1	0
Economic development			
9 – Consumes regional products	8	0	0
10 – Touristic activities available incentivize the growth of stays	7	1	0
11 – Services run throughout the year	8	0	0
12 – Provide economic benefits to the region	7	1	0
Social development			
13 – Are concerned about employing people from the region	8	0	0
14 – Activities available promote resident satisfaction with tourism evolution	7	1	0
15 – Among women employed, some have positions of management	6	1	1
16 – Facilities adapted for guests with disabilities and reduced mobility	6	1	1

Source: Own elaboration.

The rows contain the interview items associated with the two defined propositions, organized by four categories, and the columns contain the aggregate number of interviewed responses. We disaggregated the proposition associated with sustainable development into the three dimensions that compose it (environmental, economic, and social).

Analyzing the questions on the social innovation category, the responses demonstrated some variability. Almost all respondents stated that their companies promoted social innovation in the region (item 1 = 88%), and some of them (item 2 = 63%) launched a socially innovative project in the last 12 months. Most managers affirmed that their company has introduced an organizational culture that encourages social innovation (item 3 = 63%), but 25% admitted the opposite and affirmed that they evaluate the impact of their actions and participation in social innovation projects (item 4 = 63%). Despite that, in the case of every question, some managers (in certain items, one, two, or three) manifested disapproval. The responses concentrated in the “present” category (more than 50% in each item); thus, we validated the proposition of social innovation.

Considering the environmental development category, interviewees responded unanimously to question six (item 6 = 100%), that is, the companies had an optimized energy consumption. Concerning the sort of waste, despite the efforts they make to separate the garbage (item 5 = 75%), respondents considered that there was not always selective waste collection in areas far from urban areas, and are not supported in this task. Almost all respondents managed optimized consumption of water (item 7 = 88%) and defined a plan of environmental management (item 8 = 88%).

Concerning the economic development category, questions 9 and 11 present responses unanimous (items 9, 11 = 100%), that is, interviewees affirmed that the company consumed regional products, and services ran throughout the year. Almost all respondents considered that touristic activities available incentivized the growth of stays and affirmed that the company provides economic benefits to the region (items 10, 12 = 88%).

Analyzing the questions on the social development category, all respondents were concerned about employing people from the region (items 13=100%). Most respondents stated that activities available promoted resident satisfaction with tourism sector evolution (item 14 = 88%). They also considered that among women employed, some had positions of management (item 15 = 75%) and had their facilities adapted for guests with disabilities and reduced mobility (item 16 = 75%). The agreement with most of the aspects analyzed related to environmental, economic, and social development dimensions allowed for validating the proposition of sustainable development. In summary, we confirmed the propositions defined in the literature review.

We used the most relevant transcriptions of the interviews with business managers to create a graphical representation with the NVivo 15 tool (Figure 1).

As it is visible on figure 1, the most frequently used words were: social, innovation, environmental, management, and also, regional, activities, efficient, and employees. Therefore, we could conclude that there was consensus among the interviewees from the companies analyzed regarding the purpose of this study. Figure 1 shows words associated with both propositions, showing the importance of all these aspects to the agritourism companies.

The results are in line with those obtained in studies by Partanen (2024), Yüzbaşıoğlu et al. (2020), Pitarch-Garrido (2022), Dickes et al. (2020), Sangnak et al. (2025), Sekar et al. (2023), Hassan et al. (2023), and Triani and Bangun (2025). These authors analyzed how agritourism pro-

jects contribute to social innovation, and that this largely depends on contributing to the sustainability of the communities where these projects are developed.



Figure 1. Word cloud from interviews

Source: output of Nvivo 15.

Most of the interviewees considered sustainable agritourism as a business that can increase social innovation projects in local communities associated with their strategic business vision. According to them, it allows responding to the current interest of agritourists who feel the need to learn and have a moment of contact with local culture, customs, and traditions, experienced with the authenticity of the community. This creates positive synergies with the local community, fitting in the conclusions of several authors (Ruengdet et al., 2023; Roman et al., 2024; Gajić et al., 2024).

In line with Chiodo et al. (2019), most of the interviewees were concerned with the specific aspects of social innovation that focus on the territorial commitment of these companies. In this regard, they argue that their quality of life and work related to territory sustainability, local resources, and the prosperity of local inhabitants. Interviewees stated that agritourism contributes to sustainability, rural development, protection of cultural, architectural, gastronomic, and landscape heritage, contributing to the development of rural areas. As Broccardo et al. (2017) refer, managers argue that national and regional policy makers should consider these elements to develop policies that contribute to boosting this type of tourism. The results regarding agritourism's contributions to social innovation corroborate what several authors have found in other locations, such as the Southern USA (Dickes et al., 2020) and the Italian regions (Palmi & Lezzi, 2020). As agriculture became unprofitable in these areas and farmers and local communities needed to diversify their activities, they developed agritourism supported by social innovation projects that promote local culture, traditions, resources, and heritage, thereby creating value and strengthening local identity, differentiating factors valued by certain tourism segments.

Managers also agreed that the social innovation projects involving the local community contribute positively to the sustainable development of agrotourism, which is confirmed in studies by Sangnak et al. (2025), Triani and Bangun (2025), Partanen (2024), Pitarch-Garrido (2022), Wirth et al. (2022), Yüzbaşıoğlu et al. (2020), Polese et al. (2018), Alegre et al. (2016), Alkier et al. (2017), Ayob et al. (2016), Batle et al. (2018), Malek and Costa (2015), Mosedale and

Voll (2017), Moulaert et al. (2013). Ayob et al. (2016) highlight that agritourism can improve the quality of life and change social or power relations. Moreover, interviewees mentioned that by promoting local entrepreneurship and community projects, agritourism serves as a means of generating social innovation and territorial cohesion, as also referred to by Partanen (2024) and Yüzbaşıoğlu et al. (2020).

The study verified that, despite the existence of social innovation support programs for 10 years, none of the companies interviewed used them. The companies implement social innovation initiatives as part of their business strategies, guided by their social responsibility policies and aligned with the interests of their tourism segments. They develop partnerships with residents in nearby communities and local institutions and without relying on any financial support. Some companies within the scope of their partnerships have developed some cultural activities with tourists and the local community (such as, the Alentejo singing (Cante Alentejano), traditional customs and costumes, and activities related to wine, olive, agricultural, and pastoral), where they finance the local institutions, especially in the area of social solidarity, among others. The increase in social innovation projects in the field of sustainable agritourism depends on the creative and innovative capacity of entrepreneurs to develop these projects.

Results also corroborate the conclusions of Ndhlovu and Dube (2024), Gôja et al. (2021), Palmi and Lezzi (2020), Ciolac et al. (2022), and Faísco et al. (2021). In fact, these several authors recognize that agritourism contributes to the economic, social, and environmental development, that is, the sustainable development of regions.

Interviewees valued the economic aspect of sustainability more than the social and environmental aspects, which aligns with the conclusions of Ndhlovu and Dube (2024). Managers valued aspects such as the consumption of regional products, little effect of seasonality, diversification of tourist activities offered, and economic benefits for the region, aspects also present in the studies by Gajić et al. (2024), Broccardo et al. (2017), Cheteni and Umejesi (2022), Faisco et al. (2021), and Chiodo et al (2019).

Managers also valued social dimension of sustainability as corroborated by the research of Grillini et al. (2025), Rodrigues Ferreira et al. (2023), Sheldon and Daniele (2017), Tiraieyar and Hamzah (2012), which highlighted the role of agritourism to increase employment of people from the region, promoting activities that involve people from the community and contributing to tourist and residents satisfaction.

Considering the environmental category, it was possible to confirm through managers' responses that this dimension contributes significantly to sustainability. Most respondents reported that they have an environmental plan, optimize the consumption of water and energy, and recycle waste, aspects also valuable in most literature (Abadi & Khakzand, 2022; Alves-Pinto et al., 2017; Songkhla & Somboonsuke, 2013; Sayadi et al., 2009; Cheteni & Umejesi, 2022; Paniccia & Baiocco, 2021; Ciolac et al., 2019; Ćirić et al., 2021; Gajić et al., 2024). In particular, Paniccia and Baiocco (2021) also highlighted the relevance of efficient management of water, energy, and waste, and Gajić et al. (2024) – the carbon footprint. Ciolac et al. (2019) emphasized the ecologic identity in rural communities, and Ćirić et al. (2021) – the preservation of the natural environment and environmental awareness in communities and among tourists.

5. Conclusions

This study aimed to analyze the contribution of agritourism to social innovation and sustainable development in rural areas of the Beja region. Research on this contribution in Por-

tugal, and particularly in this region, remains scarce and limited. Understanding this reality in the Beja region becomes necessary and imperative, given the growth of this sector in recent years. Therefore, we analyzed the perceptions of eight microenterprises in the Beja region on this topic and verified that, despite the existence of a social innovation incubator in Beja that has some projects in the region, the companies have not adhered to the incubator's proposals, despite carrying out activities in this area. Three of them conduct several social innovation activities throughout the year with their own funding, significantly impacting their market segment, involving several local stakeholders, and with managers considering these activities as part of their core values and the company's identity.

Literature on agritourism has addressed the effect of this activity on social innovation and sustainable development of the regions where it has developed. Several authors conclude that agritourism contributes to social innovation and sustainability by promoting economic and income diversification, rural revitalization, job creation, environmental conservation, local economic development, promotion of culture, tradition, and natural resources, enhancing local identity, creating value and empowering local communities in rural development (Dickes et al., 2020; Sangnak et al., 2025; Ndhlovu & Dube, 2024; Sekar et al., 2023; Palmi & Lezzi, 2020; Lak & Khairabadi, 2022; Dionizi & Kërçini, 2025; Ciolac et al., 2022; Grillini et al., 2025; Rodrigues Ferreira et al., 2023). In any case, in the literature, these aspects have not been sufficiently studied in the Beja region, and this research attempted to approach and validate some theoretical propositions that future research can follow.

The interviews' showed a high consensus among the aspects of sustainability and social innovation. Thus, we could validate both theoretical propositions defined. The interviewees consider the social innovation an important dimension to differentiate touristic strategies from others and allow them to show the region's authenticity and respond to the interests of demand in the tourism segment.

Social innovation in the Beja region represents a new way of thinking about agritourism, focused on sustainability, active participation of local communities, appreciation of natural and cultural resources, preservation of heritage, and revitalization of rural areas, generating new jobs and opportunities, promoting social inclusion, and involving local communities and small rural producers. By integrating sustainability and collaborative models, agritourism can become a development factor for rural regions, providing genuine and transformative experiences for tourists. Given this evidence, we concluded that agritourism significantly impacts economic development by integrating financial, social, cultural, and environmental dimensions. To fully harness these benefits, the active involvement of multiple stakeholders, including governments, local communities, and academic institutions, is crucial. Only through a comprehensive and strategic approach can agritourism ensure long-term economic sustainability and contribute to the balanced growth of rural economies.

We aimed to provide relevant contributions, particularly to key stakeholders in the agritourism sector, public decision-makers, and researchers, and to examine how managers participate in social innovation projects and perceive these projects as contributing to the development of rural communities. We also aimed to understand how managers of agritourism enterprises are aware of and follow sustainability practices in their various dimensions. Because these dimensions are complex, additional research is needed to deeply analyze the specific aspects of each for future studies. The respondents' perceptions are relevant, but they may underestimate or overestimate sustainability practices, and therefore, quantitative research or other methodologies should be necessary to further explore these issues.

Considering this is a case study, we recognize the inherent limitations of this type of approach, especially regarding the impossibility of generalizing the results. This research provides only a preliminary assessment of how the analyzed variables impact sustainability in the context of agritourism. To ensure greater robustness and statistical significance, we recommend future quantitative studies with larger and more representative samples. Nevertheless, the case study presented plays a fundamental role in validating initial propositions, which scholars can later test as hypotheses in a more comprehensive quantitative investigation. We encourage future research to expand the sample to include a wider range of companies and geographic areas and examine the perception of other local actors, such as municipal governments, cultural associations, charitable organizations, among others, to further analyze their roles in social innovation and sustainability.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

The authors would like to thank to agritourism companies for the availability and interest in answering questions and collaborating in the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and their identities were anonymized to protect their privacy.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Exploring Slow Tourism in Rural Territories: Insights From the Alentejo Region in Portugal

Marta Amaral

Abstract: **Background:** Slow tourism appeals to competent, independent travelers seeking meaningful and authentic experiences. This umbrella term encompasses responsible and sustainable tourism practices and holds a significant potential for the development of rural territories.

Research objectives: The article offers a deep literature review that addresses slow tourism conceptualization and its importance for rural territories. I also aimed to verify whether accommodation business entrepreneurs in Alentejo (Portugal) engage in slow tourism in their website communication strategies.

Research design and methods: A qualitative methodological approach was adopted based on a literature review. The empirical phase involved a systematic examination of the messages contained in communication slogans and commercial offerings on accommodation websites.

Results: Although many companies do not explicitly identify as part of the slow tourism movement, their practices align with its principles. The latter promote authentic, relaxed, and immersive experiences linked to nature, local cuisine, culture, and sustainability.

Conclusions: The results suggest that adopting the principles of slow tourism in rural territories provides visitors with authentic experiences and encourages the sustainable development of the Alentejo region.

Keywords: slow movement, slow tourism, sustainability, rural territories, accommodations, Baixo Alentejo

JEL Codes: L83, Z32, Q01, M31

Suggested citation:

Amaral, M. (2025). Exploring slow tourism in rural territories: Insights from the Alentejo Region in Portugal. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 70–90. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.05>

1. Introduction

The slow movement has occurred in parallel with several contemporary changes in tourism. The notion of slowness has developed an increasingly strong link to the tourism industry, thereby creating a shift in the prevailing mass tourism and fast tourism paradigm. Also, sustainability turns out to hold greater importance to minimize tourism impacts in overcrowded territories. In fact, concerns related to overtourism in destinations enriched the discussion with the importance of sustainable planning and strategies for tourism development and the significance of alternative tourism forms.

In the 1980s, slow food and slow city movements brought new, alternative fields of tourism, and slow tourism became popular. In this scenario, the characteristics of contemporary and postmodern tourists include their frequent travels, extensive competence, and high expecta-

tions. The quality of tourism experience has enhanced compared with previous periods; tourists are independent and seek new and valuable insights (Moira et al., 2017).

Moreover, authors propose slow tourism as an alternative sustainable approach. This form of tourism displays a distinct set of guidelines, emphasizing interactions with local communities and proximity to cultural and natural attractions. It advocates the consumption of locally produced goods and the utilization of renewable energy sources. Additionally, it promotes an ecological and ethical perspective, highlighting the conservation of the quality of life for both residents and visitors (Valls et al., 2019).

Slow tourism strongly relates to the sustainable tourism market. Both share the ability to assure long-term benefits to the local environment, community, and tourist stakeholders. Slow tourism includes a variety of forms that comply with the slow principles, including slow travel, use of alternative means of transport, and in-depth contact with the natural, social, and cultural environment (Zielińska-Szczepkowska, 2020).

Furthermore, sustainability became an important issue for remote regions or small villages, whose position allows them to benefit from this economic expansion and slow tourism experiences and activities (Serdane, 2017; dall'Aglio et al., 2011). A rural destination with a slow-paced lifestyle could potentially serve as an avenue for slow tourism (Mohamad Noor et al., 2011, 2015).

Despite the growing international research about the slow tourism concept (e.g., Dickinson et al., 2011; Lowry & Lee, 2011; Fullagar et al., 2012), Portugal still lacks studies concerning the relation between sustainability in rural territories and slow tourism products, specifically in the Alentejo region. The shortage of publications mostly concerns the supply side, namely the perceptions of accommodation business entrepreneurs.

Due to the mainly rural nature of its territory, Alentejo frequently associates with the idea of slowness, characterized by a more relaxed pace of life, tranquility, and rural simplicity in terms of its landscapes, culture, heritage, and lifestyle. This makes the region a suitable destination for studying the understanding, perception, and willingness of the supply side, namely the accommodation businesses, regarding the use of commercial strategies linked to slow philosophy – especially slow tourism – in close relation to tourism's sustainable development.

The main objective was to explore the concept and key dimensions of slow tourism, assessing its potential as a form of sustainable tourism in rural territories, with a particular focus on the Alentejo region and its subregion, Baixo Alentejo. Specifically, a deep review of the literature on slow tourism in rural contexts was conducted, considering the socioeconomic changes and the transition from mass tourism to more individualized travel experiences. Moreover, the tourism offer in Alentejo including activities, services, and experiences, and how local entrepreneurs communicate and promote slow tourism were analyzed.

In the future the intention is to provide policymakers and stakeholders with insights and directions about the potential to work for a slow tourism brand in the tourism development strategy for Alentejo.

Accordingly, the article comprises four parts. First, it includes a theoretical overview of contemporary social and economic changes, slow movement philosophy origins, the slow tourism concept with its key dimensions, including tourists' behavior and motivations, and the relation between this type of tourism, rural territories, and sustainability. Second, it outlines the case study of Alentejo and Baixo Alentejo. Third, it describes the methodology used to conduct this research. Fourth, it presents and analyzes the research results. Fifth, offers final considerations, including the study's limitations and proposals for future research.

2. Literature Review

This section presents the conceptual framework of the research, serving as the basis for analyzing the results. It includes a review of the literature on socioeconomic changes and the paradigm shift from mass tourism to alternative and sustainable tourism and new consumer trends. It also examines the evolution of the slow movement and the concept of slow tourism, including its key dimensions as well as the behavior and motivations of slow tourists. Finally, it discusses the idea of slowness in the development of rural tourism and its link to sustainability, with a focus on the characteristics and potential of Alentejo and Baixo Alentejo for slow tourism.

Socioeconomic Changes and Tourism Industry Development

Tourism develops in line with socioeconomic and environmental changes, which influence travel motivations and expectations. Analyzing the different motivations of contemporary consumers may allow us to better understand the needs of those tourists who prefer experiences that differ from traditional standards. The social and demographic trends and the changing values in contemporary society and consumer perceptions promote the development of new products in the hotel, catering, and general tourism industry.

In the early 1970s, economic crises in the West, technological advances, and market liberalization dismantled the Fordist model, giving rise to a post-Fordist and postmodern society characterized by production flexibility, mass customization, and consumer orientation. Accompanying those changes, we have transitioned into a postmodern society where consumer behavior, particularly in the tourism industry, has undergone a profound transformation.

Within this context, the economy displays mainly the dominance and volatility of consumers' preferences, and tourist consumption patterns have also changed considerably. Indeed, contemporary tourists present behavioral patterns that reveal: (a) a clear rejection of traditional forms of mass tourism, such as low-cost package holidays, and looking for more diversified choices; (b) a decline in repeated visits and a growing interest in exploring alternative sites and attractions; (c) a preference for activities aligned with personal lifestyles and self-fulfillment, for example trekking, trucking, sports, or birdwatching; (d) an increasing reliance on digital technologies and media platforms to access information and plan alternative travel experiences; (e) a rapid turnover of preferred destinations and activities, driven by shifting social trends; and (f) a tendency to choose environmentally responsible and personalized accommodation options, such as eco-lodges, consistent with the principles of green tourism (Mowforth & Munt, 2016).

Socioeconomic transformations have driven the evolution of the tourism industry, affecting both consumer trends and supply side adaptation. The demographic changes, for instance population aging, have led businesses to redesign their facilities and services to accommodate senior travelers and to develop tailored cultural experiences. The growing focus on health and well-being has expanded medical and wellness tourism, combining leisure with therapeutic experiences and encouraging demand for more personalized, independent accommodation. Technological progress and social media have further reshaped consumer behavior and impacted the supply side, fostering expectations for highly individualized travel options and greater reliance on digital platforms and virtual reality tools. Climate change has also begun to influence destination preferences, as seasonal shifts and environmental concerns lead travelers to prioritize sustainable and ethical tourism practices. Finally, economic pressures such as

inflation and rising costs have increased demand for direct bookings and loyalty programs, while reducing reliance on traditional travel agencies (Mariano, 2022; International Labor Organization, 2010).

In review, these changes are driving a more flexible, conscious, and digitally connected tourism scenery, where personalization, sustainability, and well-being play central roles.

Postmodernism and a New Paradigm: From Fast to Slow Society

Two paradigms coexist in today's postmodern society. On the one hand, the social model relies on the concept of speed. This framework displays several characteristics, including behavioral ones: (a) a marked tendency to favor a fast-paced life, which makes people rush through tasks and experiences; (b) quantity often valued more highly than quality; (c) a growing dependence on technology, reflecting a general trend toward acceleration; and (d) missing awareness of, or concern for, the planet's identity despite the easy access to information about environment. From this perspective, three fundamental elements outline the current phase of postmodern development: an acceleration of time, an overwhelming expansion of space, and an increased level of individualism (Sari & Lukito, 2017; Khan, 2015).

On the other hand, we identify an emerging paradigm in which slowness is a central value. Although this perspective is not widespread in postmodern society, many individuals reevaluate their priorities, opting for a more intentional way of living, one that fosters harmony with nature, community, friends, and family (Österlund, 2020). In this context, individuals increasingly seek alternative lifestyles that promote deceleration, namely a slower pace of life. They also place a growing emphasis on experiencing quality in all aspects of life, aiming to enhance overall well-being by living according to a personal and sustainable rhythm (Honoré, 2004; Khan, 2015; Sari & Lukito, 2017). This paradigm and the consequent changes in the tourism offer and demand, and in the nature of the tourism product (Dujmović & Vitasović, 2015), usually associate with the post-tourist. This concept presents a different perspective and philosophy of life compatible with the slow paradigm characteristics. According to Pecheniuk and Kiziun (2023), a postmodern tourist avoids the mundane, wants to escape from reality, is perfectly aware of the societal crisis, looks for self-realization, and seeks new experiences. All these characteristics match the slow tourism niche.

Slow movement has thus emerged from cultural reflections on the benefits of engaging in activities that prioritize human-centered values and a more deliberate time (Honoré, 2004). In this sense, "slow" has become a form of countercultural resistance, challenging dominant Western societal structures that promote rapid consumption and relentless efficiency (Clancy, 2018). As part of this broader movement, slow movement and slow living appear as a meaningful alternative – an approach to modern life that embraces slower temporalities to counterbalance the prevailing culture of speed.

The Slow Movement Philosophy and Its Origins

The slow movement philosophy began with the slow food movement, founded in 1989 in Italy by Carlo Petrini as a protest to the spread of the fast-food industry in Europe (Lowry & Lee, 2011). Therefore, the slow movement has roots in ethical forms of production and consumption (Fusté-Forné & Tazim, 2020; Khan, 2015). It relies on the slow principles in several areas of everyday life, such as food, city, travel, transport, work, design, and education (Ferreira et al., 2014; Conway & Timms, 2012). Moreover, this movement acknowledges sustainable development and relates to less waste or zero waste initiatives (Sousa et al., 2021).

The following expressions characterize the slow movement's purposes: (a) slower temporalities – finding the right time in the right situation; (b) locality – the valorization of local potential, which helps to maintain heterogeneity and results in the sustainability of society's identity; (c) social activity orientation – improvement of communities' quality of life and enhancement of the happiness scale within society as a response to the individualism issue; and (d) ecology – improvement of environmental quality and prevention of environmental degradation (Honore, 2004; Sari & Lukito, 2017).

The slow movement philosophy is not a passing phenomenon, a fashion, or an innovative tourism product (Calzati & de Salvo, 2018). It relates to the slow life philosophy and a global social movement that has characterized many socioeconomic elements in local communities in recent years (Honore, 2004; Calzati & de Salvo, 2012). The concept focuses on sustainability, local culture, quality over speed, and avoidance of mass production, presenting a unique framework for business promotion in rural tourism. The philosophy of this movement aims to preserve the unique characteristics of places, people, products, food, and the environment (Walker & Lee, 2021).

Effectively, the slow philosophy brings the opportunity to construct a slow society – one that pays more attention to aspects such as the quality of life, ethical responsibilities, and the value of solidarity between diverse social groups (Salvo, Calzati & Soglia (2019); Calzati & de Salvo, 2019). With slow tourism, this movement quickly adapted to the tourism industry (Balaban & Keller, 2024).

Shortly thereafter, the tourism industry adopted this movement as slow tourism (Balaban & Keller, 2024).

Slow Tourism Concept: Dimensions and Paradigms

Slow tourism research proves well-diversified and multidisciplinary. Several recognized scholars have studied this topic from different perspectives and sustained their studies by trying to present a deep definition of the concept, but the results are not unanimous.

Based on this situation, let me provide a holistic perspective about the concept and its dimensions, to direct attention to its strong relationship with sustainability, the development of rural territories, the already identified social changes, and supply side perspectives, which remain less explored in research.

Authors consider the concept of slow tourism in different ways: as a specific tourist niche or product or as an umbrella (Med Pearls project, 2020); as a form of sustainable tourism (Serdane et al., 2020; Le Busque et al., 2021); as a new trend and tendency on the tourism market (Lazarević et al., 2024); and as a new cultural and behavioral model (Calzati & de Salvo, 2018).

According to Gardner (2009), the concept of slowness in travel and tourism entails conscious choices, with a strong emphasis on deceleration in moments of leisure and rest – a reengineering of time, transformed into a commodity. Gardner adds that slowness in tourism implies a new relation with places and people, including a strong engagement with the communities through which people travel. Travelers spend the time necessary to discover a landscape, interact with local people, and consider transport not only as a simple means of arriving at their destination, but also as an opportunity to experience the place.

Babou and Callot (2009, as cited in de Salvo et al., 2019) defend the view that the perfect convergence of space and time as two fundamental resources of the tourism industry is what defines slow tourism. This means that a new connection between tourism and slowness requires us to redefine the procedures and habits of today's tourists, who prove increasingly

influenced by a new sense of environmental responsibility. They now prioritize activities, destinations, and means of transport that enable them to minimize their travel's environmental and social impact.

People who prefer slow experiences look for quality over quantity. In line with this perspective, Heitmann et al. (2011) argue that the focus has shifted from seeking the quantity and volume of experiences during holidays to seeking quality experiences, usually fewer in number. For these authors, quality in this form of tourism means respecting local cultures, history, and the environment, accepting social responsibility, celebrating diversity, and connecting people – both tourists with each other and tourists with the local community. This attitude displays enjoyment, discovery, learning, and sharing. This enables a more profound exploration of the cultural environment in which the holiday takes place, resulting in a more enriching and memorable experience for the individuals.

Furthermore, according to Heitmann et al. (2011), we can analyze slow tourism from different perspectives: (a) the necessity for transport and travel, with a preference to use alternative forms of mobility and avoid polluting means of transports; (b) sustainability, which needs analysis in the context of tourism development; (c) the product, which requires a discussion on the value that the label "slow" attaches to a product or a service and on the improvement in marketing; and (d) slow tourist motivations and consumption behavior.

Caffyn (2012) gives a deeper definition of the slow tourism concept, considering that it involves making real and meaningful connections with people, places, culture, food, heritage, and the environment. Moreover, Caffyn provides a list of elements that help to better understand the concept as a whole. The list contains the slow travelers' motivations and behaviors (Caffyn, 2012, p.2): (a) minimizing the travel distance, including avoidance of car or plane; (b) maximizing the time available for the trip; (c) relaxing and refreshing the mind and the body; (d) exploring the local area in depth – seeking distinctiveness; (e) contact with local people, culture, heritage, and community; (f) eating at local restaurants, buying on local markets or directly from producers, and trying local drinks such as wine; (g) quality experiences and authenticity; (h) relatively sustainable travel and a modest carbon footprint; and (i) seeking suitability for both the visitor and their companions.

In line with the elements of the slow tourism concept, Caffyn (2012) enumerates five key components: (a) place – locality, distinctiveness, landscape, heritage, environment, and produce; (b) people – community, culture, local enterprise, cuisine, hospitality, and authenticity; (c) time – pace, relaxation, unhurried stay, more in-depth exploration; (d) travel – distance, speed, mode, and low carbon footprint; and (e) the personal – well-being, pleasure, recreation, conviviality, learning, meaning, enjoyment, and understanding. Caffyn concludes that the emphasis on particular aspects depends on the destination or product. The greater the number of elements that one can incorporate, the more sustainable the tourism.

In turn, Pécssek (2014) argues that slow tourism includes four pillars: (a) locality, referring to local gastronomy, business culture, and workforce; (b) sustainability, which entails profitability, lack of leakage, environmentally friendly investments, a small ecological footprint, and a longer stay at the destination; (c) experience focus – that is, nonstandard supply, selective attractions, active programs, and collective experiences; and (d) social well-being, namely consensual decision-making, population retention, growing welfare, and community cohesion.

Pécssek (2018) explains the relevance of those dimensions. The revitalization of local gastronomy – including food, traditions, and cooking methods – can easily draw attention to other cultural values and events, such as architecture or festivals, and vice versa. Moreover, one can

expect that the growing interest in and demand for local products and services will inevitably generate jobs. This category also encompasses local businesses and local workforce since they bring employment and serve as principal factors in the concept's formation process. Concerning sustainability, economic, social, and environmental aspects also link with tourism development, and issues such as environmentally friendly investments on the supply side and slow mobility justly seem prominent. The experience dimension entails the need for authenticity, which requires non-standardized, selective supply and active programs. Importantly, collective activities allow for experiencing the importance of the encounter between locals and tourists. Finally, the well-being dimension represents a synthesis of all the positive impacts a community could gain from slow tourism. It is important to increase the active population with entrepreneurial spirit and to involve those people in decision-making to accomplish this goal.

Based on Pécsek's dimensions approach, Balaban and Keller (2024) add that locality relates to existing demand for local production, which can create the need for new jobs. Sustainability provides experiences with a high degree of authenticity, while social well-being allows tourists to interact with locals, including creating a people-friendly environment. Finally, experience dimension emphasizes the importance of unique activities, which are more accessible through slow tourism than through mass or fast tourism.

To explore the concept of slow tourism, it is also helpful to consider approaches related to slow tourists' consumption habits and their search for authentic experiences. For instance, based on a European study developed in a cooperation between Slovenia and Italy, Zago (2012, 2018) proposes the CASTLE model of slow tourism: (a) Contamination – the promotion of intercultural exchanges and interconnected experiences between visitors, local communities, and the territory; (b) Authenticity – pursuit of genuine, non-staged, and non-standardized experiences; (c) Sustainability – emphasis on environmental and cultural preservation; (d) Time – a pace of visit that encourages appreciation and deeper understanding; (e) Length – sufficient time allocated to allow for a rich and meaningful stay; and (f) Emotion – the ability to generate emotionally engaging and memorable experiences. Zago also describes the behavior of slow tourists, with characteristics such as looking to practice sports, immersing oneself in the local culture, experiencing nature, observing the past, and reclaiming time.

In its broadest sense, slow tourism encompasses the practice of individuals undertaking travel to destinations at a more leisurely pace, characterized by extended stays at the destination, less travel, preference for land transport, travel quality, meaningful experiences, including soaking the beauty of places, taking time to interact with local people, exploring local history and culture at a slower pace, and supporting the environment (Oh et al., 2016; Kumar, 2019; Wen et al., 2021; Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Lazarević et al., 2024). It is evident that these individuals prioritize experiential travel, whereby the act of traveling itself becomes an integral component of the overall experience. Once at the destination, these travelers actively engage with local transport options, culinary traditions, and slow food and drink. They take significant time to explore the local history and culture and demonstrate a commitment to supporting the environment (Oh et al., 2016).

Slow tourism appears as a trend or an alternative type of tourism, with the intention of minimizing mass tourism's environmental impacts and with a strong connection to sustainability and environmental consciousness (Oh et al., 2016; Serdane et al., 2020; Balaman & Keller, 2024). Other authors highlight travelers' behavior to define the concept, referring to extended stays at the destination; cultural immersion, in which travelers establish a deep engagement with the culture and take time to be present in each moment; sustainability, specifically in

terms of behavioral practices; focusing on the process of traveling; flexibility and freedom, which encourages spontaneity; personal growth and reflection to rediscover oneself; as well as patience, serenity, in-depth discoveries, and improvements in knowledge and skills (Musa, 2025; Moira et al., 2017; Babou & Callot, 2009).

In summary, through a deep literature review, Calzati and de Salvo (2018) present three essential dimensions identified in theoretical research approaches to slow tourism: environmental sustainability, modality, and experience. Authors propose three paradigms to explain the perspective view of the concept: (a) experience – slow tourism and consumption; (b) sustainability – slow tourism and territory; and (c) well-being – slow tourism and the quality of life. Considering the first paradigm, they identify the relationship between experience and pace as well as experience and consumption. They also propose that exchange, in relation to responsibility, constitutes the central axis of slow tourism. For the second paradigm, they introduce the territory, including distinctive characteristics such as slowness and quality, and sustainability, in a multidimensional perspective. The third paradigm maintains that sustainability, which includes social, cultural, and ethical aspects, indicates the quality of life and well-being of the local population.

Sustainability, Rural Territories, and Slow Tourism

Although deeply interconnected, the concepts of sustainability, rurality, and slow tourism are not always consensual. Slow tourism is a lifestyle and travel approach that inherently promotes sustainability in rural environments. By encouraging travelers to spend more time in one place, immerse themselves in the local culture, use lower-impact transport, and support local economies, slow tourism provides an opportunity for authentic experiences while minimizing negative environmental and social impacts. Rural tourism, with its focus on nature and local communities, aligns naturally with the principles of slow tourism, resulting in increased economic, social, and cultural benefits for these regions.

According to Le Busque et al. (2021), slow tourism is a holistic tourism concept that promotes sustainability in all aspects of a traveler's journey. It supports positive outcomes for local communities, such as stimulating local economies and minimizing aversive environmental impacts. Other authors (Dickinson & Lumsdon, 2010; Caffyn, 2012; Guiver & McGrath, 2016) argue that a straight connection exists between sustainability and slow tourism, since slow tourists are conscious about the negative effects of pollution caused by mass tourism and wish to enhance the quality of their travel experience. Although slow tourism does not play the main role in sustainable development, one can see the latter as a by-product of slow tourism. This type of tourism can take place by offering hospitality while respecting the environment, resulting in the development of sustainable local travel. Therefore, slow tourism fosters deep respect for the visited place, appreciation of its uniqueness, and willingness to adapt to it rather than expecting it to adapt to tourists (Zielińska-Szczepkowska, 2020).

In fact, slow tourism that respects local cultures, histories, and environments. It values social responsibility, celebrates diversity, and fosters connections between tourists and the local community (Walker, 2021). As described above, in addition to promoting self-enrichment, engagement with heritage sites, local cuisine, history, and traditions as qualities of the destination (Caffyn, 2012; Fullagar et al., 2012), slow tourism goes further by giving the opportunity to connect sustainability with personal and social well-being in the community (Walker, 2021).

Within the contemporary consumer changes, slow tourism lends itself to sustainable tourism, as the changing preferences of travelers interested in nature, ecotourism, heritage, agri-

tourism, and other related forms can materialize on the condition of adopting a slower pace. In addition, slow tourism emphasizes deeper experiences via slower transport modes, and this consciousness has received promotion as an alternative to current practice and a more sustainable form of tourism (Lin, 2018). The tourists' preferences, such as staying longer at the destination, exploring local traditions, or connecting with local people, and the more conscious options in travel modes can lead to more economic benefits for those local communities (Walker, 2021).

In their literature review, Hassan and Fayad (2023) conclude that sustainable development is a key pillar of slow tourism, providing opportunities for more green forms of destinations, promoting sustainable practices such as slow modes of transport, eco-friendly activities, and regular accommodations, and contributing to both environmental protection and the strengthening of the tourism industry. Thus, it forms part of the sustainable development concept, which helps protect the environment and the tourism industry. In summary, the slow tourism movement includes a slow development of the environment, which is highly positive, as it allows residents and territories to adjust and adapt to advances.

The search for more sustainable tourism models in destinations has emerged in response to the growing environmental impact of mass tourism (Balaman & Keller, 2024). Indeed, slow tourism helps travelers escape from daily routines, promotes sustainability, enhances local quality of life, and encourages community participation in local development while offering tourists more meaningful and environmentally conscious experiences (Serdane et al., 2020; Balaman & Keller, 2024).

Authors unequivocally state that tourism is an option for developing rural lifestyles and inducing positive changes in income distribution in non-privileged regions. Moreover, tourism helps to give more "energy" to the rural economy, thus playing an important role in creating a value-added commercial channel for local produce (Liu, 2006). Surla et al. (2024) argue that the potential for rural development closely links to the evolving mindsets and behaviors of modern travelers, who increasingly value authenticity, especially regarding food choices. Slow tourism, which has emerged as a response to today's fast-paced lifestyle, represents one such approach. Indeed, rural areas seem to offer great potential for slow tourism, given that the lifestyle there is more peaceful than in urban areas (Canoves et al., 2004, as cited in Mohamad Noor et al., 2015) and includes activities developed for tourists in rural destinations. Rural spaces can offer experiences closer to natural environments and traditional heritage (Liu, 2006).

The research of Mohamad Noor et al. (2011) identified the suitability of pursuing slow tourism activity in a rural destination. According to the authors, we can call some places or areas "slow" – that is, characterized by a pace of life and environment suitable for slow tourism, focusing on sustainability and local quality of life. These destinations avoid the issues linked with mass tourism and promote enjoyment of time, simplicity, and community values. While they are not backward or in crisis, their development centers on preserving the landscape as a shared resource. Rural areas often fit this model due to their natural settings and traditional lifestyles, which attract and engage tourists. The results imply that one can expect rural tourism destinations to contribute to the livelihood of the local residents and simultaneously mitigate environmental impacts by addressing the usage of natural resources.

Focusing their research on rural and slow tourism, Mohamad Noor et al. (2015) highlight the similarities between the two types and propose a working definition of slow tourism in rural destinations. In their opinion, slow tourism is a small-scale form of travel typically found in rural settings, characterized by a mindful and reflective approach that prioritizes authentic

experiences and ecological sustainability, standing in contrast to the fast-paced consumerism of modern society.

Studies report that within the slow tourism modality, the benefits for rural territories relate to the market, characterized by the continuous capacity to create new business such as artisan and zero-kilometer markets; museum spaces; informative, meeting, and exchanging places; transformation of local products; the expansion of visits to places less known by the general public; and the recovery of the local social culture. Authors also mention new accommodation services, restaurant and catering services, guidance, interpretation, transport, and marketing (Valls et al., 2019).

Destinations and most tourism businesses in rural places are incorporating slow elements or options within their offers. These components allow visitors to choose their own pace – for instance, owing to flexible timings for meals or options to extend stays or take a slower paced tour. They also promote the use of slower transport options, for example through discounts for those arriving without a car, information on public transport and bicycle hire, and good knowledge of slow options and routes. Moreover, they provide slower environments, such as tranquil areas, television free or mobile phone free zones, reduced advertising, or the use of local imagery or literature to strengthen the sense of place. Furthermore, such elements promote local food and drink, traditional dishes, tasting events, and fair trade products. Finally, they develop specific slow products, such as relaxation/well-being breaks, learning traditional skills or cuisine, slow tours, chillout holidays, or slow food menus (Caffyn, 2012).

The benefits of slow tourism are under study, and according to Preston and Pasanen (2024), they include: local connection, which brings value to small towns and rural areas; sustainable travel, related to the use of eco-friendly slow mobility transport; well-being benefiting both the local community and the environment; food and culture, which promotes wine, local cuisine, and traditional crafts; and responsible stays, in which travelers prefer sustainable and local accommodation and seek genuine hospitality.

The Rural Region of Alentejo: Potential for Slow Tourism?

Comprising up to a third of the country, Alentejo is the largest NUTS 2 level region in Portugal, where NUTS stands for the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics. It is also the country's most rural part, with the lowest population density and the highest aging rate (INE, 2020). The primary sector of agriculture, farming, hunting, and forestry accounts for 20% of total employment, followed by manufacturing, which is responsible for 19% of jobs. Innovation performance has improved over recent years, but the region remains a moderate innovator (Santos et al., 2020). In 2022, it recorded a gross domestic product of EUR 10.3 billion, making it the second-largest regional economy in Portugal, accounting for around five percent of the national economy (INE, 2023).

Alentejo is one of the nine regions of Portugal, consisting of four subregions: Alto Alentejo, Alentejo Central, Alentejo Litoral, and Baixo Alentejo. As the biggest TL2 region in Portugal, Alentejo's TL3 subregions are also large – and diverse.

Alentejo boasts a rural and natural landscape, warm and dry climate, vineyards, traditional cuisine, and the famous Alentejo hospitality. The region is currently an uncrowded, preserved, and safe place, with a history marked by rich heritage and culture that give it identity and authenticity, and with a potential for competitive, distinctive, and sustainable affirmation, based on consolidated activities and the emergence of new local niches of productive specialization.

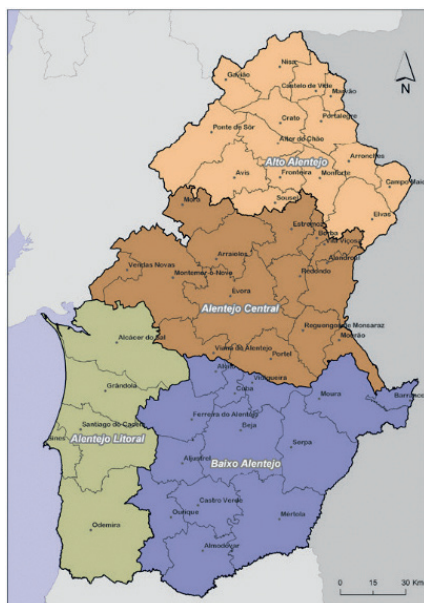


Figure 1. Map of Alentejo subregions

Source: <https://www.ccdr-a.gov.pt/mapas>.

Alentejo has products of recognized global excellence: cork and ornamental rocks. Moreover, it pleases visitors with knowledge and flavor owing to its craftsmanship, gastronomy, wines, and olive oils. Alentejo already serves as a popular tourism destination, attracting visitors interested in outdoor activities such as hiking, cycling, and bird watching, as well as in enjoying tranquility and beauty. It is also a Certified Secure and Sustainable Destination, and appears as a territory of calm, where there is time to be happy, indulge in leisure, eat, drink, and reflect. According to the regional tourism administration, time is everything in Alentejo. These characteristics give the region great potential for slow tourism routes and activities (ADRAL, 2025; Turismo do Alentejo e Ribatejo, 2021, 2019). Territorial sustainability relies on the enhancement of endogenous resources, namely natural and landscape values, and on the development of increased levels of strategic coordination and functional cooperation (CCDR, 2025).

The striking rural landscape is therefore a definitive feature that contributes to the attractiveness of this territory. Its scenic characteristics play an important role in the growing demand for the area, both as a tourist destination and as a location for second homes (CCDR, 2025). However, the region offers 170 kilometers of some of the best-preserved coastline in Europe (Publituris, 2024).

In the report *Rethinking Regional Attractiveness in the Alentejo Region of Portugal* (2024), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) provides a deep analysis of the region concerning its attractiveness. This study considers several dimensions to better describe the predominantly rural territory. Regarding economic attractiveness, Alentejo scores highly on the economy dimension relative to Portugal, but faces the lowest rate of young employment and underperforms in innovation and entrepreneurship. In terms of tourism activity, Alentejo scores lower than most Portuguese regions, with the lowest share of over-

night stays by foreign tourists (30%) in Portugal (58% on average). At the same time, it boasts a high number of museums and galleries as well as theatres and two UNESCO cultural and natural heritage sites, meaning that cultural capital forms a regional strength. Regarding land and housing, Alentejo's territory proves vulnerable to climate risks, while its residents face pressures in terms of housing affordability and availability. In the dimension of resident well-being, Alentejo offers relatively low accessibility to health services and education – a key issue in the context of population decline and aging, but it simultaneously shows strengths in social cohesion and attractiveness to international students. Concerning connectedness, Alentejo faces existential challenges in transport and digitalization, with deficiencies in railroad mobility and digital connectivity. Finally, with reference to natural environment, Alentejo's natural capital stands out, boasting the second highest share of protected areas in mainland Portugal.

The region has prodigious potential in tourism concerns, and according to the Alentejo Sustainable Tourism Observatory (ASTO, 2025), in 2024, the tourism contribution to the gross domestic product (GDP) reached 9.7% and represented 6.2% of total employment.

Alentejo has a great cultural and visitor appeal, and the main tourist attractions include the two cities classified by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites: Évora (Alentejo Central) and Elvas (Alto Alentejo), as well as Alqueva, Monsaraz, Marvão, Castelo de Vide, Vila Viçosa, the Alentejo Litoral area with Sines and Troia, and countless points of historical and cultural interest, with Beja, Mértola, Marvão, and Castelo de Vide being particularly noteworthy. In 2014, Alentejo won the title of "Best Wine Region to Visit" in a global competition organized by *USA Today*. In the same year, *The Guardian* highlighted the beaches of the Alentejo coast as the best in Europe.

In 2024, the region recorded its best season ever with a notable increase in the number of overnight stays and revenue. According to the Regional Tourism Authority's president, Alentejo exceeded "3.2 million overnight stays" for the first time in 2024, with "130,000 more overnight stays" than in the previous year. The leader noted that Alentejo had "slightly higher growth in external demand" compared to internal demand, highlighting that the region of mainland Portugal "grew the most in revenue, with a rise of 12%" (Agência Lusa, 2025).

Mainly because of its rural territory, Alentejo demonstrates an excellent potential for slow tourism considering characteristics such as: inland towns separated by cork forests, olive groves, vineyards, and wildflower-studded plains; minimal traffic and unhurried pace; silence; clean light sky; medieval strongholds and UNESCO World Heritage Sites; bike trails, beaches, and natural beauty; tapestries, tiles, and other traditional arts and crafts; as well as wine, seafood, and chestnut pudding.

3. Research Method and Materials

The study relies on exploratory research, whose main objective was to examine whether the tourism entrepreneurs' business strategy aligns with the slow tourism philosophy. Specifically, the purpose was to understand if rural accommodation entrepreneurs communicate and promote messages, commercial activities, and experiences on behalf of the slow tourism movement. In this first phase, the research considered Alentejo's subregion Baixo Alentejo as a case study.

With a qualitative methodological approach, the empirical research initially relied on a literature review as a theoretical framework to explore the main content of the slow movement philosophy, the slow tourism principles, and the key dimensions. The further stage involved a systematic examination of the websites of accommodation businesses in Baixo Alentejo,

selected from a convenience sample on the national registry's online platform (RNT, 2025). The analysis aimed to assess whether they mention the term "slow tourism" and to identify references to its core dimensions and related activities in their discourse.

Data Collection

The examination took place in May 2025 and started with the identification of 248 tourist accommodations in the 13 municipalities of the Baixo Alentejo region. The inclusion of only this region remains justified because this is still an ongoing study, and the region lies in Alentejo's interior, presenting the territory's rural characteristics. To select the sample, I considered the following criteria of inclusion: (a) accommodations classified as tourism establishments by the national legislation – this way, I excluded local premises; (b) accommodations that were open at the time; (c) accommodations with their own website and effectively working during the data collection period.

In addition to deep literature research, the study followed a methodology based on the examination of accommodation websites supported by content analysis of terms and phrases on the home page – the slogan, or the opening phrase – and on the "about us" page. Moreover, I conducted content analysis of the websites to examine the communication of concrete actions related to sustainable products and services – for example bookings, e-commerce, or promotions – as well as activities aligned with the slow tourism principles.

The content analysis started with a manual codification of a website's textual content, basically extracting the slogans identified on the home page. This focus proves justified because slogans are short, memorable, and impactful phrases commonly used in advertising and marketing to promote a brand, product, or service, with the aim of creating a strong identity and a positive association in the consumer's mind. Then, data was collected from the website phrases to identify keywords highlighted by entrepreneurs. The selection of keywords followed the literature, namely the dimensions by Zago (2012, 2018) and the CASTLE model for slow tourism.

This way, I surveyed accommodation services, offers, products, and experiences. After extracting that information, I categorized the data based on Caffyn's framework (2012) which includes several elements and indicators of how tourism businesses can introduce a slow approach in their offers: (a) allow visitors to choose their own pace; (b) promote the use of slower transport options; (c) provide slower environments; (d) promote local cuisine and related participation; (e) develop specific slow products; and (f) define a specific market target.

I employed artificial intelligence (AI), particularly ChatGPT, to support the content analysis of selected accommodation websites. Integrating such tools into scientific research is increasingly common and can ethically align with current academic standards. Since qualitative content analysis is often time-consuming and resource-intensive, AI-based tools such as ChatGPT offer promising potential to streamline certain aspects of the process (Bijker et al., 2024). Additionally, they can prove especially useful in the early phases of research or when handling large volumes of transcribed data by enhancing the efficiency and depth of exploratory analysis (Goyanes et al., 2025).

All the slogan phrases and textual content underwent manual extraction from the website, including the home page or "about us" sections and the descriptions of experiences, activities, and products in the website tabs. I introduced the extracted data into ChatGPT, where I used carefully designed prompts to instruct the model to perform data analysis tasks aligned with the study's objectives. The deductive approach employed the CASTLE dimensions of

Zago (2012, 2018), and I explicitly communicated these instructions to ChatGPT during prompt engineering.

To ensure accuracy and reliability, the AI-generated coding underwent two-step validation. First, I compared a subset of the outputs with human coding to detect inconsistencies and refine the prompts. Second, after generating the full dataset, a manual verification and adjustment of the classifications followed, resulting in a structured matrix linking phrases to the CASTLE slow tourism dimensions, complemented by citations and conclusions indicating the strength and nature of each association. This combination of AI and human approach ensured that the coding was consistent with the conceptual framework and maintained high reliability throughout the analysis. Finally, to share the results and give a better representation of the findings, I used the WordArt word cloud generator.

Study Object: The Baixo Alentejo Subregion

Due to the study's current stage and limited time and resources, the examination of rural accommodation remained limited to Baixo Alentejo. This subregion lies in the south of Portugal, bordering on the Évora district to the north, on Spain to the east, and on the Faro district to the south. This subregion has a population of 114,889 (INE, 2024) and covers an area of 8,544.6 km², corresponding to 10.8% of the national territory, divided into 13 municipalities. The main economic activities include mining (pyrites), forestry, hunting, livestock farming, pastoralism, and the resulting products, such as cork, olive oil, cheeses, sausages, hams, wines, the Medronho brandy, and honey (CIMBAL, 2025).

The subregion boasts strong cultural heritage, reflected in archaeological sites, castles, churches, old mines, museums, and small towns and villages whose traditional buildings display the diversity of cultural influences which has shaped this region. In turn, examples of natural heritage include special protection areas, the Guadiana River, and fauna. Pork and lamb form the basis of traditional gastronomy, and bread, olive oil, and aromatic herbs are key ingredients in this Mediterranean cuisine, flavoring some traditional dishes (CIMBAL, 2025; Rotas de Portugal, 2013).

To the 2023 increase in the number of tourist accommodation establishments in the country, Alentejo contributed 13.5% (+79), and the average number of overnight stays was 1.9 (INE, 2024). Additionally, in 2023, Baixo Alentejo registered 436,000 overnight stays, more than 14% compared with 2022, and it contains 13.9% of Portugal's hotel supply (PORDATA, 2023).

4. Results and Discussion

Sample Characteristics of Accommodation Businesses in Baixo Alentejo

In May 2025, the number of Baixo Alentejo's accommodation businesses registered in RNT was 150. Considering the three criteria – 13 municipalities, accommodations with an identified and effectively working website, tested by direct internet consultation, and the establishment open to the public – the final sample reached 98 enterprises, divided into Aljustrel (3), Almodôvar (7), Alvito (5), Beja (20), Castro Verde (5), Cuba (2), Ferreira do Alentejo (12), Mértola (18), Moura (8), Ourique (4), Serpa (8), and Vidigueira (6).

Concerning the type of accommodation, I distinguished campsites and caravans (7), hotels (22), country houses (68), agritourism facilities (41), rural hotels (5), monument and historical hotels (2), and housing tourism (5).

Website Content Analysis: Keywords and Dimensions of Slow Tourism

Among the 98 tourism businesses analyzed, 13 did not provide any slogan, introductory statement, or description of their mission, strategy, or objectives. Therefore, I excluded those businesses from the content analysis.

The first step of the analysis revealed that 54 establishments had a slogan on their home page. I entered all those expressions into ChatGPT for analysis, which made it possible to identify keywords strongly related to the key dimensions of slow tourism. I also used manual coding to reduce bias and ensure more credibility in content analysis. The results indicated the most frequent words together with the occurrence rate and extracted examples, the latter translated from the Portuguese language: Alentejo – 18 (e.g., “rural tourism in Alentejo”; “in the heart of Alentejo”); heart – 7 (“your place in the heart of Alentejo”); home – 6 (“welcome home”; “your home in the village”); comfort – 4 (“rural setting with comfort”); tradition – 4 (“culture, tradition, and heritage”); nature – 4 (“in touch with nature”); tranquility – 4 (“breathe in tranquility and history”); time – 3 (“this is the time, this is the place”; “here, time seems to stand still”); well-being – 3 (“harmony, well-being, and comfort”); hotel – 3 (“a family friendly hotel”); experience – 3 (“a unique experience”); refuge – 3 (“an authentic refuge”); history – 3 (“full of history”); quiet/calm/peace – 3 (“experience the quiet”; “calmness and time”; “peace, space, and freedom”); rural/rurality – 2 (“refinement in a rural setting”; “rurality and tranquility”); city – 2 (“come and discover our wonderful city”); moments – 2 (“life consists of moments”).

This analysis shows a strong focus on themes such as tranquility, nature, comfort, tradition, refuge, rurality, and the Alentejo region, as well as the use of affectionate terms such as “home,” “family,” and “well-being.” After identifying the most frequent words, I employed a wordcount application (WordArt), which generated a visual identification of the keywords mentioned in the websites’ slogan phrases.



Figure 2. Word cloud representing the most frequent keywords

Source: Own elaboration.

Moreover, the analysis identified five recurring themes in the home page slogans: (a) geographical – e.g., “Alentejo,” “Mértola,” “plain,” “village”; (b) sensory – “feel,” “enjoy,” “breathe,” “discover”; (c) emotional – “tranquility,” “hospitality,” “refuge,” “well-being”; (d) rural tourism – “nature,” “comfort,” “hill,” “rustic,” “history”; and (e) family/friends – “your next family experience,” “home,” “family-friendly.”

I categorized the slogan phrases based on the CASTLE model, and the number of mentions in each category appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Slogan phrases classified according to the CASTLE model

Category	Frequency	Slogan phrase
Contamination	2	"Comfortable hotel in the city center"; "Come and discover our wonderful city and feel at home."
Authenticity	16	"A farm with tradition"; "Rural tourism in Alentejo"; "A refined touch in a rural setting"; "A unique concept in the heart of Alentejo"; "true Alentejo hospitality"; "a farm of pleasures"; "Of rural life and tranquility"; "On a small farm in Alentejo"; "Culture, tradition and heritage"; "Between farms and traditions"; "Tradition and comfort in the heart of the Baixo Alentejo!"; "Simplicity and authenticity in the heart of Alentejo"; "Our land, our soul"; "secret wine retreat in the heart of Alentejo"; "A wine with tradition"; "Rural setting with comfort."
Sustainability	3	"Come and enjoy nature"; "Feel the pulse of nature"; "The ideal place to be in touch with nature."
Time	12	"A unique experience"; "the past and present meet"; "Life consists of moments"; "here, time seems to stand still"; "Discover the best of Alentejo"; "Spend unforgettable moments with us"; "Calm and time live here"; "Come and enjoy yourself at your leisure"; "This is the time, this is the place"; "Breathe in tranquility and history"; "A place steeped in history"; "Visiting Alentejo means discovering a region full of history, landscapes, and culture."
Length	4	"A family hotel in the heart of Alentejo; "A children's hotel with lots of entertainment and fun"; "In the heart of Alentejo, there is a refuge waiting for you"; "Rustic retreat in the heart of Alentejo."
Emotion	15	"Harmony, well-being, and comfort"; "An atmosphere of well-being and tranquility"; "Our new home"; "Your place in the heart of Alentejo"; "An open door to your well-being"; "Find the rest you seek in the tranquility of Alentejo"; "Relax, renew, and recharge in our charming retreat"; "Discover peace and quiet"; "A reality made with love!"; "Where dreams come true"; "Recharge your batteries"; "Your home in the village and in Alentejo"; "Peace, space, and freedom"; "Retreat, reconnect, regenerate"; "Your home away from home."

Source: Own elaboration.

The table shows that the emotion and authenticity categories contain a higher number of related slogan phrases. Considering the emotional dimension, most of the phrases strongly appeal to feelings, using terms such as "heart," "home," "tranquility," "well-being," "peace," "quiet," and "freedom." This reflects a clear emotional marketing strategy that seeks to create a feeling-based connection with visitors, which is typical of slow tourism. In the authenticity category, words such as "tradition," "culture," "rurality," "village," "farm," "wine," and "heritage" emphasize the genuine character and identity of Alentejo within the slow tourism values. Time is another important dimension in slow tourism, and the content analysis identified various mentions related to time in the slogan phrases. Indeed, those that highlight the experience of slowing down time – e.g., "moments," "history," "discovery," "time that does not pass" – align strongly with the values of slow tourism, which prioritizes quality time, memory, and the local rhythm.

The other dimensions relating to the phrases display minor importance. For instance, there is a relatively high presence of sustainability themes, such as the reference to "ecological reserves," "landscapes," "nature," and "river beaches." The length category, associated with permanent infrastructure such as hotels, retreats, or campsites, appears frequently in a functional sense. Finally, the contamination category has fewer related mentions, usually only when mentioning the "city," positioning it in contrast to the desired rurality, which significantly relates to the slowness principles of travel.

Accommodation Tourism's Businesses Offer

In order to identify whether accommodation tourism companies have a slow approach to their offerings, including activities and experiences, I examined the websites of 54 accommodation providers. Among those, 17 did not market activities or experiences – even those unrelated to the slow movement – in their business, opening message, or references to booking or promotions. Considering the websites of the identified accommodation businesses, I noticed a variety of offerings and activities, and I classified them according to the slow tourism framework supported by Caffyn's activities/experiences (Table 2).

Table 2. Commercialized activities and their relation to slow tourism dimensions

Dimensions (Caffyn, 2012)	Activities/experiences observed
Choosing one's own pace	"Sunset and wildlife viewing"; "Observation of the natural landscape"; "Gardens and serene landscapes; walks for couples or families."
Promoting the use of slower transport	"Walks," "hikes," "cycling," "trails"; "Bike hire, electric bikes, 'bike friendly' program, horse riding, carriage rides"; "Free bike rides around the property"; "Sustainable accommodation in a rural setting."
Providing slower environments	"Stay in themed accommodation with eclectic décor"; "Relaxation in a natural environment"; "Walks among centuries-old olive trees."
Sourcing and promoting local food and drink; developing a slow product	"Wine and olive oil tasting"; "Cheese and bread tasting"; "Cookery workshop"; "Picnic in the countryside"; "Alentejo cuisine"; "Jam making"; "Carnival program. Guided tours"; "Visits to historical heritage"; "Visits to shepherds and former smugglers"; "Hiking, hunting, fishing, boating, hot air ballooning, animal handling, farming, sunset activities, stargazing"; "Breakfast and dinner with fresh produce from the local vegetable garden."
Targeting specific markets to which slow would especially appeal, e.g., people suffering from stress, older people	"Yoga, Pilates, retreats, massages, SPA, wellness programs."

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the literature review, it was observed a wide range of product offerings and active experiences aiming to promote green transport – for instance electric cycling, horse riding, or bike-friendly services. Activities related to typical slow tourism products, such as local food and gastronomy, also tend to gain emphasis, particularly in terms of traditional food tasting and learning local culinary skills, for example at cooking classes or wine tasting. Additionally, experiences that promote deeper engagement with local culture, such as visits to heritage sites guided by local farmers, are a common feature, along with workshops, nature-based activities, and relaxation opportunities.

Many of the businesses investigated offer authentic experiences linked to the local area, promoting a strong connection with nature and landscape, rural life, well-being, gastronomy, and cultural heritage, and local contacts with the community. The researched establishments seem to commercialize a variety of complementary tourist experiences, with a particular focus on authenticity, sustainability, emotional connection to the territory, including residents and landscape/nature, and the Alentejo identity. Indeed, the variety in question makes Alentejo – specifically, Baixo Alentejo – an excellent destination for slow, mindful, and diverse tourism.

5. Conclusions

The findings indicate that slow movement strategies have the potential to create deeper tourist connections, foster authentic experiences, and enhance the cultural and natural appeal of the region, which could support sustainable economic growth. These insights offer valuable guidance for tourism businesses seeking to stand out on competitive markets by focusing on authenticity, slowness, sustainability, and community engagement.

It is evident that offering sustainable, local experiences, traditional gastronomy, and tranquility, combined with rural activities, such as wine and olive oil production and tasting, allows visitors to slow down and develop a deeper appreciation for the region's beauty and assets. Still, despite numerous examples of rural tourism activities in Baixo Alentejo that align with the slow tourism principles, businesses lack explicit self-identification as part of this movement.

Although this research remains exploratory and ongoing, some limitations are apparent. First, numerous websites were inactive or contained scattered information. Second, the website examination should encompass not only slogan phrases, but also other descriptions from different sections or tabs, accompanied by the collection of complementary visual data such as images or videos for multimodal interpretation. Third, a triangulated methodology, including interviews, user reviews on digital platforms, and local and regional slow tourism communication, would enhance the robustness of the findings. Fourth, while literature supports the usefulness of AI tools like ChatGPT for content analysis, relying solely on AI remains questionable, underscoring the need to complement such research with manual coding and analysis.

The study reveals that the potential of slow tourism in rural areas is already visible and promising. However, this potential requires strategic coordination and public support to achieve a sustainable and coherent scale. Stakeholders must collaborate to develop a communication strategy that highlights the slow principles and strengthens the Alentejo slow tourism brand. Moreover, local and regional governments need to act as mediators and create conditions for slow tourism to become a model of balanced territorial development rather than just a trend.

Indeed, future research will aim to deepen the perspective on slow tourism, expanding the study area to Alentejo's other subregions and conducting an in-depth content analysis of marketing strategies in the plans and visual campaigns by regional and local entities. This research will also utilize semi-structured interviews with accommodation providers to understand their perceptions of slow tourism's concept and dimensions, future slow business strategies, and willingness to collaborate with other stakeholders to further develop the Alentejo slow tourism brand.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

This research was funded within the scope of the project UIDB/04470/2023, <https://doi.org/10.54499/UIDB/04470/2023>, CiTUR – Center for Tourism Research, Development, and Innovation.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Home or Abroad? Following Tourism Choices in Hungary

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Abstract: **Background:** Continuing a research series started in 2020, the study analyzed the social and economic factors shaping tourism preferences, the application of motivation, and capital theories, with attention to the impact of COVID-19 and rising safety concerns.

Research objectives: The aim was to identify and analyze the structural differences in travel behaviors and active tourism preferences between Hungarian tourists who primarily choose domestic destinations and those who prefer international travel.

Research design and methods: The study involved an analysis of data from 533 respondents collected in 2024 via an online questionnaire by means of statistical tests investigating travel motivations, accommodation, activities, and demographics.

Results: The findings reveal that domestic travelers typically opt for short, low-cost trips with partial board, prioritizing safety, simplicity, and familiarity. In contrast, international travelers favor longer stays, higher service standards, and full board, indicating higher discretionary income and a desire for status expression.

Conclusions: The study underscores that travel preferences are not merely economic choices but are deeply embedded in social structures, cultural capital, and identity formation processes.

Keywords: travel decision-making, domestic vs. international tourism, push-pull model, social capital, lifestyle and tourism

JEL Codes: L83, D11, I12

Suggested citation:

Hoschek, M., Nemeth, N., Meszaros, K., & Palanca, A. (2025). Home or abroad? Following tourism choices in Hungary. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 91–103. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.06>

1. Introduction

This study builds on the sixth phase of the research series on Hungarian travel habits launched in spring 2020 and is closely linked to the previous empirical studies. The research aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the social and economic background of ever-changing tourism preferences, in particular by comparing domestic and foreign travel patterns.

Tourism patterns and consumer preferences are constantly changing. This reflects in the changing frequency of travel, accommodation, and boarding types, and interest in active tourism activities, often following current trends. The research investigates whether there is a meaningful difference between Hungarian travelers who primarily choose domestic destinations and those who primarily choose foreign destinations.

The push-pull theoretical model (Crompton, 1979) provides a framework for evaluating travel motivations, distinguishing between internal drivers (self-fulfillment, relaxation, com-

fort) and external benefits offered by destinations (e.g., infrastructure, service quality). In the studied sample, domestic trips tended to be organized along the lines of cost-effectiveness and short duration, while trips abroad displayed longer lengths of stay and higher comfort levels. The research also highlights social inequalities in tourism.

According to Bourdieu's (1984) theory of capital, tourism activities and choices differ not only along economic but also along cultural and symbolic capital. While rural hospitality, nature walks, and cycling are common among domestic travelers, golf, sailing, and skiing are also common among those who prefer to travel abroad.

In this study, we aimed to present a structured description of patterns of travel behavior and active tourism preferences based on empirical data, supported by statistical analysis and interpretation. The experience of the COVID-19 epidemic and more safety-conscious consumer attitudes have significantly shaped the dynamic transformation of tourism (Csóka et al., 2021; Csapó & Törőcsik, 2020). The research results can be interpreted along five dimensions with the help of the applied theoretical models: motivation, accommodation choice, activities undertaken, social status, and lifestyle.

2. Literature Review

Travel Motivations and Destination Choice

Destination choice is a complex decision process that the tourism literature explains by the push-pull model (Crompton, 1979, 2005; Hinek, 2017). Push factors are motivations that motivate the traveler from within, such as escaping from everyday life, stress reduction, seeking new experiences, desire for change. On the other hand, the pull factors refer to the attractiveness of the destination, i.e., the attributes that attract tourists: natural features, cultural attractions, service quality, value for money, or even the place's image.

In the case of domestic tourism, push factors include a sense of security, proximity to familiar surroundings, lower costs, and organizational ease. These factors are particularly important for those planning shorter, spontaneous trips, such as long weekends. The pull factors offered by inland destinations are often less exotic, but emphasize tranquility, close-to-nature experiences, and local culture.

For tourism abroad, pull factors dominate. Travelers often choose a foreign destination for its novelty, unique experiences, exposure to different cultures, and exoticism. Typically, such trips require longer preparation and greater funds, but have a higher prestige and are often a symbolic expression of personal status. Therefore, social recognition, experience, and self-expression often dominate the motivation for trips abroad.

Another way of interpreting motivations is to apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs to tourism. Thus, after satisfying the most basic physiological and safety needs, the purpose of travel may be to experience belonging (e.g., family travel), achieve self-esteem (e.g., status travel), or to achieve self-actualization (e.g., seeking authentic experiences, adventure tourism). Domestic tourism often satisfies lower levels of traveler needs, while foreign travel targets higher levels of need.

The examination of generational differences constitutes another important aspect. Younger age groups (e.g., Generation Z and Y) tend to seek adventure, experience, and online sharing, while older generations are more concerned with comfort, safety, and familiar surroundings. These generational differences in attitudes are visible in the choice of accommodation and catering, as well as in preferences for active forms of tourism. Research confirms that genera-

tional differences manifest not only in motivational levels but also in attitudes toward responsible tourism: younger people tend to emphasize sustainability and experience orientation, while older people are more concerned with safety and comfort (Gonda & Rátz, 2023). According to the results of generational research, Generation Y's travel decisions are closely linked to social media use. Werenowska and Rzepka (2020) found that young travelers find inspiration primarily in online content, especially Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, when choosing their destination, and that sharing itself has become part of the experience.

This dichotomy also shows in the empirical results of the study: domestic holidaymakers tend to prefer shorter, frequent, low-budget trips, while foreign travelers prefer less frequent, longer trips requiring higher quality services.

In the post-COVID-19 pandemic period, the structure of tourism motivations has changed worldwide. According to international research, new types of restrictions and compromises resulting from the pandemic influence travel decisions. Humagain and Singleton (2021) showed that motivations for outdoor recreation travel have become particularly strong, as tourists prefer experiences that are close to nature, safe, and possible to organize independently. According to international research, the sense of security, sustainability, and interest in nearby, accessible destinations has strengthened permanently (UNWTO, 2023; Gössling & Hall, 2022). Moreover, the pandemic has amplified the psychological dimensions of consumer decisions: travelers increasingly prefer flexibility, digitalized services, and green transportation solutions (Ioannides & Gyimóthy, 2023). Thus, the choice between domestic and foreign travel has become not only a question of income, but also one of risk perception and values.

Choice of Accommodation and Service Requests

One of the key factors in the tourist experience is the type of accommodation and the quality of services available. Travelers' satisfaction depends not only on the accommodation's physical characteristics (location, cleanliness, comfort), but also on the adequacy of the services offered and the extent of the gap between the expected and the actual experience.

To assess accommodation quality, the literature uses the SERVQUAL model (Veres, 2009; Szabó, 2020), which evaluates service quality along five dimensions: reliability, responsiveness, safety, empathy, and the appearance of the physical environment. Guest satisfaction is high if the perceived level of service is at least at or above the expected level. For domestic travelers, it is common for some services to be self-organized (e.g., staying with friends, half-board, or breakfast arrangements). Meanwhile, foreign travelers prefer full comfort and service.

The perception of value for money also has a significant influence on the choice of accommodation and catering. According to the decision-making model (Lőrincz & Sulyok, 2019; Savella et al., 2020; Wilhelm, 2023), consumers weigh the level of service offered against the price paid for it and make their decisions on that basis. The research results show that domestic travelers tend to make choices based on rational, economic considerations, while for those holidaying abroad, convenience and experience play a more important role.

The classic steps in the consumer decision-making process, i.e., problem identification, information gathering, evaluation of alternatives, decision, post-evaluation, are also applicable to accommodation choice. Domestic travelers often make faster, more routine decisions, while in the case of international travelers, more conscious and detailed consideration often precedes the decision.

The empirical data also clearly reflect the different patterns of accommodation and boarding choices. Domestic holidaymakers are more likely to use the help of friends and relatives,

and lower-priced private accommodation and guesthouses, while international travelers prefer hotels, Airbnb, and full-board accommodation.

Active Tourism Preferences and Social Determinants

Interest in active forms of tourism is under the influence of not only personal taste but also a number of social and structural factors. Theories on the social embeddedness of consumption, such as Bourdieu's (1999) theory of habitus and capital, show that people do not choose their tourism activities randomly, but that they are rather closely linked to their social status, education, and cultural resources. Bourdieu argues that social class determines an individual's tastes, lifestyle, and recreational habits not only through material but also through cultural and symbolic capital.

In active tourism, this means that certain sports and leisure activities, such as skiing, golf, and sailing, have a high entry threshold and thus also symbolic isolation. They often require not only economic but also social access. In contrast, hiking, cycling, or rural tourism are accessible to a wider social group. Accessibility is particularly important in the context of active tourism, which refers to both physical and infrastructural accessibility and financial accessibility/affordability. Research shows that domestic holidaymakers are more likely to choose activities that do not require special equipment or high costs, such as hiking, cycling, and rural catering, while foreign travelers are more likely to choose higher-cost sports such as skiing, rowing, golf, or extreme sports (Michalkó, 2010).

Moreover, several studies support the social determinants of consumption patterns in sports tourism. The type of activity, its intensity, its purpose (recreation, performance, social experience), and the associated consumption pattern (equipment, accommodation, transport) all reflect social embeddedness and the level of cultural capital. The results of the present research also confirm this: domestic tourists prefer low-entry threshold, nature-based, self-organized activities, while those travelling abroad prefer more intensive logistical and financially demanding activities with status value.

The Social Determinants of Domestic and Foreign Tourism

To a large extent, the choice of tourist destinations and activities depends on the financial resources available to the individual, in particular, discretionary (free-spending) income. The amount spent on travel determines not only the accessibility of the destination country or region, but also the range and quality of services available there. The travel pattern shifts of the early 2020s, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, have strongly modified the domestic-foreign preference system, with a new emphasis on safety and speed of organization (Csóka et al., 2021).

Domestic tourism is often popular among those with lower incomes, less leisure time, or those who feel safer and more comfortable travelling domestically. In contrast, foreign travel typically requires higher discretionary income, and people more often see it as a means of social status and self-representation.

Research on social inequalities in tourism shows that tourism participation is closely linked to socio-economic status. Those with both material and cultural capital not only travel more frequently, but also travel further and for longer periods, with access to more exclusive services. Therefore, the choice between domestic and foreign tourism is not simply a matter of preference, but a deeply socially determined choice.

The accessibility-affordability-preference triangle model illustrates the complexity of this choice. Accessibility is a physical factor (e.g., transport infrastructure), affordability is a financial factor (e.g., price of accommodation and services), and preference influences travel decisions along psychological and social factors (e.g., family attachment, sense of comfort, status orientation). In the study, domestic travelers tend to be in the lower income brackets and opt for shorter trips, simpler accommodation, and partial boarding. On the other hand, foreign travelers opt for longer trips, higher standards of service, and full board, indicating a higher financial margin.

Scholars have observed similar trends in Poland, where economic instability, inflation, and the proximity of war have significantly increased the demand for domestic travel. According to research by Chomać-Pierzecka and Stasiak (2024), Polish tourists increasingly prefer domestic, safe, short-term vacations, which are not only more affordable but also culturally closer to travelers. Thus, domestic tourism has become an indicator of social stability.

Tourist brand loyalty and switching costs can also influence the choice. Travelers who had a positive experience of a destination often return. Thus, familiarity and loyalty reduce the propensity to switch. This is particularly the case for domestic tourists. Simultaneously, high switching costs (e.g., lack of language skills, time needed to prepare for the trip) are also a disincentive to move abroad. In contrast, for holidaymakers on holiday abroad, the search for variety and difference can motivate them to try new destinations.

Research conducted in the Moroccan province of Al Haouz shows that social enterprises can become drivers of sustainable tourism, particularly through the activation of local communities' economic and cultural capital. The case study confirms that one can mitigate social inequalities in tourism if local participation and community innovation are placed at the center of development efforts (Benalla & El Halaissi, 2025).

Lifestyle and Travel Choices

Travel decisions are not simply the result of rational economic calculations, but are closely linked to individual values, lifestyles, and identities. Lifestyle influences the types of experiences we seek, the destinations we prefer, and the services we consume while traveling.

Based on psychographic and demographic segmentation models, in particular the VALS (Values and Lifestyles) model, we may classify individuals into eight lifestyle groups according to their motivations and resources. The VALS model considers psychological factors such as innovativeness, status aspirations, tradition, and self-expression, which may reflect in travel preferences. For example, people prioritizing self-expression and experience-seeking are more likely to travel abroad in search of novelty, while tradition-keepers or survivors prefer domestic, familiar environments (Töröcsik, 2019).

Postmodern theories of tourism indicate that travel is not only a means of consumption, but also a means of identity building. Travelers reinforce their self-images through the destinations, activities, and the sharing of their chosen destinations. In the paradigm of the "experience economy," experience has become the central value in tourism, reinforced by the narrative of travel and its sharing through social media.

The lifestyle choices in tourism also explain why younger generations prefer active, unique, and authentic experiences, while older generations prefer comfort, safety, and familiar destinations. The research reflects this, as we may partially explain the differences between domestic and international travelers with lifestyle differences.

3. Research Method and Materials

Following its theoretical grounding, we empirically investigated the differences between Hungarian tourists who prefer domestic and foreign travel in their travel motivations, accommodation choices, active tourism habits, and socio-demographic characteristics. Below, we present the methodological procedures used and the key issues of the study.

We present the results of the sixth phase of a series of studies that started in spring 2020 and was completed in November 2024. The online questionnaire covered three main sets of questions, namely respondents' general travel habits, their travel plans for 2024, and their basic demographic characteristics. In this study, we analyzed the data from the first set of questions with a particular focus on the structural differences between respondents who spend their holidays mainly at home and those who typically spend their holidays abroad.

We recorded the raw data of the responses received in Excel. After consolidating, cleaning, categorizing, and preparing the data for analysis, we conducted statistical tests using the statistical-mathematical program IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26.0. We performed the relationship between nominal variables using cross-tabulation analysis, where, after confirming the existence of a relationship, we determined its closeness using the Cramer-V coefficient. For the relationship between nominal and ordinal variables in all cases we performed a Mann-Whitney U test to examine the consistency of the expected values because none of the distributions were normal.

One of the research limitations is that the fact that we created the sample based on an online self-administered questionnaire. Thus, it primarily reflects the opinions of digitally active, younger, middle-class segments of the population. Due to the non-random sampling, the results cannot be generalized to the entire Hungarian population. Furthermore, the questionnaire was based on self-reporting; hence, the data may be distorted by the subjective perceptions of respondents and seasonal and income fluctuations in travel habits.

4. Results and Discussion

In total, 533 people participated in the survey. The gender distribution was approximately 1:2, with 188 people, 35.3% men, and 345 people, 64.7% women. We identified three age groups: under 30 (309 people, 58.0%), between 31 and 59 (198 people, 37.1%), and over 60 (26 people, 4.9%). Notably, 4.1% (22 people) of the respondents had only primary education, 66.4% (354 people) had some secondary education, and 29.5% (157 people) had completed tertiary education. For marital status, respondents could choose from 8 different options. We grouped these into three categories: single (163 people, 30.6%), divorced or widowed (15 people, 2.8%), and in a relationship (355 people, 66.6%). A quarter of the respondents (134 people, 25.1%) said they were in good financial circumstances, nearly three-quarters of the 394 people (73.9%) said they were in good financial circumstances, and only 5 people (0.9%) said they were in poor financial circumstances.

Our research focused on the influence of travel location. Thus, it is important to understand the respondents' preferences. A larger proportion of respondents, 57.6% or 307 people, mainly holiday in their home country, while a smaller proportion, 42.4% or 226 people, typically holiday abroad.

We divided the number of annual trips into four categories (Figure 1). In the total population, half of the respondents (50.3%, 268 people) take two to three holidays, while the largest

proportion of the other half (40.3%, 215 people) take only one holiday, a minority (9.4%, 60 people) take four to five holidays and a minority (2.1%, 11 people) take six or more holidays. When we looked at the inland-foreign lovers, we found that a very weak ($V = 0.108$) but significant ($\chi^2 = 6.257$; $p = 0.100$; $df = 3$) relationship. We also found that those who holiday at home do not tend to travel six or more times a year, while those who prefer to travel abroad do.

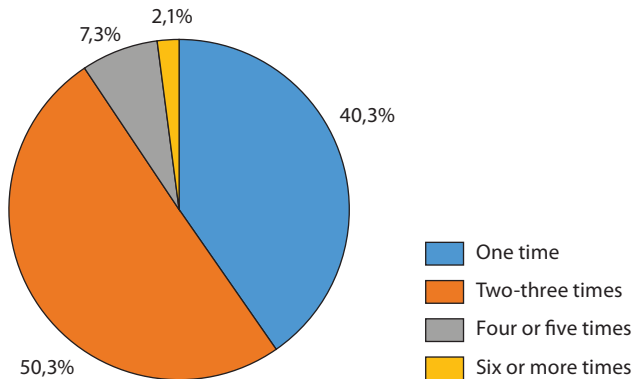


Figure 1. Distribution of respondents by the number of travels (holiday) per year

Source: own editing based on survey.

For six people, we did not get a meaningful answer to the question of how is usually their trip, so for 527 people we can say that a third (35.5%, 187 people) travel for four to five days, nearly three tenths (29.2%, 154 people) for a week, nearly a quarter (23.5%, 124 people) for two to three days, nearly a tenth (8.5%, 45 people) for more than a week, and a minority (3.2%, 17 people) for just one day (Figure 2). We found a moderately strong ($V = 0.421$) relationship ($\chi^2 = 94.390$; $p = 0.000$; $df = 6$). Therefore, we may conclude that those on holiday in the country tend to go away for short missions, either for one day or two to three days, and do not typically go away for a week or more. Holidaymakers on holiday abroad operate oppositely, preferring trips of a week rather than short trips of one to two or three days.

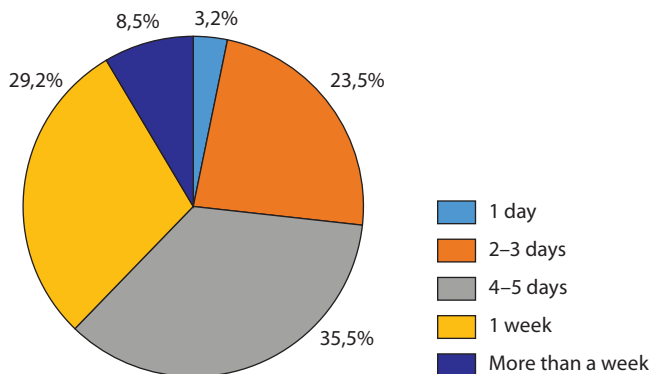


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents by length of holiday

Source: own editing based on survey.

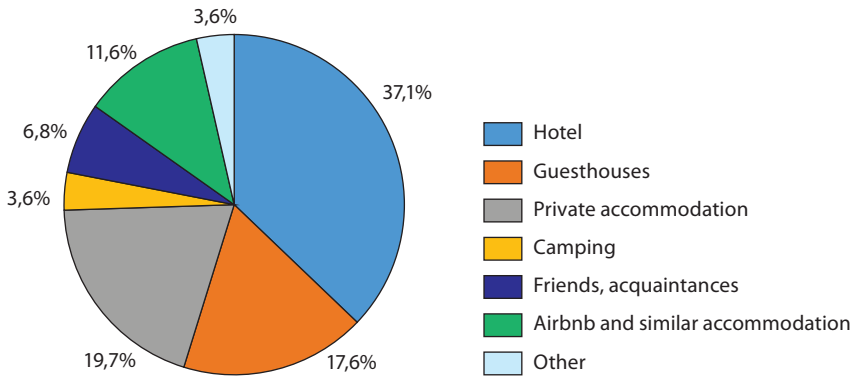


Figure 3. Proportion of people using different types of accommodation

Source: own editing based on survey.

We can also distinguish between the two groups in terms of accommodation ($\chi^2 = 50.892$; $p = 0.000$; $df = 6$). The medium relationship ($V = 0.309$) suggests that respondents who stay at home typically stay with friends and acquaintances, while their counterparts who stay abroad tend to stay in bed and breakfasts and use Airbnb or similar accommodation services. Hotels, hotels, and Airbnb are not typical for domestic respondents, while private accommodation and visiting friends and acquaintances are not typical for foreign respondents. For the total population, the proportions were as follows (Figure 3): slightly more than a third (37.1%, 198 people) prefer hotels, nearly two tenths (19.7%, 105 people) prefer private accommodation, sixth (17.6%, 94 persons) prefer guesthouses, one tenth (11.6%, 62 people) prefer Airbnb and similar accommodation, 6.8% prefer friends and acquaintances, and a small proportion (3.6%, 17 people) prefer camping and other accommodation.

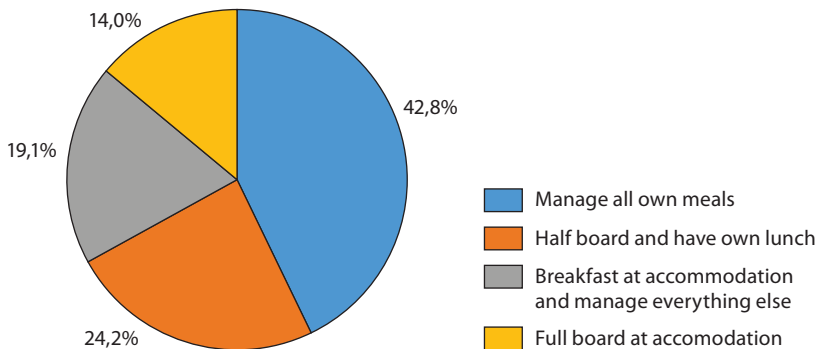


Figure 4. Distribution of different types of holiday accommodation considering the meal arrangement

Source: own editing based on survey.

Respondents could choose their preference from four answers for the services they used in the accommodation (Figure 4). Most of them (42.8%, 227 people) manage all their own meals, nearly a quarter (24.2%, 128 people) have their own lunch with half board, nearly two

tenths (19.1%, 101 people) have breakfast at their accommodation and managed everything else themselves, and nearly sixth (14.0%, 74 people) prefer the comfort of full board. Three respondents did not wish to comment.

Notably, we found a weak ($V = 0.195$) significant relationship ($\chi^2 = 20.192$; $p = 0.000$; $df = 3$) for the food service. Domestic holidaymakers prefer half board and typically do not choose full board, while holidaymakers on holiday abroad behave oppositely.

One of the respondents did not wish to answer the question about who they usually go on holiday with. More than half of the respondents (52.3%, 278 people) travel with their family, nearly three-tenths (28.0%, 149 people) with their partner, nearly one-sixth (15.6%, 83 people) with friends, and just a few (2.1%, 11 people) with a group of people with the same interests (e.g. hobby group, university group, pensioners, church community) or alone. In this respect, there is no difference between a domestic and a foreign destination ($\chi^2 = 5.313$; $p = 0.257$; $df = 4$) (Figure 5).

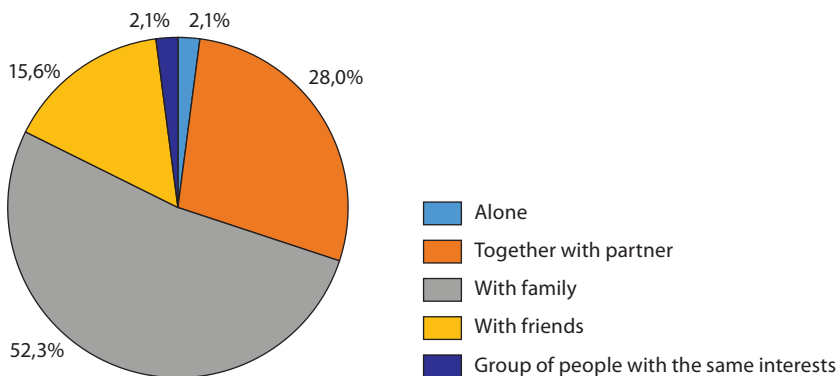


Figure 5. Distribution of respondents by travelling companions

Source: own editing based on survey.

We were also unable to detect any difference between the two groups in terms of the number of people travelling together ($\chi^2 = 8.751$; $p = 0.188$; $df = 6$). Figure 1 shows that nearly one third (30.5%, 162 people) to one third (28.9%, 154 people) travel in groups of two or four people, nearly one sixth (15.2%, 81 people) travel in groups of three people, just over one tenth (13.5%, 72 people) travel in groups of five people, nearly one tenth (8.6%, 46 people) travel in groups of six to ten people, just a few (1.3%, 7 people) travel in groups of more than ten people, while 1.3%, ten people travel alone (Figure 6).

We asked respondents to rate their interest in this type of recreation on a scale of one to five for 16 active forms of tourism. Table 1 shows that nature walking scored the highest, with an average of nearly four, while at the other end of the scale, respondents ranked running with an average of 1.77. For the seven forms, we did not find any significant difference between the ratings of those who prefer holidays in the Baltic and those who prefer holidays abroad. In three cases, the degree of domestic interest was higher. These are the types of recreation that are easily accessible domestically, such as nature walks, rural hospitality, and cycling. If a person prefers a more specific type of active recreation, they usually have to travel abroad. Thus, it is not surprising that respondents, especially those who holiday abroad, rated water sports (boating, rowing, kayaking, sailing), skiing, extreme sports, and golf higher.

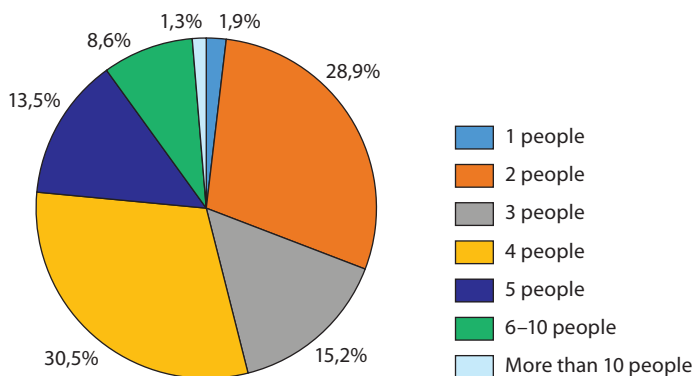


Figure 6. Distribution of respondents by number of people travelling together

Source: own editing based on survey.

Table 1. Respondents' interest in active tourism

The type of activity	<i>N</i> = 533	Mann-Whitney U-test	<i>p</i>	Difference
Hiking	3.95	-2.294	0.022	yes (domestic)
Boating	3.51	-4.097	0.000	yes (abroad)
Camping	2.80	-0.471	0.638	no
Rural tourism	3.21	-3.582	0.000	yes (domestic)
Cycling	3.42	-2.074	0.038	yes (domestic)
Adventure tours	2.87	-1.868	0.062	no
Rowing, Kayaking	2.87	-3.894	0.000	yes (abroad)
Eco-tours	2.63	-0.100	0.920	no
Fishing	2.10	-1.026	0.305	no
Skiing	2.62	-6.295	0.000	yes (abroad)
Sailing	2.71	-4.830	0.000	yes (abroad)
Extreme sports	2.56	-5.847	0.000	yes (abroad)
Running (competition)	1.77	-0.137	0.891	no
Horse-riding	2.35	-0.574	0.566	no
Golf	2.12	-2.270	0.023	yes (abroad)
Hunting	1.97	-1.546	0.122	no

Source: own editing based on survey.

5. Conclusions

The majority of the 533 people surveyed travel mainly domestically. We found a significant difference between those on holiday at home and those on holiday abroad in terms of the number of times per year they travel, the length of the trip, the type of accommodation they stay in, and the type of accommodation they use. We found no difference between the two groups in terms of the number of people and the number of people travelling together.

Domestic holidaymakers tend to travel once or five times a year, typically for short breaks (1, 2, or 3 days), staying with friends or acquaintances, but if they choose other accommodation, they will have their own lunch somewhere else during the day, with half board.

Typically, holidaymakers on holiday abroad spend six or more weeks in a hotel, an Airbnb, or a similar accommodation arrangement. When travelling, they like to be fully catered for in terms of meals.

The choice of active forms of tourism follows a clear social pattern. Among domestic travelers, the most popular and highly valued activities are low-cost and easy to pursue, such as hiking, cycling, boating, and rural tourism. In contrast, higher-cost, status-related sports – such as skiing, sailing, or golf – tend to appear more frequently in the preferences of travelers abroad and are generally among the least favored forms of active tourism among domestic holidaymakers.

The survey results clearly show marked structural differences in travel habits, service needs, and forms of active tourism between Hungarian tourists with preference for domestic and foreign travels. Based on the sample of 533 respondents, we can state that domestic holidaymakers tend to opt for shorter, cost-effective trips, often with family and friends, and with partial board. In contrast, foreign tourists tend to prefer longer stays and higher comfort levels, reflecting discretionary income differences and segregation by social status.

The empirical results confirm the relevance of the push-pull model. While domestic tourism is mainly based on intrinsic motivations (safety, proximity, simplicity), the attractiveness of destinations (specialness, comfort, status enhancement) plays a decisive role in the case of foreign trips.

The differences between domestic and foreign travelers revealed in the research are not merely financial in nature but reflect deeper social structures. Cultural capital, such as knowledge of foreign languages, education, or international experience, has a strong influence on who can participate in international tourism. As Bourdieu notes, taste and consumption are organized along social boundaries, making tourism itself a field of social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984; Ateljevic, 2022). Therefore, future research should focus on a longitudinal study of class-based differences in tourism, particularly in the context of digitalization and sustainability.

The study confirmed the applicability of Bourdieu's theory of capital to tourism research: participation in tourism and access to types of experiences are linked not only to financial capital, but also to cultural and symbolic capital. Thus, travel choices are not only preferences but also representations of social positions.

Although often not explicitly stated, a sense of security is a key factor in the choice of tourist destinations, especially for tourists who prefer domestic travel. Familiar cultural surroundings, linguistic identity, spatial proximity, and accommodation options based on personal relationships all contribute to a sense of socio-psychological comfort, which many experience as synonymous with safety. Therefore, the choice of domestic tourism is not only a result of economic or temporal rationality, but also an expression of the need for predictability and controllability. By contrast, foreign travel carries a range of uncertainties, including language, cultural differences, transport, and health risks, or even political instability, which can be a deterrent, particularly for the less mobile, older, or family-oriented.

The post-COVID period further reinforced this trend: a significant proportion of travelers felt that domestic travel was safer, faster, and easier to organize. This indicates that safety is not only an objective condition, but also a socially constructed, perceptual category that plays

a role in the deep structure of travel decisions. Although we did not include the issue of security as a separate issue in this research, the indirect effects of these factors on domestic travelers' decisions are clearly visible. Future studies should consider integrating quantitative measures of safety perceptions to gain a more complete picture of the decision psychology of tourism.

Research findings indicate that tourism policy must treat the needs of domestic and foreign travelers differently. In domestic tourism, it is worth supporting the networking of local communities and businesses, as well as making nature- and culture-based experiences accessible. However, in foreign tourism, competitiveness and service innovation are key. In the post-COVID period, strengthening safety, sustainability, and digital presence in both segments can serve to enhance the stability and attractiveness of destinations (Gössling, Scott & Hall, 2021).

Future research should consider using longitudinal studies or in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of motivational and social differences.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

None reported.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Community-Driven Food Networks as Vehicles of Rural Social Innovation

Maya Giorbelidze, Lydia Rita Barikdar, Huixin Shen

Abstract: **Background:** Rural communities in Cape Breton, Canada, face persistent challenges such as food insecurity, social isolation, and economic marginalization. Community-led food networks rooted in social economy values have emerged as innovative responses that provide dignified, culturally relevant access to food. This article's novelty lies in its comparative, community-engaged analysis of an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous rural model, treating food networks as infrastructures of rural social innovation rather than charity.

Research objectives: This study explored how community-driven food networks contribute to rural development and social innovation by fostering inclusion, empowerment, and resilience.

Research design and methods: Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examined two food networks in rural Cape Breton through document analysis, community feedback, observation, and interviews with key stakeholders.

Results: The findings reveal that integrated programming, i.e., combining food access, wellness, and employment initiatives, enhances social cohesion, local capacity, and community dignity.

Conclusions: Community food networks exemplify how social economy initiatives can transform rural spaces into hubs of innovation and care.

Keywords: social economy, rural development, food security, community empowerment, Cape Breton – Canada

JEL Codes: R11, Q18, O35, I38

Suggested citation:

Giorbelidze, M., Barikdar, L. R., & Shen, H. (2025). Community-driven food networks as vehicles of rural social innovation. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 104–118. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.07>

1. Introduction

Rural communities across Canada are navigating a layered set of structural, economic, and demographic challenges that undermine long-term sustainability and social cohesion. While the literature documents well the challenges rural communities face, the novelty of this article lies in its comparative, community-engaged analysis of Indigenous and non-Indigenous food networks as rural social innovation infrastructures that operationalize dignity, choice, and integrated support. Thus far, no scholar has conducted such an analysis in the Cape Breton context. Persistent issues such as aging populations, high rates of unemployment, intergenerational poverty, outmigration of youth, food insecurity, and inadequate access to health and transportation services define many of these contexts. These challenges are not simply logistical. They are rooted in deeper historical and policy-driven processes that have marginalized rural regions in national development agendas. In Atlantic Canada, and particularly on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia, these dynamics are especially pronounced.

Cape Breton, located on the eastern edge of the province, has a population of approximately 132,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2021), many of whom reside in former resource-dependent communities shaped by the rise and fall of coal mining, steel manufacturing, and fisheries. Economic transitions in recent decades have left behind uneven development, reduced state presence, and service delivery gaps, particularly in food access, transportation, housing, and public health. Simultaneously, Cape Breton retains a strong legacy of community-based resilience, interdependence, and civic participation, which constitutes a foundation that continues to inform local responses to socio-economic vulnerability.

Against this backdrop, the social economy has gained renewed relevance as a vehicle for reimagining rural development. Defined broadly to include cooperatives, non-profit organizations, community enterprises, and volunteer-based networks, the social economy prioritizes people, place, and public interest over private gain (Quarter et al., 2017). It challenges traditional binaries of state and market and offers a hybrid model where collective action and mutual aid take precedence. In rural Canada, where state withdrawal and market failure are common, social economy actors often fill critical service gaps, particularly in food systems, elder care, youth engagement, and cultural preservation.

Food insecurity has emerged as both a symptom and a driver of broader rural inequality. In regions like Cape Breton, community organizations are responding not only with emergency food aid, but also integrated, participatory approaches that center empowerment, choice, and cultural relevance. These include gardening programs, community kitchens, cooking classes, land-based healing, and skills development. These activities go beyond food provision to build capacity, belonging, and wellness. Such models are rooted in place-based knowledge, collective governance, and an ethic of care that reflects local histories and values.

This article offers an original contribution to the literature by examining community-driven food networks as vehicles of rural social innovation within the Canadian social economy. While previous studies have explored the role of social enterprises in urban or national contexts, little empirical work has analyzed how community food networks in small, resource-dependent regions operationalize values of dignity, inclusion, and empowerment in practice. By focusing on two rural cases in Cape Breton, one Indigenous and one non-Indigenous, this study highlights how diverse governance traditions and cultural frameworks shape the design and impact of local food systems. The analysis situates these community networks within broader theoretical debates on the social economy, rural innovation, and Indigenous self-determination, expanding our understanding of how social enterprises foster not only economic resilience but also social cohesion and cultural renewal.

The objectives of the article were threefold:

1. To explore how community-driven food networks in rural Cape Breton address food insecurity through social economy principles of inclusion, empowerment, and collective action.
2. To analyze how these initiatives contribute to rural social innovation by integrating food access, wellness, and employment programming.
3. To identify the broader implications of such models for sustainable rural development and policy design in Canada.

In doing so, the article contributes conceptually to the literature on rural social innovation and empirically to the growing body of research on community-based food systems in marginalized regions. It argues that community food networks are not peripheral welfare responses but central mechanisms for local transformation by demonstrating how care, culture, and cooperation can serve as drivers of resilience in rural development.

This study makes three novel contributions. First, it offers the first comparative, community-engaged analysis of two rural community food networks in Cape Breton by deliberately juxtaposing an Indigenous (Mi'kmaq-led) model with a non-Indigenous model, thereby demonstrating how governance traditions and cultural frameworks shape program design and outcomes. Second, it advances the literature by conceptualizing community food networks as rural social innovation infrastructures, moving beyond food charity to examine dignity, choice, and wraparound supports (wellness, employment, land-based healing) as integrated mechanisms of inclusion and empowerment. Third, methodologically, it combines directed content analysis with community validation and culturally grounded indicators (e.g., cultural safety, Two-Eyed Seeing, and participant-defined dignity). Thus, it offers an evaluative lens rarely applied to rural Canadian food systems. Together, these contributions fill a documented gap between social economy theory and on-the-ground rural practice in small, resource-dependent contexts.

This article is divided into five main sections. Section 1 (Introduction) explains the rural development and food insecurity situation in Cape Breton and explains the reasons for the study, its goals, and what it will do. Section 2 (Literature Review) places the research in the context of existing studies on the social economy, rural social entrepreneurship and innovation, social inclusion and empowerment, and Indigenous governance and food sovereignty. It also shows how this paper fills a gap in these areas. Section 3 (Research Method and Material) describes the design of the study. This includes the types of data that will be collected, the participants, how the data will be analyzed, and what ethical considerations will be taken. Section 4 (Results) presents the most important findings from the two cases, Glace Bay Town House and Eskasoni. These findings are organized by theme. The themes are dignity and choice, integrated programming and wraparound supports, volunteerism and social capital, cultural safety and self-determination, and structural barriers to sustainability. Section 5 (Conclusions) summarizes the study's main findings, discusses how they apply to rural policy and practice, and gives practical recommendations and ideas for future research.

2. Literature Review

The social economy has emerged as a compelling response to growing social and economic inequalities, particularly in rural and marginalized contexts. Distinct from the public and private sectors, the social economy consists of a wide range of organizations, i.e., cooperatives, mutuals, associations, and non-profits, that engage in economic activity while prioritizing social objectives (Quarter et al., 2017; Borzaga & Defourny, 2001). These organizations operate with a clear commitment to inclusivity, local autonomy, and sustainable development, and often involve both paid staff and community volunteers. In rural settings, where economic opportunities are scarce and social infrastructure is limited, the integrative and community-based logic of the social economy becomes particularly salient.

Rural areas face persistent structural challenges, including depopulation, aging demographics, the withdrawal of public services, and limited access to employment and education. These dynamics weaken social cohesion and exacerbate economic precarity (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019). Against this backdrop, social economy organizations have stepped in to address gaps in essential services, promote civic engagement, and foster inclusive forms of development. Social enterprises, defined as organizations that use commercial activities to advance a social, cultural, or environmental mission, have gained increasing recognition for their ability to bridge economic sustainability with community need (SECC, 2025; Steiner & Teasdale, 2019).

Unlike traditional businesses, social enterprises reinvest profits to support their mission, maintain democratic decision-making structures, and pursue long-term value creation for communities (Bencheva et al., 2017).

The literature documents well the contribution of social enterprises to rural development. Bencheva et al. (2017) identify key enabling conditions, including targeted institutional support, access to capital, and locally tailored programming. Their work emphasizes the role of social enterprises in mitigating the effects of demographic decline, unemployment, poor infrastructure, and social exclusion – factors disproportionately concentrated in rural regions. Similarly, Kačar, Curić, and Ikić (2016) present a framework that integrates both endogenous (local knowledge and resources) and exogenous (external funding and policy) drivers of rural development. Their hybrid model encourages community-based initiatives that blend internal capacity with strategic external partnerships to achieve more resilient and place-based outcomes.

However, the success of social economy organizations depends on the strength of their surrounding ecosystems. Sumner (2025) argues that the social economy does not operate in a vacuum but relies on a supportive policy, financial, and institutional environment to sustain impact. In the absence of such conditions, fragmented governance, chronic underfunding, and short-term project cycles can constrain efforts to promote inclusion and resilience. This is particularly true in rural areas, where isolation and infrastructural constraints often leave community-based organizations to shoulder disproportionate responsibility for social well-being.

In addition to economic resilience, the social economy plays a vital role in advancing social inclusion and empowerment, two central pillars of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Silver (2015) conceptualizes inclusion as a relational, multidimensional process that strengthens individuals' participation in society, builds mutual respect, and fosters collective cohesion. Empowerment, often linked with inclusion, refers to individuals gaining the capacity to shape their own lives through increased agency and control (Page & Czuba, 1999; Narayan, 2002). Social enterprises occupy a unique position to advance both goals, particularly among underserved communities that face systemic barriers to participation.

Ismail, Farooq, and Rolle (2022) define underserved communities as groups historically excluded from economic opportunity, including low-income individuals, women, racialized groups, and Indigenous peoples. Social enterprises targeting these populations can serve as platforms for inclusive job creation, skills development, and financial access. Vidal (2005) emphasizes the role of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the social economy in promoting work integration and local economic development. Wilson (2012) further highlights the potential of social enterprises to combat financial exclusion by offering accessible, community-controlled alternatives to traditional financial services. Together, these perspectives show that social economy actors are not only service providers but agents of structural change.

In Canada, where over 60% of Indigenous peoples reside in rural or remote areas, Indigenous governance has become central to rethinking rural development strategies (OECD, 2020). People no longer see Indigenous communities as stakeholders, but rather recognize their role as co-governors and leaders of rural innovation. Agrawal (2001) illustrates how communities can sustainably manage shared resources through collective decision-making and local rules, which are principles that align with Indigenous governance practices across Canada. Doucette and Lanine (2016) offer a powerful example in the Osoyoos Indian Band's partnership to create

the Nk'Mip Winery, which integrates economic development with cultural revitalization and self-determination.

This place-based governance approach aligns with the concept of “Two-Eyed Seeing” (Bartlett et al., 2012), which advocates for integrating Indigenous and Western knowledge systems to address complex rural challenges. In food systems specifically, Indigenous communities are leading efforts to move beyond conventional food security models toward food sovereignty frameworks that prioritize cultural relevance, local control, and ecological sustainability (Jackson et al., 2020; Fieldhouse & Thompson, 2012). Ray et al. (2019) and Timler et al. (2021) highlight how food sovereignty enables Indigenous communities to restore traditional foodways, reconnect with the land, and address intergenerational trauma through culturally grounded food practices.

The Manitoba Northern Healthy Foods Initiative, examined by Fieldhouse and Thompson (2012), provides a case of a successful Indigenous food program that emphasized gardening, preservation, and traditional knowledge over external food aid. This analysis supports a broader call for participatory, community-led approaches that move away from short-term interventions and instead invest in long-term community capacity. OECD (2020) echoes this as it underscores the importance of data sovereignty, land-use planning, and institutional recognition in supporting Indigenous-led rural development.

However, significant governance and structural barriers persist. Johnstone (2016) shows how colonial licensing frameworks and financing models that failed to accommodate communal ownership limited Mi'kmaw fishery development in Atlantic Canada. Daniels et al. (2025) note that fragmented emergency management systems in British Columbia often exclude Indigenous legal orders, leaving communities unprepared or unsupported in times of crisis. Kwiatkowski (2011) adds that environmental and health assessments frequently marginalize traditional knowledge, advocating for community-based participatory research and the formal integration of elders and knowledge holders into decision-making processes.

Indigenous innovation is not only technological, but also relational and governance-based. Benoit et al. (2023) documented how the Meadow Lake Tribal Council used federal support to modernize its forest operations while maintaining cultural stewardship. Rice (2016) offers a comparative analysis of Bolivia and Nunavut, showing how resource-based governance and consensus models can serve as foundations for Indigenous-led development. These cases underscore that political autonomy, cultural knowledge, and structural recognition are prerequisites for sustainable rural innovation.

Recent empirical work on community-driven food networks offers further insight into how rural and remote communities are mobilizing place-based food initiatives. For instance, Schiff (2013) documents how collaborative food networks in Canada's northern and remote regions organize across actors and sectors to strengthen food system resilience. Lavallée Picard (2016) provides a comparative case of two small rural communities in Québec and British Columbia that engage in food system planning and networks oriented toward food sovereignty. Piaskoski (2020) highlights the lived experience of rural households facing food insecurity and emphasizes the need for networks that integrate social support. “Resilience and Alternative Food Networks” (Breen et al., 2025), a British Columbia study on food hubs, demonstrates how networked food infrastructures in a regional context function as innovation platforms. Finally, the systematic review by Idzerda et al. (2025) underscores an important gap: while food-based interventions are common, the evidence for their long-term impact remains limited, which signals the need for more in-depth qualitative and mixed-methods work such as this study.

These studies collectively suggest that community food networks are more than charitable provision; they are relational, governance-embedded, and innovation-oriented. However, the literature still lacks comparative analyses of Indigenous and non-Indigenous rural networks within the same region, especially where governance traditions, cultural frameworks, and social economy logics intersect. This gap shaped the rationale for the present study.

Taken together, the literature affirms that the social economy in rural areas operates at the intersection of community care, local governance, and systemic change. It offers a pathway to revitalize rural communities not only through service delivery, but through empowerment, inclusion, and the reassertion of local control. Whether through non-profit food networks, Indigenous food sovereignty initiatives, or community enterprises, rural social economy actors are building more just and resilient futures, often despite, rather than because of, the policy environments in which they operate.

3. Research Method and Material

This study adopts a qualitative, community-engaged case study approach to explore how social economy principles are operationalized through collaborative food networks in rural Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. We chose case study methodology to allow for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of two distinct food network initiatives, i.e., one based in a non-Indigenous community and the other led by an Indigenous Mi'kmaq organization. These cases provide insight into how place-based responses to food insecurity can promote community resilience, inclusion, and empowerment through social economy frameworks.

We conducted the research between February and April 2025. It involved multiple forms of qualitative data collection, including:

- Key informant interviews: We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 stakeholders, including program managers, volunteers, organizational leaders, and municipal staff. These interviews explored perceptions of program goals, implementation challenges, and community impact, with a focus on understanding the values, strategies, and networks that shape rural food programming.
- Focus group discussions: We held two focus groups, one in each community, with program participants, including elders, parents, and youth. The discussions centered on themes such as dignity in food access, sense of belonging, knowledge gained, and volunteer experiences. These sessions provided valuable insights into lived experiences and local definitions of success.
- Participant observation: The researcher attended multiple food-related events and workshops (e.g., Soup Days, cooking classes, garden preparation sessions), observing social interactions, participation patterns, and the physical and social environments in which programming took place. The researcher kept detailed field notes to capture informal dynamics and the role of community space.
- Document and program review: We reviewed internal program documents, summary reports, and outreach materials from the 2024–2025 programming cycle. These included attendance logs, program feedback forms, internal evaluations, and partnership records. We also consulted publicly available data, such as census profiles from Statistics Canada (2024), and organizational websites to contextualize the findings.
- Community feedback tools: We collected informal data through post-activity surveys, suggestion boxes, and “Coffee & Chat” events where participants could reflect on their experi-

ences in a conversational setting. This added an accessible, participant-led layer of input and helped validate findings emerging from more formal interviews.

We selected the two cases for their diversity in structure and cultural grounding. The first case centered on Townhouse, a long-standing non-profit organization in Glace Bay that hosts community meals, food literacy workshops, gardening programs, and volunteer-led social activities. The second case focused on the Eskasoni First Nation, where the Collaborative Food Network is embedded within the Mental Wellness and Crisis Centre. This initiative integrates food security programming with culturally grounded approaches to healing, skill-building, and inclusion, guided by Mi'kmaq values and leadership.

We analyzed data thematically using directed content analysis. Key concepts drawn from the literature, including social inclusion (Silver, 2015), empowerment (Narayan, 2002; Page & Czuba, 1999), and rural social economy (Quarter et al., 2017; Bencheva et al., 2017) guided the analysis. We developed codes around themes such as dignity in service delivery, volunteerism, food knowledge, cultural relevance, and system navigation. To ensure trustworthiness, we applied data triangulation across sources and shared preliminary findings with organizational leads for validation and feedback.

The study adhered to principles of ethical community-based research, including respect for local knowledge, voluntary participation, and informed consent. We took special care to ensure that we respected Indigenous governance and cultural protocols in the Eskasoni case. This approach helped ensure the research process aligned with community values and provided useful feedback to partners.

In sum, the research design combined rigorous qualitative methods with a participatory lens, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how social economy practices are shaping food systems and community well-being in rural Cape Breton.

4. Results

The analysis of the Collaborative Food Network (CFN) initiatives in Cape Breton, Glace Bay Town House, and Eskasoni, revealed how social economy organizations are reshaping rural development by addressing food insecurity through culturally anchored, community-led models. These initiatives go far beyond emergency food assistance. They embody principles of empowerment, dignity, inclusion, and sustainability. The findings grounded in interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions demonstrate that integrated programming across food access, wellness, social support, and capacity building not only meets basic needs but also rebuilds social cohesion, addresses systemic barriers, and fosters local agency.

Community Ownership and Empowerment

Both the Glace Bay and Eskasoni programs prioritized community ownership, ensuring that food programming was not something “done to” but rather “done with” the community. In Eskasoni, Indigenous governance and self-determination principles were central to the CFN’s design and delivery. Local staff and leadership emphasized cultural safety, language use, and healing-centered approaches. One staff member shared, “We make sure everything we do is based on our teachings. Food is medicine, and we don’t want anyone to feel shame accessing it.”

Similarly, in Glace Bay, community members shaped the program’s direction through informal consultations and active volunteer engagement. Respondents repeatedly expressed a sense of ownership, describing the CFN as “our foodbank,” “our community meals,” and “our

place to give back.” The Glace Bay Town House model intentionally positions food access as part of a broader volunteer-driven community hub. As one volunteer explained: “It’s not just about giving out food. It’s about building people up again, making them feel they belong.”

Table 1. Overview of Community Food Network Activities in Glace Bay and Eskasoni

Community Food Network	Core activities	Target groups	Underlying principles	Key outcomes (as identified in interviews and FGDs)
Glace Bay Town House CFN	Choice-based food pantry, community meals, cooking classes, community garden, Christmas Feast, volunteer engagement	Low-income families, seniors, youth, single parents	Dignity, inclusion, reciprocity	Improved access to nutritious food; enhanced sense of belonging; volunteer-to-employment pathways
Eskasoni CFN	Community pantry, garden boxes, land-based healing, cooking and preservation workshops, wild meat distribution, cultural feasts	Indigenous families, youth, Elders	Cultural safety, empowerment, Two-Eyed Seeing	Strengthened cultural identity; increased community engagement; improved mental wellness and intergenerational learning

Source: own elaboration.

Human Dignity and Choice

A defining feature of both CFNs is the emphasis on choice-based food access, which signifies a radical departure from traditional food charity models that rely on standardized hampers. The Eskasoni program aimed to integrate food access with other dimensions of wellness, offering programs such as the community pantry, garden boxes, cooking classes, and land-based healing.

In the Glace Bay program, the food pantry operated on a model that allowed clients to “shop” for their preferred items within a points-based system. This flexibility restored autonomy and removed stigma. One participant noted, “For the first time, I feel like I can choose what my kids will eat this week, instead of taking whatever they give me.” This sentiment reflects a broader shift in the framing of food programming, from charity to rights-based service delivery grounded in dignity and respect.

Furthermore, volunteers and staff reported that offering choice did not result in logistical burdens, rather, it built stronger relationships and enhanced the model’s sustainability. Choice became a gateway to engagement in other services, including employment readiness workshops, mental health supports, and peer mentoring.

Integrated Programming and Wraparound Supports

In both communities, the CFNs demonstrated that food insecurity rarely constitutes an isolated issue. Rather, it intersects with housing insecurity, unemployment, mental health, and social isolation. Addressing these interconnected issues required integrated, wraparound programming.

In Eskasoni, the integration of food programming with land-based education and mental health support was particularly impactful. For example, the Land-Based Healing Program combined harvesting, traditional cooking, and cultural teachings, offering both practical food skills

and spiritual restoration. Youth and elders participated together, enhancing intergenerational knowledge sharing. One elder described the program as “a circle of healing with the land and each other.”

Similarly, in Glace Bay, CFN activities were embedded within broader supports. For instance, the employment readiness initiative provided soft-skills training through food-related volunteerism, offering pathways for participants to build confidence and re-enter the workforce. A participant shared: “I started by stocking shelves, then helping with meal prep. Now I’m doing an interview for a kitchen job next week.”

The Annual Christmas Feast, community cooking classes, and peer support groups were not only food-related services but social bridges that addressed loneliness and stigma. Importantly, these programs were accessible to all residents, not only food bank clients, reinforcing social cohesion and reducing barriers to participation.

Volunteerism and Social Capital

The CFNs relied heavily on volunteerism, not as a stopgap, but as a core design feature. In Glace Bay, over 60 regular volunteers were involved in daily operations, from food sorting to outreach coordination. Volunteers represented various demographic groups, including youth, seniors, and newcomers. Many had previously been clients of the CFN themselves.

This volunteer model reinforced reciprocity, dignity, and ownership. As one volunteer noted: “They helped me when I was down. Now I’m helping others. It’s a circle.” Such expressions highlight how participation in the CFN model builds social capital and reweaves frayed social networks in rural communities.

In Eskasoni, while volunteer roles were also important, the emphasis was on cultural mentorship, with elders guiding food and land-based practices and youth participating as learners and helpers. This approach ensured cultural continuity and fostered intergenerational relationships. The CFN became not just a service provider but a cultural institution, sustaining Mi’kmaw traditions through food systems.

Indigenous Self-Determination and Cultural Safety

The Eskasoni CFN uniquely demonstrated the importance of Indigenous-led programs. From governance to program design, the initiative was rooted in Mi’kmaw values, practices, and knowledge systems. This included the use of traditional language, ceremony, and community-defined metrics of success.

Participants highlighted that the goal was food sovereignty, rather than food charity. “We’re not just filling stomachs. We’re reclaiming our food, our ways, and our health,” shared a community organizer. Programs like the wild meat distribution and medicine garden were not just about nutrition; they were acts of resistance against colonial food systems and healing responses to intergenerational trauma.

The CFN’s culturally grounded framework created safe spaces where Indigenous participants felt respected and affirmed. The emphasis on traditional teachings, cultural safety, and trauma-informed approaches resonated deeply with participants, many of whom had experienced exclusion or racism in mainstream food services.

Structural Barriers and Policy Gaps

Despite the success of both CFNs, several structural barriers persist. In both Glace Bay and Eskasoni, transportation constituted a significant challenge, particularly for elders, single

mothers, and individuals without access to a vehicle. While programs attempted to offer delivery or partner with transit options, the infrastructure in rural Cape Breton remains inadequate.

Funding uncertainty was also a shared concern. Much of the CFNs' program relied on short-term grants or pilot project funding. Staff found long-term planning difficult when funding was uncertain. One coordinator explained: "Every year, we hold our breath and wonder if we'll get funding again. We want to expand, but we need stable core support."

These findings underscore the need for policy reform and institutional backing that would recognize the vital role of social economy actors in rural development. Governments and funders must cease to see these initiatives as charitable add-ons to essential community infrastructure.

Measurement of Impact and Learning

Measuring the impact of social economy interventions in rural settings remains complex. Traditional metrics, such as pounds of food distributed or number of clients served, fail to capture the transformative, relational aspects of CFNs. Staff of both programs emphasized the importance of storytelling, participant narratives, and qualitative feedback in understanding the deeper outcomes of their work.

For example, in Glace Bay, participants reported improved mental health, restored self-esteem, and a renewed sense of purpose. One participant stated, "Coming here is what got me out of the house again. I feel like myself for the first time in years." These stories are difficult to quantify, yet they represent critical indicators of community well-being.

Similarly, Eskasoni leaders pointed to cultural pride, youth engagement, and strengthened kinship ties as key outcomes. They advocated for evaluation frameworks that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and holistic understandings of health, food, and community.

Toward Scalable Models of Rural Innovation

The CFNs in Glace Bay and Eskasoni are not isolated success stories. They represent scalable models for rural innovation rooted in the social economy. Their success hinges on four key elements: (1) an integrated, wraparound program that meets intersecting needs; (2) a commitment to dignity and choice; (3) deep community ownership and leadership; and (4) a recognition of cultural and place-based identity.

Scaling these models does not require replication but adaptation, i.e., ensuring that any new initiative is co-designed with the community, responsive to local culture, and embedded in existing social networks. It also demands investment: core funding, infrastructure support, and policy alignment are essential to move from pilot to permanence.

Importantly, these models challenge dominant paradigms in rural development that prioritize economic growth or external investment. Instead, they center community well-being, relational economies, and local knowledge as the foundations of sustainable development.

Table 2. Thematic Coding of Interview and Focus Group Data

Theme	Description	Frequency (across 12 interviews, 2 FGDs)	Illustrative quote
Empowerment	Participants feel more capable and confident in decision-making related to food, health, and employment	16	"I started by volunteering, and now I'm training for a kitchen job next week." – Participant, Glace Bay
Dignity and choice	Food access models promote autonomy, reducing stigma	14	"For the first time, I can choose what my kids will eat this week." – Participant, Glace Bay
Cultural relevance	Integration of Mi'kmaq traditions, teachings, and ceremonies into food programming	11	"Food is medicine, and we make sure everything we do follows our teachings." – Staff, Eskasoni
Social cohesion	Building trust, relationships, and belonging through collective participation	18	"This place makes you feel like you belong again." – Volunteer, Glace Bay
Sustainability	Need for stable funding and long-term planning	9	"Every year we hold our breath waiting to see if we'll get funding." – Coordinator, Eskasoni

Source: own elaboration.

5. Conclusions

The findings reinforce the idea that rural development in Canada must be reimagined not only as an economic imperative but as a social and cultural process grounded in place-based knowledge, community participation, and inclusive governance. The two food networks examined, one in a predominantly non-Indigenous community and the other in a Mi'kmaq First Nation, demonstrate how one can mobilize the principles of the social economy to create responsive, participatory, and empowering interventions in contexts marked by structural disadvantage.

What distinguishes these initiatives is not merely their ability to provide food, but the way they fundamentally reconfigure how support is delivered and experienced. By focusing on dignity, relationship-building, and cultural relevance, both networks moved beyond transactional models of food assistance toward relational models of community care. This shift is significant in rural settings where formal services often remain limited, and where community infrastructure plays an outsized role in sustaining well-being. The Glace Bay and Eskasoni cases provide concrete examples of what a people-centered approach to rural resilience can look like and how food programs double as sites of learning, belonging, healing, and empowerment.

Analytically, this article contributes to the growing literature that challenges deficit-based narratives of rurality. Rather than viewing rural communities as passive recipients of development, these cases position them as innovators that leverage social capital, volunteerism, and cultural knowledge to co-create solutions. The findings align with theoretical frameworks that conceptualize the social economy as a "third way" between state and market (Quarter et al., 2017), as well as feminist and Indigenous perspectives that view community care, collective action, and local governance as foundational to sustainable development (Agarwal, 1997; Bartlett et al., 2012).

Importantly, the study also raises questions about the structural conditions that enable or constrain this work. While both food networks exhibited high levels of adaptability and commitment, they also operated under conditions of chronic underfunding, limited infrastructure, and institutional precarity. The potential of these initiatives to scale or replicate depends not only on community will, but on the presence of enabling ecosystems, i.e., policies, funding mechanisms, and partnerships that value social impact over short-term efficiency. As Sumner (2025) and Ismail et al. (2022) argue, social innovation in marginalized settings requires more than creativity, namely structural support, trust in local leadership, and recognition of alternative forms of governance and knowledge.

As an answer to the Social Entrepreneurship Review's call for research on sustainable and inclusive rural development, this study offers both empirical evidence and conceptual insight. It highlights how social economy models, when embedded in local realities and guided by values of care, equity, and autonomy, can address deep-rooted exclusions in rural areas. It also points to the need for more integrated rural development strategies that position community-based organizations not as service gaps to be filled, but as vital infrastructure for social resilience and democratic renewal.

As Canada and other countries seek to respond to rural depopulation, climate uncertainty, and growing inequality, the lessons from Cape Breton suggest that the future of rural development does not lie in top-down solutions, but rather the everyday, transformative practices of communities working together – through food, through trust, and through the collective pursuit of dignity and well-being.

Practical implications

The findings suggest that policymakers and funders should prioritize stable, multi-year funding streams for community food networks to ensure sustainability and reduce staff turnover. Integrating community-led food programs into rural development and health strategies could strengthen local economies by linking food access with employment and training. Furthermore, support for culturally grounded approaches, such as Indigenous-led governance and land-based healing, can enhance both program effectiveness and social inclusion. Community organizations can use this evidence to advocate for dignified, choice-based service delivery models that treat food as both a human right and a social connector.

Future research directions

Further studies could adopt longitudinal and comparative designs to examine how community food networks evolve over time and across regions. Quantitative analyses could complement our qualitative insights by measuring long-term outcomes related to employment, health, and community cohesion. Moreover, additional research could assess how digital tools, social finance, and policy frameworks can strengthen the sustainability of community-driven food systems. Finally, future studies might explore inter-provincial and international comparisons to understand how rural social innovation in Canada aligns with global movements toward food sovereignty and inclusive local economies.

In summary, this article contributes new empirical evidence and conceptual clarity to the understanding of rural social innovation, while providing actionable lessons for practitioners and a foundation for continued academic inquiry.

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All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

This research was supported by Mitacs through the Accelerate Internship Program in partnership with the Cape Breton University. The funders had no role in the design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation of findings, nor in the decision to submit this article for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Event Impact Assessment and Community-Based Tourism: The Case of a Portuguese Music Festival MEOSudoeste

Sandra Saúde, Sandra Lopes, Marta Amaral, Ana Isabel Rodrigues

Abstract: **Background:** As integral components of the event industry, music festivals significantly impact local communities and encompass social, cultural, economic, political, physical, and environmental dimensions. We may perceive this impact as either positive or negative. As event tourism continues to grow in importance, there is an increasing need for evaluation methodologies that promote sustainable development through more participatory approaches.

Research objectives: This article examines how impact assessment methodologies, grounded in action research, can enhance community engagement and support the principles of Community-Based Tourism (CBT).

Research design and methods: Drawing on evidence from research conducted on the MEO Sudoeste music festival in Odemira, Alentejo/Portugal, the study explored the potential of this notable event to foster community involvement, despite its limited adoption of the CBT paradigm.

Results: The findings emphasize the importance of collaborative evaluation processes in balancing benefits and costs and supporting informed decision-making for large-scale tourism events.

Conclusions: Collaborative evaluation contributes to improving the long-term sustainability of large-scale tourism events.

Keywords: events tourism, community-based tourism, action research, MEO Sudoeste

JEL Codes: L83; Z32; O35

Suggested citation:

Saúde, S., Lopes, S. Amaral, M., & Rodrigues, A. I. (2025). Event impact assessment and community-based tourism: The case of a Portuguese Music Festival MEOSudoeste. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 119–136. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.08>

1. Introduction

Music festivals, as products embedded within the broader event industry, music festivals generate various types of impact on local communities, which we may perceive as either beneficial or detrimental. This impact is multidimensional and encompasses sociocultural, physical, environmental, political, and economic dimensions (Van Niekerk, 2016; Yeoman et al., 2014, cited in Séraphin et al., 2018). Given the breadth and interconnection of these effects, it is essential to consider how event development, particularly in the context of hallmark events, can integrate effective strategies for community engagement. It is equally important to recog-

nize the potential of local communities to act as active and participatory stakeholders, rather than passive recipients of the event's outcomes.

As an expanding field within the tourism industry, event tourism likewise necessitates critical reflection on the types of event formats that require promotion to ensure a close, effective, and sustainable relationship with the host territory. In this regard, the adoption of an impact assessment methodology grounded in participatory research, i.e., incorporating reflective input from both community members and event organisers, assumes particular significance. Such a methodology facilitates the continuous adaptation of planning and management strategies based on empirical evidence, while enabling the collective identification and evaluation of the event's costs and benefits with precision and depth.

In this context, we examined how event impact assessment methodologies applied in territorial contexts can foster the integration of attributes characteristic of the alternative tourism development model promoted by Community-Based Tourism (CBT). While CBT emphasizes local participation, empowerment, and sustainability, such principles are often absent in large-scale commercial events. Accordingly, this research draws on empirical evidence from a case study of the MEO Sudoeste music festival, one of Portugal's longest-running and most widely publicised festivals, with more than two decades of activity. The event, held annually in August in the municipality of Odemira, in the Alentejo region of Portugal, provides a relevant context for examining how impact assessment practices might support a shift towards more inclusive and community-oriented approaches in the management of hallmark events.

2. Literature Review

The importance of planning and developing community-based tourism

The last decades brought competitive dynamics of globalization and worldwide capitalist expansion and the phenomenon of mass tourism, which privileges immediate and large-scale profit, often failing to respect local resources, leading to the need for new models of tourism planning and management based on sustainability (Pineiro, 2015). The concepts of alternative and sustainable tourism development include principles such as the promotion of social inclusion, ecological preservation, improvement of quality of life (Pineiro, 2015), and practices of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and empowerment of local communities in decision-making (Amaral, 2013).

We may see the numerous consequences of mass tourism and the attitudes of residents in host communities toward this type of tourism as a kind of appeal to increase public participation and, in particular, to develop a planning approach that would be more focused on community participation (Keogh, 1990; Huybers, 2007). This is because most of the generated impact, whether positive or negative, occurs precisely at the level of the destination community (Sharma, 2004), while residents become an essential "ingredient" for the "atmosphere of hospitality" of that destination (Simmons, 1994). This fact led some researchers to emphasize the need to decentralize tourism development and integrate it into the community's general objectives. Murphy (1985, cited by Amaral, 2013) was one of the first promoters of this perspective in his work *Tourism. A Community Approach*, in which he emphasizes the need for each community to relate tourism development to local needs. Already in 1985, Murphy considered that the community-based approach to tourism development planning allows for harmonizing social relations between tourists and the host community, which can be particularly positive in terms of social impacts in these territories. He further advocates adopting an ecological per-

spective in tourism planning and implementing planning systems that integrate tourism into community objectives and strategic plans, thereby ensuring the flexibility needed to adapt to economic and market changes.

Conventional mass tourism, which has typically developed through centralized decision-making by external authorities, is now in decline. Largely, this shift results from tourists' changing profile, who are becoming more demanding and conscious of environmental and social issues. Consequently, local stakeholders are assuming a more prominent role in managing tourism within their regions. Such a context has led to the emergence of local and community forms of intervention in tourism development and planning (Gómez et al., 2015).

The literature supports the idea that there are several factors (economic, social, cultural, and political) that led to the emergence of CBT, particularly in rural areas (Sansolo & Burszty, 2009), namely:

- Global pressures from the tourism market: rural and indigenous communities face market pressures on their natural and cultural resources as a result of the control of environmental NGOs that encourage these communities, considering CBT a viable option for preserving their natural resources;
- The need for communities to overcome more fragile economic situations;
- The relevant role of micro and small enterprises in local economic development and in the diversification of national tourism supply. Tourism businesses bring socio-economic benefits by mobilizing resources, generating wealth, and distributing income to local economies. However, if they grow rapidly, they can generate exacerbated competition, contribute to the deterioration of natural resources, and reduce the quality of services provided to customers.

Thus, CBT arises within the paradigm of alternative development and as a counterpoint to mass tourism. It is based on planning instruments grounded in community/territory involvement (community-based planning) with tourism potential. In this paradigm, the process of tourism development implies considering the totality of the subsystems that constitute the tourism system (elements of regional tourism, such as transport, accommodation, promotion, attractions, and information) to avoid conflicts between tourism subsectors (Gunn, 1994; Timothy, 1998). However, this is not a task. The implementation of community-based planning constitutes a response to the deficiencies of that systemic approach (Amaral, 2013). Thus, CBT is configured as a new approach to tourism planning that provides local communities with the alternative of inserting themselves into the tourism development process in their spaces by adopting an active and decisive role (Pinheiro, 2015). In more fragile territories, such as traditional communities (e.g., rural, fishing, islands, and indigenous), CBT can stimulate and elevate economic status, because it promotes the construction of basic infrastructures and cultural and recreational attractions, which clearly benefits the residents' quality of life and fosters the preservation, respect, and valorization of their local culture (Lee & Jan, 2019).

According to Pinheiro (2015), innovation contributes to the competitiveness of destinations and plays an important role in resolving disputes between public and private management of the tourism sector. In this context, Pinheiro (2015) considers CBT a social innovation that meets the needs of local development. Moreover, Nunes and Menezes (2017) consider CBT a way of structuring a tourist destination that focuses on social, cultural, and economic development, strengthening self-management of local agents in the territory and mobilizing communities around a common good, by fostering income creation and giving more visibility to different local productions. Throughout the process of tourism development and planning, the leading

agent will be the community itself, defined as the set of people who cohabit in a given territory, thus including owners and entrepreneurs, residents, and local government authorities (Monteiro & Deville, 2007, cited by Amaral, 2013).

According to Yanes et al. (2019), CBT is not an instrument of tourism development that the local community can easily decide upon and then implement. Other entities/organizations, particularly public bodies (public policy), must first recognize the local community's power. This is possible through the development of partnerships with the stakeholders of the community.

Thus, the local community's participation in the decision-making process of tourism development is foundational to tourism sustainability. Within the paradigm of community-based planning, participation will only be possible in a regime with fair democratic rules and where tourism expansion does not occur beyond what the citizens of a given community really want and can control. This implies that community involvement in the political planning process and in the decision-making process itself is based on a bottom-up decision-making model, in an integrated development logic that seeks to solve collective problems through actions coordinated by various agents (Gómez et al., 2015).

However, this process is not always easy. Some obstacles that justify its complexity include institutional issues (Sharma, 2004; Telfer & Sharpley, 2008), community's lack of knowledge of the activity (Moscardo, 2008), lack of local leaders and control by external agents (e.g., tour operators, marketing consultants), which gives them dominance over the activity, gaining power over the tourism development process. Among the obstacles, Mathieson and Wall (2006) also name the lack of homogeneity of communities (something already mentioned by Taylor, in 1995), many involved actors, the fact that tourism experiences are differentiated, and the absence, in many countries/communities, of political and administrative tradition that enhances or facilitates this type of process.

Furthermore, the challenges are also evident when considering the compatibility of the approach with the profile and assumptions of so-called event tourism, particularly large-scale events. Mathilda Van Niekerk (2016) and Ian Yeoman et al. (2014) (cited by Séraphin et al., 2018) argue that, due to the growing expansion observed in the event tourism sector, it is essential to record and monitor the impacts generated by them, whether positive or negative, in their various dimensions: cultural, social, economic, environmental, and political. Similar to what happened with mass tourism in an earlier phase, there is always the risk of minimizing the medium/long-term negative effects and amplifying the immediate positive effects. In addition to the organizational typology and obstacles that may exist, event planning shared and participated in by the community also constitutes an option and a winning path in terms of sustainability. In this sense, it is important to consider methodologies of event impact assessment in the territory, whose rationale is based on the paradigm of alternative development, embodied through the model advocated by CBT.

Events, music festivals, and their multiple impacts

Among the various economic activities, tourism constitutes one that best personifies the era of the experience economy (Oh et al., 2007), with the events sector excelling in the creation of products based on this objective.

Events have taken on growing and significant importance in the context of tourism and the tourist experience, with different typologies, dimensions, and impacts. As highlighted by the World Tourism Organization (2014, 2017), the events market has become a highly specialized segment and increasingly relevant for the tourism sector. Getz (2008) argues that events con-

stitute “an important tourism motivator” and “a prominent feature in the marketing plans of most destinations.” In fact, events have become “travel opportunities that broaden consumption, ... promoting the host core and defining new strategies for product development and marketing” (Carneiro & Fontes, 1997, p. 71). Whatever the event, it can function as a strategic tourism marker of a destination, with its image directly associated with it and vice versa.

Events are temporary occurrences of limited duration that aim to promote something to their target audience and assume a concept, a plan, an organization, and a manager (Carneiro & Fontes, 1997; Neves de Jesus, 2015). Since it is difficult to construct a single typology of events that encompasses the entire variety of occurrences ranging from the Olympic Games to conferences, fairs, festivals, and many others, Getz (2008) grouped them according to their “value and potential impact.” He distinguished them into:

- mega-events;
- hallmark events, large events with high status/visibility/value;
- regional events;
- local events.

For Maciel (2011), events, taking music festivals as an example, are a “vibrant and living showcase of places” (p. 18), capable of improving the profile of a destination through “positive dissemination of information, particularly of an informal nature” (p. 18). One of the main attracting factors of such an event is that in a short period of time, they concentrate a large number of activities, not only related to music, which promote socializing and fun. For Sarmiento (2007), festivals also have the added value of boosting cultural tourism, making it more active and bringing it closer to younger generations.

Currently, the music industry and its respective festivals constitute a system that generates millions and attracts a growing number of spectators/festival-goers. “Much more than music and entertainment, summer festivals are symbols of economic and cultural transformation. They transform cities, boost businesses, attract tourists, and place the country (Portugal) in the international spotlight” (Mirra, 2024, p. 1). Since 2015, with an interregnum in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance and number of festivals have grown significantly, multiplying across various points of the country and throughout different months and seasons of the year. Strategic partnerships between organizers and major brands and sponsors have consolidated, supply has professionalized, dividends have increased (in 2015, ticket revenues were around 44 million euros, rising to about 99 million euros in 2019 (INE, *Estatísticas da Cultura*, 2017, 2020), and Portugal has strengthened its position as a destination within the so-called “music tourism.” According to the Portuguese Association of Music Festivals (APORFEST, 2025), 405 festivals are scheduled to take place in Portugal in 2025, including 33 first editions.

Currently, evidence confirms that there are several effects and impacts associated with the holding of music festivals, particularly those which, due to their size and scope, fall within the so-called group of hallmark events.¹ In addition to enriching tourist attractiveness, scholars see them as instruments valorizing culture, heritage, and economic dynamics of the places and territories where they take place, increasingly forming part of local and regional public action plans (Saúde et al., 2019).

As mass events that mobilize producers, sponsors, suppliers, and festival-goers, among others, festivals naturally influence the routines and dynamics of the places and communities where they are held. There are effects at the level of economic activity, insofar as the pres-

¹ According to the typology of Getz (2008) and/or of Bowdin et al. (2011).

ence of a significant additional number of visitors increases the volume of sales and purchases in local commerce (restaurants, accommodation, supermarkets, shops, companies supplying goods and services), as well as potentially generating price inflation and real estate speculation. At the level of the labor market, festivals also influence the dynamics of supply and demand, associated with the processes of construction and/or improvement of infrastructures necessary for the holding of the event and/or during its assembly, realization, and dismantling. Economic activity has a direct and indirect impact, in the short and in the medium/long term, clearly standing out among the latter those underlying the consolidation of the place/territory in the tourism market through association with the image/brand of the festival (Davies et al., 2013).

In addition to economic impacts, music festivals also influence the sociocultural dynamics of local communities, allowing and/or broadening the range of opportunities for access to cultural and leisure activities, for sharing and cultural exchange with organizers, musicians, festival-goers, and other visitors. Furthermore, through the dissemination of the image and local identities, they act as drivers of improved community self-esteem and self-identification with local customs and traditions (Pavlukovic et al., 2017). Conversely, depending on the size and type of the event, we may note changes in daily routines, traffic congestion, increased noise, more waste, more confusion, and a greater sense of insecurity, which in some cases may generate discomfort and discontent among the population. Among the types of impact that generate the most criticism, environmental impact stands out, due to noise, visual, atmospheric, and waste pollution resulting from the gathering of thousands of visitors/festival-goers in a delimited space in a short period.

Events, and in particular music festivals, influence the territorial dynamics of the local communities/territories. They constitute important markers of the economic, social, cultural, tourist, and even urban activity of the places, with more positive and/or negative externalities depending on the matrix and organizational model followed, as well as how much the community and the music tourism market accept the product.

In this sense, it is important to consider events, particularly certain types of festivals, as an instrument of tourism planning that, given the model they advocate, can allow local communities to become involved in the process of tourism development of their spaces by adopting an active and decisive role. The community that hosts the event should (also) be an active element in the event management and operationalization, as a shaping agent of its sustainability and its social, cultural, tourism, economic, and political meaning.

Evaluating Impacts through Action Research in Community-based Tourism

The ontological nature of CBT implies that we must always consider its construction with an effective involvement of communities as the guarantee of achieving the project in its entirety. Based on this assumption, scholars consider it essential that the development of any tourism project or event, with these attributes, be accompanied by processes that can better dimension its multiplier effects, namely studies that can evaluate and estimate in the short, medium, and long term the impact of the event at the community level. This concern, visible in scientific production since the 1970s (Frey, 1994; Getz, 2008; Getz, 2010; Saayman & Saayman, 2006), assumes relevance as it generates important outputs to support political decision-making, given the growing integration of “tourism products” in municipal, regional, and national public action plans.

The dimensions in impact studies that we should consider involve an extensive typology of effects, and there is consensus that these require analyzing through a combined methodological approach that gathers information on the direct and indirect impacts generated, in the short, medium, and long term, of an economic, social, cultural, and environmental nature (Saúde et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2015). In a logic that prioritizes the understanding of these various dimensions, scholars have developed methodological instruments that make it possible to measure the perception of the social and cultural costs/benefits generated. One that stands out among them is, e.g., the Festival Social Impact Attitude Scale (FSIAS) developed by Thomas Delamere (Delamere, 1998). This instrument measures the induced social and cultural benefits through a set of items that allow for the evaluation of perceptions regarding how the event (festival) influences community life, identity, and well-being, and estimates, from the respondents' opinion, what can alter the community's quality of life. Along the same lines, other proposals focus on the analysis and description of impacts on the opinion of the community, organizers, and stakeholders involved in the event, but where the concern stands out not only with the description and technical measurement but also with returning the assessed results to the stakeholders (Saúde et al., 2019).

Sociocultural impact assessment models inherently rely on methodological designs that operationalize them. Within the CBT framework, it is essential to adopt approaches that strengthen the connection between the tourism product and local community dynamics. The Finnish Event Evaluation Tool developed by Pasanen, Taskinen, and Mikkonen (2009) is particularly valuable in this regard, as it considers multiple perspectives throughout a project's lifecycle: from planning and execution to conclusion.

We may further enhance this perspective when we combine it with participatory action research, defined as the "systematic collection of information to promote social changes" (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2013, cited by Traqueia et al., 2021, p. 38). Action research integrates participation, reflection, empowerment, and emancipation, fostering transformation (Berg, 2001, cited by Traqueia et al., 2021). Kemmis et al. (2014) highlight two relevant models: technical action research, focused on improving outcomes, and critical action research, aimed at emancipating individuals and groups from unsustainability or injustice. By privileging interactive and participatory dynamics, this methodology engages participants in reflection and action throughout the project, promoting informed and responsible involvement.

The process involves describing the context, planning and implementing changes, observing outcomes, reflecting on processes, and adjusting subsequent actions (Guerra, 2000; Kemmis et al., 2014). When combined with technical monitoring in collaboration with participants and external research teams, it ensures methodological rigor, manages deviations from high participant involvement, and supports a deeper understanding of CBT project dynamics. This iterative approach encourages meaningful community engagement while aligning events with sustainable practices.

This article draws on our two prior studies. The first one from 2017 assessed the economic and sociocultural impacts of the MEO Sudoeste Festival on the municipality of Odemira. The second one from 2018 examined how festival participation influenced the destination images (DI) of the region developed by visitors. Both studies underscored the importance of engaging stakeholders, particularly festivalgoers and the local community, to generate nuanced insights into the festival's operations, impacts, and improvement opportunities.

Building on these findings, this text reflects on how a large-scale music festival such as MEO Sudoeste, currently not aligned with CBT principles, could integrate community participation

and, critically, adopt participatory action research in future assessments of its socioeconomic and cultural impacts. In doing so, it highlights the added value of methodologies that actively involve local communities, demonstrating how such approaches can enhance understanding, promote sustainable practices, and foster closer alignment between large-scale events and the objectives of CBT. These do not currently integrate the attributes of CBT, but can incorporate elements of community involvement in future editions.

3. Research Approach and Data Informing the Chapter's Reflection

This article explores how a large-scale music festival such as MEO Sudoeste could incorporate community participation and, importantly, employ participatory action research in future assessments of its socioeconomic and cultural impacts. Such an approach would enhance engagement between festival organizers and local stakeholders, fostering the sustainability and long-term resilience of the tourism product. The discussion draws on findings from our two prior investigations. The first one examined the festival's effects on the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of the host territory, while the second investigated how participation in the festival influences the destination images (DI) of the region developed by festivalgoers.

The 2017 impact study commissioned by the municipality of Odemira represented the first comprehensive assessment in many years of the festival's socioeconomic and cultural effects on the territory and its community. The study aimed to characterize and evaluate the socio-cultural impacts as perceived by various stakeholders, while also measuring the festival's economic impact. To capture these multiple dimensions effectively within the study's timeframe, we employed a participatory mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative techniques.

We designed the information-gathering process to generate insights that would provide an almost real-time understanding of the event and its various dimensions. We collected data before, during, and after the 2017 edition of the festival using the following techniques:

- Direct observation of the event and the surrounding community context's dynamics;
- Participant observation through staying at the event for three days, sharing the performance venue and campsite with festivalgoers and the organization;
- Indirect observation through:
 - (i) interviews with the festival organization, officials of the Municipality of Odemira, local actors with privileged relations and knowledge of the history and dynamics of the event in the territory, and entrepreneurs with preferential links with the festival organization and/or whose location favored greater impact;
 - (ii) questionnaires applied to representative samples of: festivalgoers (residents and non-residents of the municipality of Odemira), the resident population of the municipality, and entrepreneurs located in the municipality.

For the analysis of qualitative data resulting from direct participant observation, interviews, and the open-ended questions in the questionnaire, we applied a thematic categorical content analysis (Bardin, 1991).

The employed research strategy combined direct participant observation with consultations of both festivalgoers and members of the local community. It allowed us to collect diverse data and comprehensively assess the economic, social, and cultural impact generated by the festival (Saúde et al., 2019).

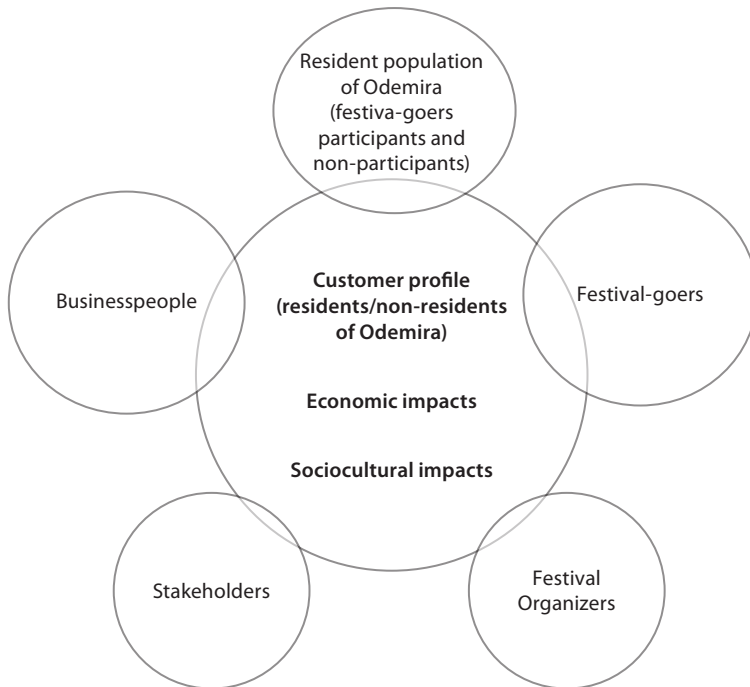


Figure 1. Dimensions of analysis and sources of information collection

Source: own elaboration.

We investigated how festival participation influences the destination images (DI) in 2018. Using a probabilistic and representative sample of festival participants who did not reside in Odemira, the study assessed how their participation in the 2017 edition of the festival shaped the DI they constructed and shared about the region. For the analysis of the collected data, we applied descriptive and inferential statistics to the quantitative information. Meanwhile, we used thematic categorical content analysis for the qualitative data. This direct consultation provided valuable insights into the festival's role in shaping the tourism image and brand of Odemira among visitors who travel specifically to the destination to attend the event (Saúde & Rodrigues, 2020).

4. Results and Discussion

The MEO Sudoeste festival is one of Portugal's oldest and most widely covered music festivals, having been active for more than 20 years. It takes place annually every August, although the organizers cancelled it in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The festival is held at Herdade da Casa Branca, located in the parish of São Teotónio within the municipality of Odemira (NUTS III Alentejo Litoral, district of Beja) (for localization, see Figures 2, 3, and 4).



Figure 2. Map of Portugal

Source: TUBS, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. No changes made.

The festival was inaugurated in 1997 and has developed into a significant tourist event. Various sponsorships enhanced this transformation, shaping the festival's identity and communication style. According to the producer, the festival attracted around 200,000 attendees in recent years (2017, 2018, and 2019). It is closely linked to the image of its host region, Zambujeira do Mar/Southwest/Alentejo Litoral, classifying it as what Getz (2008) describes as a hall-mark event.

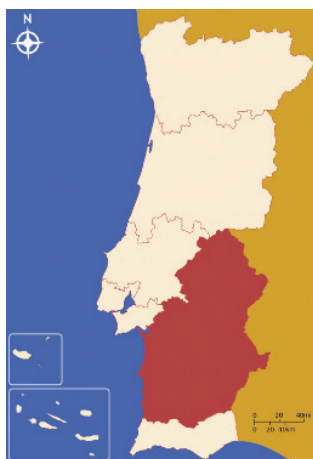


Figure 3. Map of the Alentejo region

Source: Petnog, CC BY-SA 4.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. No changes made.



Figure 4. Map of the Alentejo Litoral region

Source: Tschubby, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons. No changes made.

This festival embodies the characteristics of a major event, marked by its regular occurrence, large scale, and operational complexity. Furthermore, it is included in the municipal cultural program as a key event aimed not only at young residents of the municipality but also at attracting festival tourists to Odemira.

The Municipality of Odemira (Figure 5) consists of 13 parishes, each with distinct sizes and geographical characteristics. The parishes of Vila Nova de Milfontes, Longueira/Almogrove, and São Teotónio, along with the locality of Zambujeira do Mar, which has been part of São Teotónio since 2013, are situated in the Alentejo Litoral/southwest region (Figure 3) (Saúde et al., 2019). According to the 2021 census, São Teotónio is home to 29.4% of the municipality's total population, which amounts to 8,694 inhabitants (INE, 2021).

In 2019, approximately 46% of all hotel establishments in the NUTS III Alentejo Litoral region were located in Odemira (INE, 2020). The total revenues from tourism activities in this area amounted to €14.427 million, which represented 22.6% of the total revenue reported for NUTS III Alentejo Litoral, according to the latest data from INE dated 2019. These figures highlight the significance of the tourism sector in this region. Each summer, the residents of this territory, particularly those in Zambujeira do Mar, due to its proximity to the festival site and its strong branding, prepare to meet the direct and indirect demands of increased tourism.

The structured presentation of information throughout the study enabled the timely dissemination of selected results to the contracting entity – the Municipality of Odemira – and to institutional partners. The research team shared these results in multiple settings, including restricted meetings with municipal teams and broader forums open to public participation. These forums included presentations and discussions at the municipal social council, progress evaluation forums, the final presentation of conclusions, and a book launch.



Figure 5. Map of the Odemira Municipality

Source: Gazillion, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons. No changes made.

The evaluation of the festival's sociocultural and economic impacts revealed that, even in the absence of CBT attributes, the MEO Sudoeste festival is far from a neutral presence, generating a range of effects on the local community over the years. For the purposes of this reflection, we highlight the following key impacts, derived from data collected among the resident population. The findings indicate that the majority (Saúde et al., 2019):

- “I like to interact with the festival collaborators/organizers/artists;”
- “The festival is an opportunity to try out new ideas and projects;”
- “The festival guarantees opportunities for the development of new experiences and activities for residents of the municipality of Odemira.”

The examples presented illustrate an existing yet constructed relationship between the community and the festival, one that nonetheless requires greater sustainability. In recent years, the festival has shifted toward a highly centralized, site-contained model that concentrates entertainment activities alongside the musical program; this shift has increased the festival's distance from the broader community. Nevertheless, whether through the substantial influx of festivalgoers traversing the territory, engaging with the local circuit to Zambujeira do Mar and surrounding beaches, or through the direct and indirect sociocultural and economic effects generated, the MEO Sudoeste festival has remained a transformative presence for the host community. The results underscore the strong connection between the festival and its territory, a relationship that not only shapes its image and branding as a commercial product but has also significantly influenced community dynamics over the past two decades. In particular, the festival has enhanced the region's profile and value as a tourist destination. Recognizing the festival's role in promoting and consolidating the image of the territory as one of its most positively perceived effects, we sought to deepen the interpretation of its sig-

nificance by exploring and characterizing the DI constructed by festivalgoers regarding the Odemira region, as well as their intentions to revisit (Saúde & Rodrigues, 2020). The data collected showed that (Saúde & Rodrigues, 2020, p. 372):

- 85.2% of festivalgoers stated that they began to have a different and more positive image of the region after participating in the 2017 edition of the festival;
- 88.5% stated that they would like to spend holidays in the region again;
- 90.2% have already recommended or will recommend visiting the territory to family/friends;
- The images identified by festivalgoers focused on the existence of good, beautiful and/or excellent beaches. Young people did not highlight distinctive elements associated with the touristic and sociocultural identity of the territory.

The results demonstrate that participation in the festival fostered the creation and sharing of more positive images of the territory among festivalgoers and strengthened their intentions to revisit and recommend the destination. Moreover, based on the shared image attributes, we may conclude that festivalgoers highlighted a very small number of characteristics and resources of the territory (beach, sunset, entertainment/fun, MEOSudoeste), revealing the lack of reference to other elements that construct the material and immaterial heritage and identity of the region. The shared images were entirely “glued” to those exploited and promoted by the event marketing (Saúde & Rodrigues, 2020). Besides enriching and deepening the results found in the study developed in 2017, the additional data obtained identify more issues for reflection on the dynamics of the event and its relationship with the surrounding territory and community.

Impact assessments that incorporate a participatory research approach offer the significant added value of measuring and identifying the effects generated by an action, project, or event through iterative reflection and observation with the target audience and key stakeholders. They also have the potential to serve as guides for continuous improvement if integrated into action-research, shared, and collaborative processes.

In the specific case of the studies developed about the MEO Sudoeste festival, we collected relevant information that allowed us to determine results that one could, and should, use to:

- improve/optimize the event planning and organization: its compatibility with community life and identity; provide benefits generated at the level of capitalizing on the touristic and economic potential of the territory,
- minimize environmental effects: the social and physical distancing of the community from the event, with direct benefits, among others, for its compatibility with the current dynamic of tourism supply in the territory,
- improve the future sustainability of the event underlying the exploration of other program paths that go beyond the exclusive focus, in recent years, on a certain type of music and a certain type of audience, i.e., young people, under the “amusement park” format.

One may leverage the festival’s strong evaluative standing to support a transformation of its attributes, enhancing its sustainability within the host territory. In this context, an impact assessment methodology grounded in participatory research principles, i.e., returning results to both the community and organizers, assumes particular significance. Such an approach enables the collective, as both participants and beneficiaries, to identify in detail the economic, sociocultural, and environmental costs and benefits of the event, while fostering active community involvement in shaping its development, in alignment with the objectives of CBT. The findings in both studies underscore the multiple benefits of integrating action-research

methodologies into event impact assessments, particularly when these processes are shared and collaborative with local communities, regardless of the event's typology. The community should remain central, even for events that use the territory merely as a venue—considered not as a passive backdrop but as a vital asset whose identity, dynamics, perceptions, preferences, critiques, and expectations are essential to the event's sustainability. An event cannot be truly sustainable if it operates independently of the community in which it occurs. Instead, its planning, execution, and evaluation must actively engage and reflect the lived experiences of residents.

5. Conclusions

The incorporation of participatory research methodologies aligned with the principles of the CBT approach into event impact assessment processes – enriched by structured moments of collaborative discussion designed by the evaluation team (whether external, internal, or mixed) – constitutes a key strategy for enhancing the sustainability and contextual relevance of tourism events. By systematically integrating the perspectives and perceptions of diverse stakeholders throughout the different stages of an event (before, during, and after), such a methodology fosters a more balanced, inclusive, and informed approach to event management.

Drawing on the benefits and added value generated by the two studies conducted on the MEO Sudoeste Festival, which allowed for the identification of a wide spectrum of direct and indirect impacts, as well as areas in need of improvement and adjustment, the empirical evidence underscores the necessity for event impact assessments to adopt a participatory approach capable of informing and guiding the event's ongoing enhancement. Such an approach requires a systematic orientation of inquiry toward key questions, including which actions should be prioritized in future editions based on findings from previous evaluations and how these actions can be effectively implemented. It also asks how local communities, drawing on their perceptions and lived experiences of the event, can actively participate in its planning and development, and, more broadly, how can an event rooted in a profit-oriented business model evolve – without compromising its legitimate economic objectives – into a platform for genuine community engagement and a catalyst for sustainable practices benefiting the populations directly affected by its impacts?

Therefore, emphasizing the importance of adopting a continuous and participatory methodological approach to impact evaluation is crucial. One can foster a genuine communicative space only by maintaining sustained involvement of participants and community members, rather than relying on isolated or sporadic assessments (Kemmis et al., 2014), endowing large-scale events with community-based attributes. Such an approach may contribute to a paradigm shift in event planning and development, transforming major festivals like MEO Sudoeste into genuinely sustainable tourism experiences that respect and enhance the communities in which they take place.

The findings are based on two studies of a single festival within a specific cultural and geographic context, which readers must consider when reflecting on the results' generalizability. Furthermore, while participatory methodologies provide rich qualitative insights, they are under the inherent influence of the perspectives and engagement levels of the stakeholders involved, which may influence the potential added value of such approaches. Despite these limitations, the principles and reflections derived from this research offer valuable guidance for

applying participatory and CBT-aligned approaches in other contexts, while underscoring the need for context-specific adaptation and ongoing evaluation.

Overall, this article underscores the potential of participatory action research to strengthen community engagement, enhance event sustainability, and advance the broader objectives of CBT. By systematically integrating these approaches into event impact assessments, organizers can design events that are not only economically viable but also socially responsible and closely connected to the communities and territories in which they take place.

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

This research was funded by FCT – Foundation for Science and Technology, I.P. (Portugal), within the scope of the project UIDB/04647/2020 of CICS.NOVA – Interdisciplinary Centre of Social Sciences of Universidade Nova de Lisboa and within the scope of the project UIDB/04470/2023 with DOI 10.54499/UIDB/04470/2023, CiTUR – Center for Tourism Research, Development and Innovation.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Institutional and Territorial Drivers of Rural Social Enterprise Ecosystems: Evidence from Finland

Harri Kostilainen, Jari Karjalainen

Abstract: **Background:** This article investigates the interplay between institutional frameworks and territorial conditions in shaping the development of rural social enterprise (RSE) ecosystems in Finland.

Research objectives: Comparative case analysis across three regions, i.e., Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu, identified key configurations of governance structures, socio-economic conditions, and infrastructural dynamics that enable or constrain RSEs' emergence and sustainability.

Research design and methods: Drawing on document analysis, 9 semi-structured interviews, and one expert panel, plus regional statistics, we triangulated findings across three Finnish regions to explicate the configurations that shape RSE ecosystem formation. The research introduces the concept of institutional–territorial fit to explain the varied trajectories of ecosystem formation.

Results: The findings show that successful RSE ecosystems are contingent on multi-level institutional coordination, place-based adaptability, and civic engagement.

Conclusions: The article concludes with strategic recommendations for fostering resilient, inclusive, and territorially embedded social enterprise ecosystems.

Keywords: rural social enterprise, institutional support, ecosystem development, regional policy, Finland

JEL Codes: L31, R11, O35

Suggested citation:

Kostilainen, H. & Karjalainen, J. (2025). Institutional and territorial drivers of rural social enterprise ecosystems: Evidence from Finland. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 137–151. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.09>

1. Introduction

Rural regions in Europe are facing increasingly complex social and economic challenges, including depopulation, aging demographics, service centralization, youth outmigration, and economic restructuring. In the Finnish context, geographic remoteness, climate-related vulnerabilities, and disparities in access to welfare services further compound these issues. In this landscape, social enterprises have emerged as promising actors capable of delivering public value while mobilizing local resources in innovative ways. By operating at the intersection of market mechanisms, civic engagement, and public policy, rural social enterprises (RSEs) offer new modes of organizing economic and social activities grounded in local needs and values.

However, despite their growing relevance, the development of RSEs in rural Finland remains fragmented and uneven. While national strategies and EU-level frameworks increasingly recognize the social economy, the actual materialization of supportive ecosystems varies widely across regions. This results not only from differences in institutional capacity or funding avail-

ability but also from the particularities of local governance traditions, territorial identity, civic engagement, and infrastructural connectivity.

We sought to understand how institutional frameworks and territorial conditions co-shape the emergence and evolution of RSE ecosystems. We introduce the concept of *institutional–territorial fit* to assess how well governance structures align with the socio-economic and cultural fabric of rural areas. Our goal was twofold. First, we aimed to develop a comparative analytical framework that would capture the interdependencies between institutional and territorial variables. Second, we aimed to apply this framework empirically in three Finnish regions, i.e., Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu, which exemplify different ecosystem configurations. By situating this research within broader discourses on rural innovation, social economy, and place-based development, we aimed to contribute to both theoretical refinement and policy relevance in rural ecosystem studies.

Empirically, we combined regional strategy and EU programming documents, administrative statistics, and key-informant interviews/panel data (Tables 1–3) to ensure source triangulation. Conceptually, we used this evidence to elaborate the notion of *institutional–territorial fit* as a diagnostic lens rather than to advance prescriptive claims.

We position this study at the intersection of social enterprise ecosystem research and place-based rural development (e.g., Eversole et al., 2014; Olmedo & O’Shaughnessy, 2022; Olmedo et al., 2023), while drawing on strategy-oriented ecosystem frameworks to structure interdependencies (Moore, 1993; Adner, 2016). We aimed to apply a comparative analytical framework, integrating structural and lifecycle ecosystem perspectives, to diagnose institutional–territorial fit across three regions, rather than to claim a fully formalized new theory.

We conducted this study as part of the activities of the Centre of Expertise for Social Enterprises (n.d.), supported by the Improving business conditions for social enterprises coordination project (ESF+). The project aims to strengthen regional ecosystems for social enterprises and the social economy, promote social innovation, support the employment of people with partial work ability and others in disadvantaged labor market positions, compile and produce knowledge on social enterprises, and raise awareness of social entrepreneurship.

The article is organized as follows. First, we provide a literature review that contextualizes rural social enterprise ecosystems within debates on rural development, the social economy, and ecosystem thinking. This review motivates our focus on the interplay between institutional and territorial conditions. Next, we introduce our analytical framework and define the concept of institutional–territorial fit and its key dimensions. Then, we outline the research design, case selection (Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu), data sources, and analytical strategy. After that, we present descriptive results for each region. Finally, we synthesize cross-case patterns, interpret differences in ecosystem configurations and life-cycle positioning, and clarify the article’s conceptual contribution in the discussion section. In the conclusion, we summarize implications for policy and practice, indicate limitations, and suggest avenues for further research.

2. Literature Review

Finnish RSEs have emerged at the intersection of cooperative traditions, work integration, and public sector reform, addressing unemployment, demographic decline, and service gaps through locally embedded, cross-sector innovations (Kostilainen & Pättiniemi, 2016; Kostilainen et al., 2021; Perikangas et al., 2024). Community-based RSEs contribute to place-based social innovation by fostering participatory governance, spatial justice, and new forms of coop-

eration (Rinne-Koski & Lähdesmäki, 2024). Regional policies, welfare restructuring, and traditions of self-help have shaped these enterprises as institutional innovations (Kostilainen, 2019).

Despite their potential, RSEs face structural and institutional barriers that limit their contribution to community resilience and local vitality. Their legitimacy as service providers remains contested, as municipal actors often prioritize economic efficiency and regulatory compliance over recognizing the broader social value these enterprises create (Rinne-Koski & Lähdesmäki, 2024). A fragmented ecosystem that offers “limited access to tailored finance, support structures, and visibility” compounds this challenge, even though rural areas present “fertile ground for social enterprises due to market failures and service gaps” (European Commission, 2019, p. 53).

Opportunities to strengthen RSEs include enhancing municipal cooperation, reforming public procurement practices, and developing innovative financing instruments such as social impact bonds. Finland’s Strategy for Social Enterprises identifies the need to “strengthen the operating conditions of social enterprises, increase their numbers, develop their competencies, and boost the employment of persons with partial work ability or otherwise disadvantaged” (Strategy for Social Enterprises, 2022, p. 6). However, it does not explicitly integrate RSEs into broader security or resilience frameworks.

Finland’s security environment is changing, marked by growing geopolitical uncertainty, hybrid threats, and reforms to the welfare system. In this context, it is crucial to align the RSEs’ development with regional, social, and vitality policies to strengthen preparedness and protect critical societal functions. Embedding social enterprise development within regional innovation and employment ecosystems could strengthen societal resilience through economic inclusion, local agency, and service continuity, while advancing community-level capacity-building.

Scholars define social enterprises by their pursuit of social goals through market-based activities (e.g., Defourny & Nyssens, 2017). In Finland, the Strategy for Social Enterprises defines a social enterprise as “a business that pursues commercial activities to achieve its societal objective and uses most of its profits or surpluses to promote this primary objective, as laid down in its articles of association or statutes. In addition, a social enterprise emphasizes responsibility, openness, and transparency in its activities, as well as inclusion and democracy in its administrative model.” In Finland, a social enterprise may adopt any legal form governed by private law. It must operate as an independent legal entity with a business ID and be registered in the Trade Register maintained by the Finnish Patent and Registration Office. (Strategy for Social Enterprises, 2022, pp. 17–18).

In rural contexts, social enterprises frequently serve as a corrective to market and state failures by addressing service gaps, promoting local employment, and enhancing social cohesion. (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019, p. 148). Notably, RSEs frequently fulfil very specific needs in communities by providing local services that commercial rural businesses might not supply, thus addressing rural market failures through their ability to mobilize a wider mix of resources from cohesive local communities (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 134). When treated as a safety net to fill gaps left by state retrenchment and market inequalities, RSEs can play a critical role in mitigating these failures. However, there is a risk they could inadvertently reinforce inequalities if relied upon excessively without adequate support (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017, p. 6). In their research, Steiner and Teasdale (2019) discuss the collective and collaborative nature of RSEs in Europe, their community involvement, and warn about the risks of reinforcing inequality when filling gaps left by the state or market. They highlight RSEs’ integrated role in addressing local

issues, the need for policy integration beyond silo approaches, and the importance of collaboration and tailored support to realize their full potential.

Furthermore, RSEs generate local employment opportunities and help keep money circulating within rural areas, and reduce the need for long-distance commuting, which is especially important in remote areas with limited job availability (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 131). Moreover, RSEs bolster community cohesion by drawing on and stimulating voluntary and collaborative community culture. They create opportunities for volunteering and support vulnerable groups, leading to greater social sustainability and intergenerational interactions within rural settings (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 132). They embody integrated approaches to local rural development by combining economic, social, and environmental goals, thus contributing inclusively and sustainably to rural areas (Defourny & Nyssens, 2017, p. 6). Framing RSEs within the concept of a wellbeing economy enables a broader understanding of their value beyond economic indicators, emphasizing their role in cultivating sustainable and equitable development (Roy, 2021). The embeddedness of RSEs in community life, their participatory governance structures, and their hybrid financing models allow them to generate multi-dimensional value (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 134). However, structural constraints, including scarce financial capital, lack of professional networks, and limited access to capacity-building resources, often limit their potential (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 133). The literature highlights the importance of tailored support and policies to enable these social enterprises to effectively address rural challenges that the market and state fail to resolve (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019, pp. 145–146). According to Davies et al. (2019), local strategic institutional responsiveness and support-structure coherence at the regional scale could improve RSE capacities.

The concept of ecosystems has gained prominence in both entrepreneurship and innovation studies as a means of understanding the complex environments in which enterprises develop. Ecosystems are typically conceptualized as systems of interrelated actors, institutions, infrastructures, and practices that collectively shape the conditions for enterprise creation, growth, and impact (Perikangas et al., 2024). In the context of social enterprises, key ecosystem components include support organizations, policy frameworks, funding institutions, educational bodies, and informal civic networks. We approach the social enterprise ecosystem as a multifaceted network of interconnected actors and institutions that together enable social enterprises to generate social value, sustain operations, and scale their impact.

Analytical framework

We integrated a structural view of ecosystems (alignment among interdependent actors) with a temporal/lifecycle view (emergence–transition–consolidation). We termed their alignment within specific rural contexts as institutional–territorial fit. We operationalized institutional–territorial fit along three dimensions drawn from prior sections of the review: (1) institutional responsiveness, (2) support-structure coherence, and (3) civic mobilization capacity.

In rural contexts, these ecosystems tend to be fragmented or emergent, characterized by weak institutionalisation and reliance on informal coordination. Simultaneously, rural ecosystems may exhibit distinctive strengths, such as trust-based networks, cultural cohesion, and traditions of local problem-solving (Eversole et al., 2014; Gao & Psenner, 2024). Moore (1993) and Adner (2016) provide complementary frameworks for analyzing such ecosystems. Moore's model emphasizes the temporal dynamics of ecosystems as co-evolving communities that progress through stages of birth, expansion, leadership, and renewal. In contrast, Adner offers a structural lens, focusing on how interdependent actors align and coordinate to create and

capture value. Applied together, these frameworks illuminate how rural social enterprise ecosystems evolve through emergent, transitional, and consolidation phases shaped by institutional arrangements, actor interdependencies, and territorial conditions.

In rural settings, these components are often unevenly developed. Scholars frequently describe rural ecosystems as emergent or fragmented, characterized by weak institutionalization and reliance on informal coordination. However, they may also possess strengths not found in urban areas, such as trust-based networks, cultural cohesion, and a tradition of local problem-solving (Eversole et al., 2014, p. 246; Gao & Psenner, 2024, pp. 7–15).

Although scholars have studied institutions and territories extensively, their interplay remains under-theorized in social enterprise literature (Steiner & Teasdale, 2019; Richter, 2019; Eversole et al., 2014). Institutions, defined broadly as formal and informal rules, norms, and organizations, shape the incentives, capabilities, and legitimacy of social enterprises (North, 1991; Rodríguez-Pose, 2013). We use here territory in a pragmatic, place-based sense that bridges administrative boundedness and lived relational space: bounded governance arenas, e.g., regions, where socio-economic structures, cultural identities, and policy competences interact to shape enterprise conditions (Paasi, 2002; Massey, 2004). This usage aligns our comparative units, i.e., Finnish regions, with their policy remit, while recognizing relational rural dynamics described in the literature (Paasi, 2002; Massey, 2004). The concept of institutional–territorial fit integrates these dimensions by asking whether institutional designs are responsive to and reflective of territorial specificities (Folke et al., 2007).

We argue that institutional–territorial fit constitutes a critical determinant of ecosystem functionality. It allows one to assess whether governance frameworks are appropriately tailored to the unique challenges and assets of different rural regions. High institutional–territorial fit implies coherence between strategic intent, operational capacity, and civic realities; low fit denotes dissonance, policy failure, or underutilization of local potential.

Existing studies have highlighted the importance of institutional support and local embeddedness in social enterprise development, yet few have operationalized these concepts in a comparative and territorially grounded way. This study addresses this gap by introducing a heuristic framework of institutional–territorial fit and applying it across three distinct Finnish rural regions. Our contribution is threefold: conceptual, empirical, and strategic. We offer a novel framework that integrates institutional and territorial analysis to explain ecosystem formation. We present rich qualitative data from three regions that reflect varying levels of institutional maturity and civic engagement. Moreover, we translated our findings into actionable policy recommendations for enhancing rural ecosystem functionality.

3. Research Method and Material

We adopted a comparative qualitative case study design to examine configurational conditions rather than to estimate population parameters. This approach is appropriate where phenomena are institutionally embedded and multi-level by construction. We employed a comparative qualitative case study approach to investigate the institutional and territorial dimensions of rural social enterprise ecosystems in Finland. We selected three regions, i.e., Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu, based on their distinct socio-economic characteristics, institutional capacities, and varying degrees of engagement with the social economy. These regions represent a spectrum of rural contexts, from peripheral and sparsely populated territories to more economically diversified and administratively developed areas. The principle of maxi-

imum variation guided the selection, as we aimed to capture diverse configurations of ecosystem development. We analyzed Finnish regions (NUTS-3) because regional councils hold statutory strategy-setting and EU-fund programming roles that shape support instruments for RSEs (e.g., Lapland Agreement 2022–2025; Satakunta Strategy 2022–2025; Kainuu Programme 2021; Finland’s 2021–2027 EU Regional and Structural Policy Programme). This governance remit makes the regional scale probative for institutional–territorial fit, while we explicitly noted intra-regional heterogeneity as a limitation.

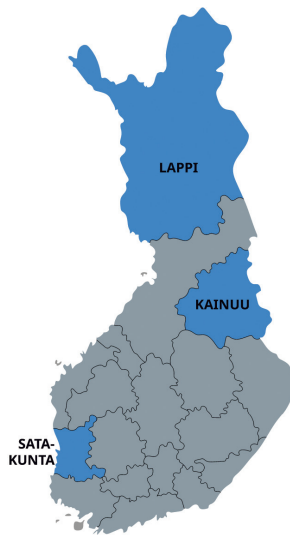


Figure 1. Map of Finland and regions of the study (Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu)

We assessed institutional–territorial fit via three dimensions: (1) institutional responsiveness (explicit RSE/social-economy objectives and instruments in regional/EU strategy documents; procurement provisions), (2) support-structure coherence (presence/role of anchor institutions, intermediaries, and coordination mechanisms), and (3) civic mobilization capacity (evidence of cooperative traditions, participatory planning, grassroots initiatives). We coded evidence from document sources, interview transcripts, and regional statistics presented in Tables 1–3.

We drew data from multiple sources to enable triangulation and deepen contextual understanding. First, we analyzed policy and planning documents to identify formal institutional arrangements, strategic priorities, and funding instruments relevant to the development of social enterprises. These included regional development strategies, European structural fund programming documents and guidelines, national-level frameworks for social entrepreneurship, and guidelines on public procurement. The document analysis provided a foundational understanding of the policy environment and institutional architecture in each region, including insights into funding allocations and stated institutional priorities.

Table 1. Document analysis

Data source	Document analysis
Regional development strategies	Lappisopimus 2022-2025 (2022). (Lapland agreement. Provincial programme of Lapland 2022–2025) Satakunta-strategia (2021). (Satakunta Regional Strategy) Kainuu-ohjelma (2021). (Kainuu Programme)
European structural fund programming documents and guidelines	Innovation and skills in Finland 2021–2027 EU regional and structural policy programme. (2023) Proposal for a council recommendation on developing social economy framework conditions (2023)
National-level frameworks for social entrepreneurship	Strategy for social enterprises (2022)
Guidelines on public procurement	Laki julkisista hankinnoista ja käyttöoikeus-sopimuksista 1397/2016. (Act on Public Procurement and Concession Agreements)

Source: Own elaboration.

Second, we conducted semi-structured interviews and a group panel with key informants, including regional development officers and representatives of intermediary organizations. The interviews explored perceptions of institutional responsiveness, ecosystem coordination, resource availability, and challenges faced by RSEs. We selected informants through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure coverage of both formal institutional actors and grassroots practitioners. Given limited interview numbers, we treated qualitative insights as explanatory illustrations triangulated with documentary/statistical evidence, not as population prevalence. The interviews allowed for the exploration of tacit knowledge and practitioner perspectives that are often absent from official documents.

Table 2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews	Data source	
Individual interviews	Six (6) representatives of intermediary organizations	
Group panel	Four (4) national and regional development officers	Three (3) representatives of intermediary organizations

Source: Own elaboration.

Third, we utilized statistical and demographic data from national databases to contextualize the territorial features of each region. We reviewed indicators such as population density, age structure, labor market dynamics, education levels, and migration patterns to assess the socio-spatial environment within which RSEs operate. Furthermore, we analyzed indicators of disadvantages, such as long-term unemployment, youth exclusion, low income, and reliance on social assistance to capture social vulnerability dimensions. This data provided an empirical grounding for understanding the opportunities and constraints shaped by territorial conditions.

Table 3. Statistics and databases

Data source	Statistics and databases
Statistic Finland	Key figures on population by region Migration between regions by level of education, age group, and sex Establishments of enterprises by industry and region
Statistics of Regional Councils	Lapin liitto, (2025) Lapin tilanne- ja kehityskuva 2024 (Situation and development in Lapland) Satakunnan alue-ennakointi ja aluetieto (Satakunta region forecasting and regional information) Tilastoja ja tilannekuva Kainuusta 2/2025 (Kainuu in Statistics)
Other statistics and databases	Disadvantage in Finland map site Data on Social Enterprises (Finnish social enterprise data and statistics site) Project information service for the European Union's region and structure policy for the program period 2021–2027

Source: Own elaboration.

The analytical strategy combines inductive and deductive elements in an abductive research logic. We operationalized the concept of *institutional–territorial fit* through three inter-related dimensions. These dimensions informed both the coding of interview transcripts and the synthesis of findings across cases. Rather than seeking to establish causal generalizations, the analysis aimed to uncover patterns of alignment and misalignment between institutions and territories that can inform both theory-building and policy design.

4. Results

In this section, we report descriptive results, indicating a source for each statement. Notably, we reserve interpretive analysis for discussion.

Regional context

Lapland, Satakunta, and Kainuu are three distinct yet comparable regions in Finland that face structural challenges related to demographic change, economic transition, and service provision in rural contexts (Establishments of enterprises by industry and region 2018–2023; Key figures on population by region 1990–2024; Migration between regions by level of education, age group and sex, 2005–2023). Across all three, indicators such as long-term unemployment, youth exclusion, low income, and reliance on social assistance point to varying levels of social disadvantage (Disadvantage in Finland map site). Satakunta showed a mixed profile: overall disadvantage was lower than in Lapland or Kainuu, but remained above the national average (Disadvantage in Finland map site). In each region, social enterprises and social-economy organizations contribute to mitigating exclusion, supporting employment integration, and sustaining essential services where market and state provision are limited (Data on Social Enterprises, n.d.)

Lapland

Lapland is Finland's northernmost and largest region, with approximately 175,000 inhabitants. The population is concentrated in a few urban centers, and most of the territory consists of sparsely populated rural and wilderness areas (Lapin liitto, 2025). The regional economy includes tourism, forestry, mining, metal processing, and growing bioeconomy and clean-tech-

nology activities (Lapin liitto, 2025). Tourism plays a major role year-round, leveraging unique natural environments and cultural heritage (Lapin liitto, 2025). Demographic challenges include population decline and ageing, workforce shortages, and difficulties maintaining access to basic services in remote areas (Lapin liitto, 2025). Disadvantage indicators (e.g., youth unemployment, low income, long-term reliance on social assistance) are among the highest in Finland, particularly in remote municipalities (Disadvantage in Finland map site). Universities and universities of applied sciences provide innovation support, entrepreneurship services, and workforce training tailored to regional needs (Universities Act (558/2009); Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014)). In 2020, there were approximately 112 social enterprises in Lapland, spanning WISEs, cooperatives, cultural associations, and sports clubs encompassing activities like social and health care, rehabilitation, assisted living, daycare, and cultural services (Data on Social Enterprises, n.d.)

Satakunta

Satakunta has roughly 210,000 inhabitants and combines industrial cities undergoing structural transformation with an extensive rural area (Satakuntastrategia, 2021). The economy is traditionally based on machinery, metal, forestry, chemistry, food production, and marine sectors, with recent shifts toward innovative technologies, the bio- and circular economy (Satakuntastrategia, 2021). Demographic challenges include a slowing population growth rate and ageing (Satakunnan alue-ennakointi ja aluetieto, n.d.). While urban centers perform well, some rural and industrial localities report elevated youth unemployment and pockets of low income (Disadvantage in Finland map site). Higher education institutions support regional development and the ongoing economic transition (Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014)). In 2020, there were 108 social enterprises operating across housing services, care, rehabilitation, education, book publishing, and industrial production (Data on Social Enterprises, n.d.).

Kainuu

Kainuu is a sparsely populated rural region with approximately 70,000 inhabitants (Kainuu ohjelma, 2021). Tourism, technology industries, the bioeconomy, and mining drive its economy (Kainuu ohjelma, 2021). Demographic and labor-market challenges include decline and ageing, labor availability constraints, and the need to preserve essential services across dispersed settlements (Tilastoja ja tilannekuva Kainuusta, 2025). Kainuu records high levels of long-term unemployment and youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (Disadvantage in Finland map site). Higher education institutions contribute to regional development and responses to socio-economic challenges (Universities of Applied Sciences Act (932/2014)). In 2020, there were 70 social enterprises, including sports clubs, WISEs, and labor cooperatives, active in service housing for the elderly, rehabilitation facilities, and children's daycare centers (Data on Social Enterprises, n.d.).

5. Discussion

This section synthesizes the interpretive analysis in three parts: (i) institutional–territorial fit by region (life-cycle positioning), (ii) cross-regional themes, and (iii) the study's conceptual contribution.

Institutional–territorial fit and life-cycle positioning by region

Lapland exemplifies a proactive-peripheral ecosystem. Despite demographic decline and remoteness, coordinated strategies and inclusive governance have enabled a relatively robust support environment. Regional development frameworks integrate social-economy goals, and the University of Lapland and Lapland University of Applied Sciences function as likely anchor institutions. The inclusion of Indigenous Sámi communities enhances civic legitimacy and embed social enterprises in culturally grounded practices. Enterprises operate across eldercare, youth services, and cultural production, reportedly benefiting from targeted procurement and capacity-building. Taken together, these features suggest a position approaching consolidation on an ecosystem life-cycle continuum.

Satakunta appears to represent a *capable-fragmented* ecosystem. Strong administrative capacity and a diversified economy coexist with limited coordination mechanisms specific to RSEs. While selected municipalities and organizations show interest, the lack of a shared vision and relatively weak institutional linkages, particularly with higher education, indicates under-used potential and constrained policy responsiveness. This configuration may be consistent with a transitional life-cycle position.

Kainuu appears to illustrate an *experimental-constrained* configuration. Formal support structures remain comparatively limited, and economic vulnerability persists, yet civic engagement and grassroots innovation look pronounced. Local actors have initiated community-based services, cooperatives, and participatory planning models. Meanwhile, adaptive governance and trust-based networks suggest an enabling environment in formation. Recent national coordination projects indicate strengthening institutional presence and a potential pathway toward consolidation. This profile is consistent with an emergent/early-growth life-cycle position.

Table 4. Institutional-territorial fit

	Institutional – territorial		
	Lapland	Satakunta	Kainuu
Ecosystem	Proactive-peripheral	Capable-fragmented	Experimental-constrained configuration

Source: Own elaboration.

Cross-regional Themes

Across the cases, four themes recur and shape interpretation, namely institutional coherence and policy responsiveness, anchor institutions, civic infrastructure, and inclusive procurement and finance.

Institutional coherence and policy responsiveness are associated with ecosystem maturity through coherent regional strategies and cross-sector collaboration. Lapland's arrangements suggest such alignment, Satakunta's capacity seems underleveraged due to fragmentation, and Kainuu compensates through governance experimentation and civic agency. This pattern is consistent with neo-endogenous development logics that foreground the interplay of local agency and institutional structures (Eversole et al., 2014, pp. 247–248; Olmedo & O'Shaughnessy, 2022, p. 1205; Olmedo et al., 2023, pp. 17–18).

Anchor institutions play pivotal intermediary roles: higher-education actors in Lapland contribute to knowledge transfer and coordination; civic actors in Kainuu frequently assume intermediary functions; and Satakunta exhibits comparatively weak linkages between innovation infrastructures and RSE development. These patterns align with prior research on policy alignment and the catalytic role of universities (Mazzucato, 2018, p. 807; Perikangas et al., 2024, p. 355; Ricket et al., 2023, p. 11).

Civic infrastructure varies markedly, as Kainuu's cooperative traditions and participatory planning appear to bolster viability, Lapland's Indigenous networks provide cultural anchoring, and Satakunta, despite stronger economic conditions, seems to exhibit weaker civic mobilization in this domain.

Inclusive procurement and finance likewise differ, with social-value procurement in Lapland appearing to open markets for RSEs, whereas more rigid procurement frameworks in Satakunta and Kainuu seem to limit opportunities for engagement with public services.

Table 5. Cross-regional themes

	Cross-regional themes		
	Lapland	Satakunta	Kainuu
Institutional coherence and policy responsiveness	Inclusive regional strategies and cross-sector collaboration suggest supportive alignment	Capacity appears underleveraged due to fragmented strategies.	Compensates with governance experimentation and civic agency
Anchor institutions	HEIs facilitate knowledge transfer and coordination	Lack of effective bridges between innovation infrastructure and RSE development	Intermediary roles often filled by civic actors
Civic infrastructure	Indigenous networks provide cultural/community anchoring	Weaker civic mobilization	Cooperative traditions and participatory planning bolster viability
Inclusive procurement and financing tools	Social-value procurement appears to open markets	Rigid frameworks seem to limit engagement	Rigid frameworks seem to limit engagement

Source: Own elaboration.

Life-cycle Positioning

Applying ecosystem life-cycle perspectives (Moore, 1993; Adner, 2016), we may situate the three regions along a development continuum: Kainuu as emergent, Satakunta as transitional, and Lapland approaching consolidation. Each stage likely requires tailored policy instruments, ranging from seed funding and intermediary support to procurement reform (van Twuijver et al., 2020, p. 133).

RSE Functions and Institutional Change

Across cases, empirical materials suggest that RSEs act as adaptive agents, deploying hybrid models to address service fragmentation and demographic challenges (Steinerowski & Steinerowska-Streb, 2012). Illustrative examples include eldercare cooperatives, youth employment hubs, and community-based enterprises that reflect institutional bricolage, repurposing local resources and norms to address systemic gaps (Di Domenico et al., 2010). In Lapland, RSEs appear to co-produce public services and may innovate governance arrangements, which is

consistent with the shift from service substitution to institutional innovation (Pestoff, 2012, pp. 1116–1117). Despite these advances, infrastructural disparities appear to persist: while regional hubs such as Rovaniemi, Kajaani, and Pori support hybrid models, remote areas face logistical and digital constraints, consistent with findings on the infrastructural dependency of rural social innovation (Richter, 2019, pp. 181–185; Biggeri et al., 2017, p. 301). Access to funding appears uneven. Although EU instruments are formally available, limited intermediary capacity seems to hinder effective uptake and may stall ecosystem maturation (Kostilainen, 2019). Addressing this would likely require embedded support systems and context-sensitive finance.

Conceptual Contribution: Institutional–Territorial Fit

We suggest institutional–territorial fit as a diagnostic lens capturing the alignment between support structures and regional conditions. In Lapland, a strong fit appears to enable embedded RSE development. In Satakunta, institutional disconnection seems to inhibit impact. In Kainuu, civic mobilization and policy openness indicate scope for strategic improvement. Overall, embedding institutional–territorial fit within place-based development theory is consistent with a holistic account of how institutional arrangements might evolve in response to territorial realities to foster inclusive rural innovation.

6. Conclusions and Strategic Implications

The evidence suggests that the effectiveness of rural social enterprise ecosystems in Finland turns on the institutional–territorial fit between support structures and regional conditions. Lapland appears to be approaching consolidation, Satakunta seems to be in transition, and Kainuu is consistent with an emergent phase. Across cases, ecosystem trajectories appear to be shaped by institutional coherence, the presence of anchor intermediaries, civic infrastructures, and the openness of procurement and finance to hybrid models.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that progress is most likely where strategies, intermediaries, and community capabilities align with place-specific realities. Existing practices already visible in the regions, i.e., knowledge brokerage by universities, cooperative traditions, indigenous and civic networks, and selective use of social-value commissioning, suggest workable pathways for strengthening ecosystems without relying on wholesale system change. Incremental alignment around these elements appears feasible and is consistent with cumulative learning over time.

Overall, the findings point to a cautiously optimistic outlook. Even with demographic headwinds and uneven infrastructures, the combination of local agency and adaptive institutional arrangements indicates room for steady improvement. By recognizing life-cycle positions and leveraging existing assets, rural regions may continue to evolve more coherent, resilient, and inclusive ecosystems that support social innovation and community wellbeing.

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All authors made: conceptualization, writing, original draft preparation, writing, review and editing, supervision. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

The authors acknowledge the contributions of regional stakeholders and thank the interview participants and policy experts who informed the empirical analysis.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Improving Business Conditions for Social Enterprises coordination project (ESF+), which co-funded this study. The research was conducted as part of the activities of the Centre of Expertise for Social Enterprises, Finland. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union, the European Commission, or the funding authority. The European Union and the funding authority bear no responsibility for the content of this publication

Conflict of Interest

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

Land Tenure and Population Exchange: *Intermarginal Disintegration* in the Ormánság

Attila Palancsa

Abstract: **Background:** The study explores the demographic and social challenges in peripheral rural regions shaped by a self-restrictive “one-child strategy” among the Reformed majority and the long-standing exclusion of Roma communities, leading to cumulative marginalization.

Research objectives: The main objective of this study is to introduce the concept of intermarginal disintegration to elucidate how overlapping forms of social, ethnic, and demographic marginality exacerbate crises in peripheral regions.

Research design and methods: The research is grounded in a qualitative approach combining content analysis of secondary sources, historical documents, and selected demographic indicators. The Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index (SEK-index) was developed as a composite measure to integrate five dimensions of socio-ethnic exclusion.

Results: The findings indicate that classical core-periphery models are insufficient to capture the complex and interrelated marginalization processes affecting the region.

Conclusions: The proposed framework provides novel insights into the process of rural social restructuring. It offers analytical support for the development of more effective social and regional policies that are aimed at promoting long-term recovery in peripheral regions.

Keywords: intermarginal disintegration, rural marginality, Roma communities, one-child strategy, composite SEK-index

JEL Codes: R11, R23, J15, Z13

Suggested citation:

Palancsa, A. (2025). Land tenure and population exchange: *Intermarginal disintegration* in the Ormánság. *Social Entrepreneurship Review*, 2, 152–173. <https://doi.org/10.15678/SER.2025.2.10>

1. Introduction

The Ormánság region of South Transdanubia is one of the most marginalized areas in Hungary. Its social and demographic decline has been recognized for decades yet remains an underexplored research problem. The region’s distinctive features – its dense network of small villages, geographical isolation, and ethnic diversity – make it particularly suitable for examining processes of intergenerational decline and rural marginalization.

The study focuses on the historical phenomenon known as the “one-child strategy,” a Reformed inheritance strategy in which families deliberately had only one heir to avoid the fragmentation of land. While this practice initially reflected economic rationality and social prudence, it gradually led to long-term depopulation, the weakening of community ties, and a transformation of the local ethnic composition. The legacy of this self-restrictive strategy,

combined with later structural disadvantages, continues to shape the demographic and social realities of the region.

The research aims to uncover how these intertwined historical and cultural patterns have contributed to Ormánság's contemporary status as an "internal periphery." Using qualitative and secondary data – historical sources, census statistics, and local case studies – the study explores the social norms behind the one-child system and their long-term effects on population structure and community reproduction.

Ormánság is situated in the southern part of Baranya County, along the Drava River, in the vicinity of Sellye and Vajszló. It consists of more than fifty small settlements where population decline, ageing, and social marginalization have persisted for decades. The region's settlement structure was consolidated after the Ottoman occupation and the 18th-century resettlement, but its exclusion from modernization left it with severe infrastructural and economic disadvantages.

Geographical conditions – such as sandy and clayey soil, floodplain farming constraints, and recurring floods – were unfavorable to industrialization and large-scale agriculture. During state socialism, local employment was maintained by collective farms, forestry, and public institutions, but these were not replaced by competitive opportunities after the political transition. Small and medium-sized enterprises lacked sufficient capacity, and by the 2000s, public employment had become the main livelihood source.

According to data from the Ős-Dráva Programme area (2019–2020), the employment rate was 55.2% and the activity rate 63.7%, meaning that over 13% of the working-age population had no job at all. This points not to temporary disruption but to a deep, long-term structural crisis (Központi Statisztikai Hivatal, 2021).

In recent decades, a sharp social contrast has emerged between the ageing Reformed majority and the Roma population, which has become dominant among younger generations. This ethnic realignment results from both demographic differences (e.g., higher fertility) and migration. The symbolic and institutional presence of the Reformed community has gradually declined, while the Roma population remains concentrated in segregated, under-serviced areas.

Limited accessibility, poor transport, and deficits in education, healthcare, and digital infrastructure further reinforce social exclusion. High rates of early school leaving and the absence of educational or mentoring hubs exacerbate the situation, especially for young Roma people.

Overall, Ormánság has become an internal periphery in both geographic and socio-economic terms. The combined effects of historical legacies, missed modernization, economic contraction, and ethnic stratification have produced a unique developmental dead end that continues to drive the region into a spiral of social disintegration. Understanding this complex background is essential for interpreting both the long-term consequences of the one-child system and the contemporary challenges of Roma integration.

2. Literature Review

One of the most decisive historical factors in the demographic decline of the Ormánság is the phenomenon of the so-called "single-handedness," which can be interpreted not only as a set of family decisions but also as a collective social strategy. The predominantly Reformed population of the region consciously sought to pass on family land to a single descendant from the 18th century onwards, avoiding the impoverishment resulting from the fragmentation of land ownership. This practice was not only an economically rational but also a moral expecta-

tion: a family was considered honest if it could provide land and a vision for its children. The logic of inheritance was deeply embedded in religious and community norms. The biblical ideal of the “good farmer” played a central role in the Reformed faith, elevating the inheritance of wealth to a moral obligation as the earthly equivalent of maintaining divine order. Presbyteries, pastors, and local opinion leaders reinforced this practice with the folk wisdom “you can plow, but you don’t have to sow.” (Koloh, 2021). Following the community norm was also justified by the fact that families with many children often faced emigration and social declassification, while single-their families retained their wealth and status. However, this strategy caused a demographic distortion in the long term, from which the region could not recover. Population stagnation and then gradual decline can be observed from the 1890s, especially among the Reformed communities (Koloh, 2013). Communities aged, younger generations often left their homelands, and emigration resulted not only in an economic but also in a cultural vacuum. The consequences of single-handedness go beyond population processes. Church life, as a fundamental pillar of community cohesion, has now become dysfunctional in several settlements: merged congregations, abandoned churches, and increasingly infrequent services. In parallel, cultural heritage – family oral tradition, folk crafts, festive ceremonies – has also been disrupted. The connection between generations has weakened, and local identity has been pushed into the background, often associated with a sense of shame. The state of the built heritage is also an imprint of demographic and social decline. The adobe houses and wooden-towered churches left without heirs have begun to decay, and there are no community or state resources available to maintain them. Cultural memory and the power to shape identity have also faded: the younger generations’ attachment to the region has gradually ceased, while the Roma communities, whose population is growing proportionally, are starting to develop new forms of identity. Thus, single-handedness is not merely a historical peculiarity but a hidden social norm that disrupted the framework of communal reproduction in the long term and contributed to the internal social disintegration of the Ormánság. The strategy chosen to protect land ownership ultimately undermined the foundations of communal existence and generational continuity.

Family norms and communal ethos in rural societies

The peasant society of the Ormánság functioned not only as an economic organization, but also as a normative, value-based community. The concept of family did not only mean the nuclear family, but also an extended, multi-generational economic unit. Its internal norms – such as the division of labor, prestige-related honor, or the ethic of “contentment” – determined the life opportunities of the family members. The Reformed religious background and the resulting Puritan value system strongly influenced the functioning of the family. The role of the presbytery was not only a religious, but also a moral and disciplinary institution. Community control and the so-called “village public opinion” were crucial in shaping family norms. The order of marriages, the role of the elderly, the place of women in the division of labor, and patterns of family decision-making were closely aligned with the local ethos (Putnam, 2000). In this environment, having children was not a purely individual decision, but a strategy intertwined with social expectations and economic rationality. The social acceptance of single parenthood cannot therefore be understood without an understanding of the relationship between family and community.

Periphery theories and structural disintegration

The interpretation of the Ormánság as a social space cannot be separated from the processes of peripheral formation. The concept of periphery is used here not only in a geographical but also in a socio-structural and economic sense. According to Wallerstein's (1974) world-systems theory, peripheries depend on core regions and operate under their resource-extractive influence. While the theoretical framing of rural peripheries has been widely discussed in international literature, the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* also relates to notions such as *compound marginality* (Shucksmith, 2012) and double periphery (ESPON, 2017). These frameworks emphasize cumulative or multi-layered exclusion processes in rural Europe, where spatial, economic, and social disadvantages overlap. By situating intermarginal disintegration within this conceptual lineage, its novelty can be demonstrated as a model that captures not only additive but also mutually reinforcing forms of marginalization. This theoretical approach can also be applied to the Ormánság, especially considering the structural inequalities in infrastructure and land tenure that developed during the period of Dualism.

Theoretical background – research gap

International literature increasingly interprets rural poverty and exclusion not merely as an income deficit, but as a combination of spatial-access, institutional and relational deficits. The ESPON inner peripheries framework identifies the lack of access to essential services, the weakness of mobility and network connections, and the lack of coordination of multi-level (local-regional-national-EU) governance as structural causes (ESPON, 2017). The European Commission's 2040 rural vision links the same problem space to demographic decline, connectivity disadvantages, and resilience deficits, emphasizing the need for new indicators and coordinated policy trajectories (European Commission, 2024).

Woods (2019) describes the expansion of rural geography beyond agrarian and settlement foci, highlighting governance, cultural representations, and "invisible regions" alongside multi-scalar perspectives. Similarly, Shucksmith (2012) embeds rural inequalities in class and power relations and – together with Shucksmith et al. (2023, pp. 24–26) – draws attention to institutional barriers and the recalibration of support systems. The theme of temporality – crisis shocks and biographical/time schedule breaks – is also prominent: Shubin and McCollum (2021) show that the temporal flexibility of Central and Eastern European migrants is fragmented due to precarious employment and rural labor market characteristics, which can indirectly erode the relational and identity capital of peripheral areas.

In the post-socialist context, the Polish qualitative tradition provides detailed, micro-level descriptions of exclusion: Warzywoda-Kruszyńska & Kruszyński (2023) presents urban-industrial spaces of "enclaving" poverty, while Tarkowska (2013) analyzes patterns of deprivation within the family according to gender and age. In the institutional-legal dimension, Szarfenberg et al. (2020) describe the regulatory gaps and fragmentation of service access. On the methodological front of measurement, Łuczak & Kalinowski (2025) propose a fuzzy-hybrid MCDM approach for synthetic estimation of subjective poverty, emphasizing the role of past experiences and future expectations. Although the above directions adequately identify the main elements of the causal chains (access gaps, institutional fragmentation, demographic decline, temporal breaks, cultural-identity vulnerability), an integrated, micro-territorial decision support tool that combines them in a model and a composite indicator, and links it to an operationalizable intervention matrix, is missing. Most European frameworks operate at the NUTS level or coun-

try aggregation. Qualitative urban or regional case studies rarely reach the settlement, street network, or cohort level, nor do they offer priority rankings for local implementation.

This research gap is filled by the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* introduced by this study – a mutually reinforcing, feedback process of social and spatial marginalization – and the associated SEK-index, which quantifies the degree of disintegration by means of an indicator fusion of (R%, ESL, UΔ, DI, ISR) components. The novelty of the model is that:

- (1) it diagnoses at a micro-territorial level (Ormánság case), (2) it integrates the historical-cultural heritage (e.g., single-handedness, land ownership, and settlement structure) with the access-institutional dimensions in a single framework, (3) it makes feedback loops and path dependence explicit (service withdrawal ↔ emptying), and (4) it maps it directly onto an intervention matrix that generates prioritized, schedulable action proposals for multi-level governance actors.

Thus, the SEK-index is not only a diagnostic indicator, but also a local decision-support tool that operationalizes international theoretical-empirical insights in a particularly vulnerable, inner-peripheral Hungarian region.

Since the 1990s, international literature has been describing the dynamics of peripheries and exclusion using multidisciplinary and multi-scale (household-settlement-regional-European) approaches. Qualitative research at the urban and family levels shows that poverty is a spatial-social embeddedness, not merely an income deficit. Warzywoda-Kruszyńska & Kruszyński (2023) explored the “enclaving” poverty and its intergenerational legacy in the industrial districts of Łódź. Tarkowska (2013) highlights the gender and age differences in deprivation within households.

After the change of regime, socio-economic isolation in Hungary took a new form: the decline of agriculture, the narrowing of job opportunities and the reduction of state involvement were accompanied by disintegration. Adapting Wacquant’s (2008) concept of urban outcasts, we can speak of rural exclusion in the Ormánság, the deterioration of infrastructure (roads, public works) and the lack of state and civil presence. Together, these led to the creation of a kind of inner periphery, whose population was not only isolated but also symbolically devalued (Virág, 2006). The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* aims to capture precisely this multiple disadvantageous situation: a region that is both outside the development centers and inside its own, but dysfunctional, social logic.

Patterns of the Roma population

The demographic transformation of the Ormánság region is intricately linked to the change in the proportion of the Roma population. Since the 1990s, the Roma community has become an increasingly dominant player in local society, partly through natural increase and partly through internal migration. Based on the data for the settlements in the region, a clear trend can be observed, according to which the ageing and emigration of the non-Roma population has taken place in parallel with the spatial concentration of the Roma population (KSH, 2022). The table below summarizes the demographic and infrastructural data for the fifty-two settlements of the Ormánság for the period from 2011 to 2022. The table shows the change in the total population, the proportion of the Roma population, and the presence or absence of basic public services (doctor’s office, school, kindergarten, post office, railway). The data provides an opportunity to examine the extent and forms of marginalization at regional level, and their relationship with service provision and ethnic composition. The limited spatial and social mobility of the Roma population therefore contributes to the persistence of the intermarginal

situation of the Ormánság. In the region, not only the marginalization of the Roma population can be observed, but also the structural reproduction of ethnic differences.

Table 1 provides an empirical basis for the typological foundation of the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* and helps to identify the types of settlements where different marginalization patterns prevail.

Table 1. Infrastructural provision of the Ormánság

Settlement	Population 2013	Population/ 2022	Roma % 2011	Roma % 2022	Medical office	School	Kindergarten	Post	Railway
Besence	126	108	19.5	18.8	0	0	0	0	0
Bogdása	283	222	24.3	12.2	0	0	0	0	0
Csányoszró	677	538	11.8	14.0	0	1	1	0	0
Drávafok	509	438	26.8	18.0	1	1	1	0	0
Drávaiványi	220	154	69.3	36.8	0	0	0	0	0
Drávakeresztúr	99	115	16.7	15.7	0	0	0	0	0
Drávasztára	418	365	3.2	1.4	0	1	1	0	0
Felsőszentmárton	950	705	0.7	0.7	1	1	1	1	0
Gilvánfa	398	332	56.3	69.9	0	0	0	0	0
Gyöngyfa	140	138	36.8	29.7	0	0	0	0	0
Kákics	224	188	18.8	22.3	0	0	0	0	1
Királyegyháza	956	827	2.2	2.7	1	1	1	1	1
Kisasszonyfa	186	182	16.3	6.9	0	0	1	0	0
Magyarmecseke	324	290	19.8	14.4	0	1	1	1	0
Magyartelek	216	184	10.6	8.4	0	0	0	0	0
Markóc	72	64	23.4	14.5	0	0	0	0	0
Marócsa	104	71	39.6	21.2	0	0	0	0	0
Nagycsány	152	130	0.7	7.5	0	0	0	0	0
Okorág	173	139	29.9	27.1	0	0	0	0	0
Sellye	2727	2340	3.2	3.5	1	1	1	1	0
Sósvertike	169	149	15.0	36.4	0	0	0	0	0
Sumony	430	395	10.2	21.1	0	0	0	0	1
Adorjás	184	165	72.4	33.1	0	0	0	0	0
Baranyahídvég	188	174	36.2	31.0	0	0	0	0	0
Bogádmindszent	433	361	39.2	14.3	0	0	0	0	0
Cún	245	190	13.9	19.3	0	0	0	0	0
Dióviszló	695	600	13.9	28.9	1	1	1	1	0
Drávacsehi	208	154	13.1	8.7	0	0	0	0	0
Drávacsepey	209	186	7.3	3.7	0	0	0	0	0
Drávapiski	94	107	23.3	10.9	0	0	0	0	0
Drávaszerdahely	193	149	2.2	0.6	0	0	0	0	0
Hegyszentmárton	416	388	25.6	24.7	0	0	0	0	0
Hirics	238	231	45.6	21.3	0	0	0	0	0

Settlement	Popula- tion 2013	Popula- tion/ 2022	Roma % 2011	Roma % 2022	Medical office	School	Kinder- garten	Post	Railway
Ipacsa	194	189	n/a.	0.5	0	0	0	0	0
Kemse	56	51	6.8	n/a.	0	0	0	0	0
Kémes	499	419	0.8	8.0	1	1	1	1	0
Kisszentmárton	243	214	23.3	19.7	0	0	0	0	0
Kovácskida	283	222	8.2	3.0	0	0	0	0	0
Körös	220	163	10.2	4.5	0	0	0	0	0
Lúzsok	232	196	12.3	3.0	0	0	0	0	0
Ózdfalu	167	147	52.1	16.7	0	0	0	0	0
Páprád	158	136	5.1	6.9	0	0	0	0	0
Piskó	250	221	59.5	80.3	0	0	0	0	0
Rádfalva	187	187	8.3	3.1	0	0	0	0	0
Sámod	187	193	27.6	14.6	0	0	0	0	0
Szaporca	241	201	6.4	4.0	0	0	0	0	0
Tengeri	55	61	2.2	n/a.	0	0	0	0	0
Tésenfalva	192	151	4.7	16.1	0	0	0	0	0
Tésény	305	292	21.6	24.2	0	0	0	0	0
Vajszló	1821	1601	5.6	4.6	1	1	1	1	1
Vejtő	176	153	13.8	28.8	0	0	0	0	0
Zaláta	239	205	6.9	8.7	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Own compilation based on statistical data from settlement websites, 2025.

The data clearly illustrates the uneven distribution of public services across the 52 settlements. Villages with high Roma population shares, such as Gilvánfa or Piskó, show a complete lack of schools, kindergartens, or postal services, which supports the argument that infrastructural deprivation and ethnic segregation reinforce each other in the region.

However, the presence of Roma communities did not automatically lead to social integration. Segregated living environments, low educational attainment, and exclusion from the labor market characterize a significant part of this population (Kertesi & Kézdi, 2016; Kállai, 2019). For example, school segregation is not only a consequence but also a reproducerfactor of social exclusion (Virág, 2006).

Reflection – from the social legacy of one-child strategy to intermarginal disintegration

To integrate the social, historical, and spatial processes described above, it became necessary to create a new interpretative framework. The concepts of “inner periphery” and “structural disintegration” highlight some aspects of the social decline taking place in the Ormánság region, but they do not capture the complexity, especially the combination of ethnic components and historical heritage. In response to this problem, the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* was born, which refers to:

- spatial marginalization (lack of infrastructure, accessibility, services),
- social exclusion (unemployment, poverty, lack of education),
- and identity crisis (cultural cohesion, disintegration of community roles).

The concept aims to provide an integrative theoretical tool that helps to analyze regions in similar situations and contributes to the development of intervention strategies.

Intermarginal disintegration is therefore not only a descriptive but also an action-oriented category, which points out that the fate of the Ormánság cannot be separated from the responsibility of state, regional and local actors. The exploration of the historical practice of single-handedness points not only to demographic anomalies, but also to a deeper social legacy that played a role in laying the foundation for the region's subsequent structural degradation. Inheritance and family planning strategies ensured the unity of land ownership and the maintenance of social status for a long time (Koloh, 2013; Erdei, 1980), while at the same time gradually weakened the possibility of communal reproduction and generational continuity.

This process did not stop at population decline. The structural vacuum created by single-handedness – an aging population, disintegrating family chains, the withering away of communal spaces – developed patterns of social disintegration that over time became a self-perpetuating spiral. As posited by Virág (2006) and Kovai et al. (2025), economic and symbolic separation are concomitant phenomena in peripheral regions. The erosion of community identity, institutional crises, and reduced accessibility give rise to a state of social “external closure”.

The following chapter attempts to capture the typology of this social disintegration. The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* offers a new theoretical framework that can simultaneously interpret the region's confinement to the geographical periphery, its symbolic exclusion, and its internal social fault lines. According to Horváth (2018), the internal peripheries are characterized by a “structural densification” crisis formation, in which inherited social patterns and the lack of modernization strain the normative frameworks of local society. The introduction of the concept presented here is not only a descriptive category, but also a diagnostic tool that targets the structural conditions under which social reproduction becomes impossible.

Methodological positioning – theory and method development study

After presenting the theoretical and empirical background, the methodological positioning of the research follows, clarifying the genre and ethical framework of the present study, as well as the logic of developing the SEK-index. This manuscript is primarily of a theory and method development nature. Its aim is to systematically introduce the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* and to provide a conceptual and technical foundation for the SEK-index.

Phase I. Conceptual and index-building stage

In this genre, primary, qualitative fieldwork is not a prerequisite, because the main contribution is conceptual clarification, variable architecture, metric formation, and the development of decision-support logic. The thesis strives for analytical generalization (not statistical generalization): the validity of the model rests on internal coherence, the literature-based foundation of the variables, and robustness tests. In the small, vulnerable, and stigmatized communities of the Ormánság, rapid, targeted interviews carry research ethical risks (identifiability, research fatigue, gatekeeper dependence). In this phase, the author consciously avoided “rapid qualitative” data collection and relied on triangulation of secondary data (census, administrative statistics, historical sources) and indicator-level validation. This approach reduces the community burden and prevents model building from being done at the expense of the field. The primary qualitative phase is not omitted, but is given a time-delayed, targeted validation function.

Phase II. Targeted qualitative validation

In the next phase, semi-structured interviews and small group workshops (settlement leaders, teachers, health workers, local civil society actors) are prepared, with a hypothesis-driven protocol: the qualitative material does not serve the creation of the model, but rather the fine-tuning and local prioritization of the model (intervention matrix). The study does not contain in-depth interviews or new qualitative data. This is a genre decision: this phase of the report is a conceptual and methodological foundation study that structures and targets the subsequent fieldwork.

The primary qualitative part is conducted in Phase II, according to a pre-established protocol. The reported robust tests and multi-source triangulation ensure the internal validity of this phase. Decision-makers often need a quick, transparent ranking. The SEK-index provides – even without primary interviews – a priority list of intervention areas, which is validated on site by the qualitative work of Phase II. This two-step model (synthetic diagnosis → targeted field validation) is cost- and ethics-conscious and reduces the risk of unnecessary field visits with the “wrong questions.” International literature describes the phenomenon of inner peripheries in detail, but a micro-territorially resolved, operationalized decision-support framework that combines social, spatial, and institutional dimensions in a composite index and translates them into an intervention matrix is lacking. The present study fills this gap. The primary qualitative phase is under preparation; its function is not to create a model, but to fine-tune and legitimize it locally.

3. Material and method

The present study is grounded in a qualitative research methodology, which encompasses analysis, document analysis, and a theoretical framework based on secondary sources. The examination of the social structure, historical development, and current situation of the Ormánság was based primarily on previous empirical research, ethnographic monographs, sociological and social history writings. Szabó (1938) drew attention to the demographic characteristics of the Ormánság between the two world wars, while Erdei (1980) described the process of the collapse of the peasant social structure and community norms. Koloh (2013) pointed to new waves of regional marginalization and ethnic exclusion, while Virág (2006) analyzed the reproduction of the inner peripheries.

The empirical background of the research is provided by the population and social changes that took place between 1990 and 2022 in five selected settlements of the Sellye district (Kémes, Sellye, Cún, Drávafoke, Gilvánfa). The increase in the proportion of the Roma population, the development of educational indicators, and the dynamics of unemployment were the dimensions based on which the patterns of exclusion can be mapped.

During the study, a five-factor analysis indicator, the SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index), was developed, which integrates the following dimensions:

(1) The data are the proportion of the population (R%), (2) Early school leaving rate (ESL), (3) Change in unemployment rate ($U\Delta$), (4) Demographic index (DI), and (5) School segregation ratio (ISR).

The SEK-index is a composite indicator that combines individual factors based on Z-score standardization¹, allowing comparison between settlements. This allowed for analysis not only of the extent of exclusion, but also of its spatial and structural differentiation.

The typology revealed by the SEK-index allowed for the theoretical operationalization of the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*. This category is used to describe regional situations where structural, ethnic, and spatial disadvantages do not occur separately, but cumulatively (Wacquant, 2008). The typology therefore served not only descriptive but also an interpretative purpose. The methodological background included socio-historical reconstruction and comparative territorial analysis, which allowed for the connection of historical and contemporary tendencies. The qualitative approach allowed for the complex examination of social exclusion facilitated by multi-level, institutional and cultural mechanisms. Segregation, as a social practice, in many cases did not develop spontaneously, but was also facilitated by educational policy and regional development decisions (Virág, 2006).

Limitations

The study has several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. The reliability and comparability of secondary data sources vary considerably across settlements. Statistical records often underreport the Roma population due to self-identification bias, while local government datasets may contain inconsistencies or missing values. Furthermore, the qualitative analyses presented here cannot be generalized to the entire region; they are intended to provide interpretive depth rather than statistical representativeness. Despite these limitations, the triangulation of sources – combining demographic indicators, historical literature, and local reports – helps to mitigate data distortions and ensures analytical coherence.

4. Results and Evaluation

Transition to a new interpretative framework. The contemporary social reality of the Ormánság region is shaped not only by successive, clearly distinguishable processes – such as the population decline due to single-handedness and the growth of the Roma population – but also by their interacting, mutually reinforcing dynamics (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 2019; KSH, 2022). While the majority community gradually withdraws from social and economic activity (Szabó, 1938), Roma communities cannot structurally fill the resulting void – neither institutionally, culturally nor economically (Havas, 2005). This situation is not only marginalization, but also a double disintegration, where two different social groups slide into each other. There is no organic social reorganization, and no coherent community dynamics emerges that could regenerate the area (Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006). As Dupcsik (2009) emphasizes, the historical interpretation of Roma identity and exclusion in Hungary has been shaped by long-term structural inequalities and shifting social discourses, which are still visible in rural peripheries such as the Ormánság. This recognition leads to the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which is the central theme of the next chapter. Based on census data and demographic indicators, the Roma population in the Ormánság region has significantly increased in recent decades, with a younger age structure and higher fertility rate than the non-Roma population.

¹ *Z-score standardization* (also known as standard score normalization) is a statistical technique that transforms raw data values into a standardized scale with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1. It allows for comparison across different datasets or variables by expressing values in terms of their distance from the mean in standard deviation units.

These demographic tendencies are consistent with national-level findings that show the spatial concentration and temporal growth of the Roma population in peripheral areas of Hungary (Pénzes et al., 2019). The contemporary social processes of the Roma cannot be interpreted solely in terms of the inner periphery; population decline or the transformation of the ethnic structure. A complex marginalization mechanism is taking place in the region, which is not fully described by either the classical center-periphery theories (Tagai & Lennert, 2023) or the traditional categories of social exclusion (Levitas et al., 2007). According to European social exclusion theories (Room, 1995; Silver, 1994), this situation is no longer a simple deprivation, but a complex, regional-ethnic stratification pattern. The recognition of this led to the introduction of the concept of intermarginal disintegration, which sheds new light on the deep structural crisis of the Ormánság. This chapter examines how two different paths of social disintegration overlapped:

- on the one hand, the self-destructive, population-reducing inheritance and socialization pattern of the majority, Reformed Hungarian community (e.g. single-handedness – cf. Szabó, 1938),
- on the other hand, Roma communities are characterized by settling, embedded from the outside, but with low social mobility (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 2019).

The dual, not compensatory but mutually reinforcing, decline has led to a specific regional crisis model. We call this *intermarginal disintegration*: a situation where two social groups simultaneously find themselves on the periphery of the periphery but follow different historical and social paths (Tésits et al., 2021). This new concept is based on dysfunctions embedded in opportunity hierarchies. This phenomenon is related to the concept of “inner peripheries” described by ESPON (2017) but is more microregional and sociocentric: it captures not only the lack of access to services, but also the combination of identity loss, community cohesion and institutional degradation.

The model fits particularly well with the new theoretical horizons of European rural marginality (Woods, 2019; Shucksmith et al., 2023), which emphasize the dual logic of rural development – the simultaneity of global integration and local vulnerability. *Intermarginal disintegration* is a hybrid concept in comparison: it places structural (infrastructural, economic) disadvantages and symbolic (cultural, identity-related) exclusion on a common plane of analysis. Thus, the concept is suitable for application in other European regions – for example, in the southern Italian Mezzogiorno, eastern Slovakia, in the rural zones of the Balkans or in the peripheral villages of the Scottish Highlands – where similarly overlapping demographic, ethnic and economic gradients shape the structure of social space (cf. Tagai & Lennert, 2023; Shucksmith et al., 2023).

At the international level, the concept has comparative value because it can bridge the research directions of European “inner peripheries” and global “neglected rurality’s.” Research such as Shubin and McCollum’s (2021) temporality-based marginality analyses or Łuczak and Kalinowski’s (2025) fuzzy-hybrid poverty measurement models also strive to interpret social exclusion as a dynamic, multidimensional system. *Intermarginal disintegration*, in line with these, is a flexible theoretical framework that allows for the identification of cumulative patterns of marginality (structural, spatial, cultural, temporal) and thus makes rural areas of different countries comparable. The global relevance of the concept lies in the fact that it treats marginality not as a simple deficit, but as a self-reproducing social and spatial mechanism. Such self-reproducing peripheral processes have been observed, for example, in the depopulated mountain regions of Southern Europe, the agrarian peripheries of Latin America, and the

marginalized regions of Southeast Asia (Woods, 2019). The intermarginal approach can also be applied here, because it can reveal how the processes of structural underdevelopment, symbolic exclusion, and loss of local identity are interconnected. Thus, the case study of Ormánság is not an isolated one, but an illustrative micro-laboratory of the global problem that social science describes with the concepts of “rural resilience” and “multi-layered exclusion” (ESPON, 2017; European Commission, 2024).

Intermarginal disintegration is therefore a transferable diagnostic tool that can be used in any peripheral area where social, economic, and cultural disadvantages reinforce each other. Its comparative application can contribute to the recalibration of rural development policies, especially in the EU LEADER, CLLD and Smart Villages programs, which are still primarily infra-structural in approach. The model treats marginality as a system, not as a condition – thus the analysis offers not only a descriptive but also an interventionist logic.

Overall, the case study of Ormánság is not only a local description, but also an internationally adaptable theoretical contribution to the new generation of research on rural marginality. The concept of *intermarginal disintegration* provides an opportunity to interpret the social, spatial and identity dimensions together and synergistically in periphery research – thus making the experience of Ormánság comparable with the structural experiences of other European and global peripheries.

The concept of intermarginal disintegration

Intermarginal disintegration describes a social and spatial state where overlapping marginalization processes, such as the structural peripheralization of a region and the ethnic-social exclusion of a social group living there – mutually reinforce each other, thus transforming the given region into a complex, new type of periphery.

As a definition, intermarginal disintegration is understood as a socio-territorial state in which the structural disconnection of a region and the marginalization of a social group (e.g. an ethnic minority) mutually reinforce each other and cause the disintegration of the local society and economy. Regional isolation, institutional deficit, employment vacuum, and ethnic stigmatization of the low-status population build on each other and perpetuate the peripheral situation. The concept of intermarginal disintegration therefore describes a complex state of marginalization in which regional underdevelopment (e.g., a lack of infrastructure, economic decline, and inadequate services) and social exclusion (e.g., stigmatization, institutional discrimination, and limited education) together and interwoven create a state of lasting disintegration (Author's own definition).

The resulting intermarginal zone becomes:

- geographically isolated,
- economically inactive,
- socially stigmatized, where the possibilities for social mobility are minimized, and the reproductive mechanisms (e.g. education, labor market, healthcare) are constantly underperforming.

The persistence of long-term unemployment and the limited impact of public work programs in the Ormánság (Pulszter, 2020) exemplify the structural employment vacuum characteristic of intermarginally disintegrated regions.

Intermarginal disintegration therefore means a situation where the encounter of a backward region and a socially disadvantaged community results in double exclusion: the region itself is on the periphery, but the situation of the people living there – for example, in the case of Roma

communities – is also particularly disadvantaged. Together, these two perpetuate the disconnection. The form and typology of *intermarginal disintegration* are built on two dimensions:

- the degree of regional marginalization (infrastructure, accessibility, economic opportunities),
- the socio-ethnic exclusion reason (status, discrimination, education, etc.).

These two dimensions appear in the social space in interaction with each other, often reinforcing each other. Regional marginalization means that the accessibility, infrastructural provision, and economic opportunities of the settlement – or even entire micro-regions – are limited. This includes the quality of roads, the lack of transport connections, the lack of jobs, and the regression of the institutional system (schools, medical clinics, community spaces). In parallel, the dimension of socio-ethnic exclusion reflects the internal structure, hierarchy, and equal opportunity relations of the local society. For example, the limited access of Roma communities to education, employment, housing, and social participation, as well as the symbolic and structural discrimination against them, appear here. When these two dimensions intersect at a high value – that is, a region is both closed, infrastructurally degraded and its population is strongly marginalized and stigmatized – then we can speak of *intermarginal disintegration*. The aim of this typology is to reveal the different forms of marginalization that require different socio-political interventions.

Hidden marginality

- Almost urban infrastructural conditions.
- Social exclusion of a minority community (e.g., Roma) is present.
- Example: suburban Roma settlement on the edge of a prosperous small town.

In this type, regional accessibility, accessibility of public services and infrastructure can typically be said to be good – so there are no signs of physical or economic periphery. In such settlements, members of the community live close to integration systems (school, workplace, transport), yet they are socially marginalized. Exclusion here is more manifested in symbolic and structural factors: for example, the stigmatization of the Roma population, hidden forms of school segregation, or discrimination based on address (Virág, 2006; Kállai, 20; Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006). The phenomenon of hidden marginality is particularly dangerous because superficial development masks deeper social problems (Wacquant, 2008). Authorities and decision-makers tend to underestimate the need for intervention, since objective indicators (e.g. public utilities, number of school places) do not make the area appear peripheral. However, minority communities struggle with invisible barriers to integration, which preserves exclusion in the long term (Powell, 2013; van Kempen & Bolt, 2009).

Segmented marginality

- Well-served area.
- Ethnic or social groups are deeply marginalized, stigmatized.
- Example: Roma residential area on the outskirts of a city, with strong social prejudices.

This type typically occurs in areas where infrastructure, accessibility of services and economic opportunities are given, but certain groups of society – especially ethnic minorities – are deeply marginalized. In the case of such segmented marginality, exclusion is not linked to physical space, but to social space: the presence of the minority community often entails ghetto-like separation, stigmatized identity, and social exclusion. (Ladányi & Szelényi, 2006; Török, 2018). The isolation of the communities strengthens prejudices, while the receiving

institutions (schools, workplaces, housing market) operate with latent or overt discrimination. One of the main characteristics of segmented marginality is that the chances of social integration are not only limited but also institutionally closed - even if the region is economically prosperous.

Structural marginality

- A closed area with a lack of services.
- The population living there is still partly integrated and of mixed composition.
- Example: an aging village in Ormánság with a minimal Roma population.

Structural marginality can be observed in settlements where regional disadvantages – inaccessibility, transport isolation, lack of services – have existed for a long time, but the social composition of the population living there has not yet become homogeneous or excluded (Tagai & Lennert, 2023). The community still has some connections to the dominant society, for example through the access of older generations to permanent pensions (Pálné Kovács, 2013). Despite this, the gradual degradation of the area, the emigration of young people and the closure of institutions (schools, post offices, shops) slowly preserve the peripheral situation, in which the possibilities for social mobility are narrowing.

Intermarginal disintegration

Intermarginal disintegration denotes a socio-territorial condition in which regional peripheralization and the socio-ethnic exclusion of a local community mutually reinforce each other. The outcome is a complex and persistent form of disintegration, characterized by geographic isolation, economic inactivity, and social stigmatization.

This represents the most complex and severe type of marginalization, where regional isolation and socio-ethnic exclusion interact to produce a deep and lasting structural disconnect. Such settlements are typically characterized by minimal institutional provision, limited access to healthcare, and low educational opportunities for young people, while the community remains largely excluded from the labor market. The majority presence of the Roma population often constitutes not only a site of social but also of political and symbolic exclusion.

The community becomes trapped in a self-reinforcing social cycle, where escape routes are blocked and, in the absence of external intervention, marginality reproduces itself. This form represents the “full” version of *intermarginal disintegration*, serving as the most critical manifestation of permanently marginalized zones forming on the fringes of society. Recent empirical findings confirm that the Ormánság region suffers from severe competence deficits and low employability among older workers, which further exacerbate the employment vacuum and social exclusion (Pohl et al., 2022).

To operationalize this typology, the socio-ethnic exclusion dimension can be measured using both objective (quantifiable) and qualitative (descriptive) criteria that define “low” and “high” levels of exclusion. Based on these indicators, any settlement can be classified. The proposed operational measure is the composite SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index) – a newly developed indicator designed to quantify the level of socio-ethnic exclusion in each settlement by integrating multiple social and ethnic parameters. Its aim is to capture and quantify the complex state of marginalization that particularly affects Roma communities in peripheral regions. The components of the SEK-index are:

- R% (Roma ratio): the proportion of the Roma population within the total population,
- a high value may correlate with segregation and stigmatization,

- ESL (Early School Leaving): the proportion of early school leavers in the population aged 18–24
- an indicator of structural backwardness,
- UΔ (Unemployment Gap): the unemployment gap between the Roma and non-Roma population.
- DI (Dissimilarity Index): the degree of residential segregation of the Roma and non-Roma population.
- ISR (School Segregation Rate): the proportion of Roma students in segregated educational institutions.

These values are standardized (e.g., based on Z-score), and then the SEK-index is calculated with a weighted average, which takes a value between 0 and 1:

- 0–0.25: Low exclusion
- 0.25–0.50: Moderate exclusion
- 0.50–0.75: High exclusion
- 0.75–1.00: Critical exclusion

Advantages of the SEK-index

Complexity: The SEK-index simultaneously includes several indicators – education, employment, housing and spatial, thus providing a more realistic picture of the structure of socio-ethnic exclusion.

Quantitativeness: The level of exclusion of individual settlements becomes comparable, which allows for an objective ranking of regions.

Plannability: It is a development policy tool that is well-suited for decision-makers, as it provides clear guidance on where to intervene and in which dimensions (e.g. education, transport, social services).

Practical application of the SEK-index – on the example of five Ormánság settlements

The following section contains an analysis of these Ormánság settlements based on the components of the SEK-index, presenting the extent and nature of socio-ethnic exclusion. The following data are based on the latest local and statistical sources, with particular attention to the revised proportions of the Roma population.

The SEK-index (Socio-Ethnic Exclusion Index) was calculated on the example of five Ormánság settlements – Kémes, Sellye, Drávafok, Cún, and Gilvánfa. When selecting the settlements, I tried to include the district center (with more than two thousand inhabitants, Cún, a medium-sized settlement by the Hungarian standard) in the survey. Also, Gilvánfa, which is also referred to as a “gypsy village” in national terms. Table 2 shows the individual indicators and the overall SEK-index value.

The table above clearly shows the SEK-index values of the five settlements. The critical level of exclusion is clearly shown by the high value of Gilvánfa, while the other settlements fall into the moderate or high category.

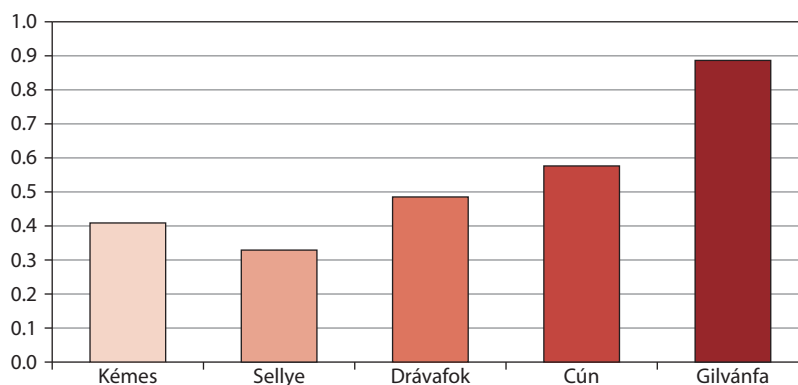
As shown in Figure 1, the SEK-index values reveal a clear hierarchy of exclusion: while Kémes and Sellye fall into the moderate range, Gilvánfa reaches a critical level, representing a case of complete social disintegration. This visual comparison demonstrates the diagnostic power of the SEK-index in distinguishing different stages of marginalization.

In the case of Cún, the level of exclusion is high, due to the educational and housing indicators, but it does not reach the critical threshold. The settlement is already approaching the

Table 2. Overall SEK-index values

Settlement	R%	ESL	UΔ	DI	ISR	SEK-index	Exclusion level
Kémes	8%	22%	11%	0,28	21%	0,41	Moderate
Sellye	3,5%	18%	9%	0,20	17%	0,33	Moderate
Drávafok	18%	26%	13%	0,35	25%	0,49	Moderate
Cún	19,3%	32%	17%	0,44	37%	0,58	High
Gilvánfa	69,9%	47%	29%	0,71	63%	0,83	Critical

Source: Own elaboration, 2025.

**Figure 1. Evaluation of the SEK-index**

Source: Own compilation, 2025.

intermarginal disintegration category in several respects. Gilvánfa remains severely disadvantaged: the critical SEK-index value indicates outstanding exclusion in all indicators, so it can still be interpreted as a typical example of intermarginal disintegration. Based on the data, after correcting the originally overestimated Roma proportions, the SEK-index of Sellye, Drávafok and Kémes also fell into a lower category: their exclusion is moderate, and they cannot be classified as examples of intermarginal disintegration. Ethnic exclusion is present to a lesser extent in these settlements, although certain signs of regional underdevelopment still exist (Figure 1).

Transition to a new interpretive framework

The contemporary social reality of the Ormánság is not only shaped by successive, clearly distinguishable processes – for example, the population decline resulting from the single-handedness, followed by the rise of the Roma population and the perceptions of local communities – but by their interacting, mutually reinforcing dynamics. While the majority community gradually withdraws from social and economic activity, the Roma communities are unable to structurally fill the resulting void – neither institutionally, culturally nor economically.

This situation is not just marginalization, but a double disintegration, where two different social groups slide against each other. There is no organic social restructuring, nor are there any coherent community dynamics that could regenerate the area are formed. This recogni-

tion gives rise to the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which is the central subject of the next section. Contemporary social processes in Ormánság cannot be interpreted exclusively in terms of the inner periphery, population decline or the transformation of ethnic structure. A complex mechanism of marginalization is occurring in the region, that is neither described by either the classical center-periphery theories (Tagai & Lennert, 2023) nor the traditional categories of social exclusion (Atkinson et al., 2002; Levitas et al., 2007) fully describe.

The recognition of this led to the introduction of the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*, which sheds new light on the deep structural crisis of the Ormánság. The analysis of regional data confirms this interpretative framework. Based on the population and Roma ratio change data for the 52 settlements of the Selye district between 2011 and 2022, a non-homogeneous process is taking place: in some villages the proportion of the Roma population is exceptionally high (e.g. Piskó 80.3%, Gilvánfa 69.9%), while in other settlements it is negligible (e.g. Királyegyháza 2.7%, Felsőszentmárton 0.7%). This internal structural dispersion forms the basis of *intermarginal disintegration*: two different social trajectories determine the future of the region in parallel and by projecting onto each other.

The service data further nuance the picture: in several settlements with a high Roma ratio (e.g. Gilvánfa, Adorjás, Piskó) neither schools, kindergartens, post offices nor railways are operating. However, in other villages with a similar population – for example Kémes or Királyegyháza – these institutions still exist. This also supports the fact that social exclusion has not only an ethnic but also a structural dimension: the lack of physical infrastructure and low social mobility simultaneously preserve the disadvantaged situation. However, objective indicators (such as public utilities or service presence) often mask the reality of social disintegration – this is especially true for cases of hidden or segmented marginality. The settlement-level data of the Selye district therefore not only support, but also quasi-typify the concept of *intermarginal disintegration*: the different Roma population ratio, the lack of institutions and the decrease in population are all indicators that can be associated with different types of marginalities.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The social marginalization of the Ormánság is not merely a consequence of current political or ethnic conflicts, but a deep-rooted social heritage, shaped by historical processes and long-term structures. The region's "dead end" is not just a metaphor: it is a real situation, sustained by structural disintegration, identity crisis, and the aggravation of ethnic relations. There is no quick or superficial solution to this situation. Development policy interventions can only be effective if they are able to move away from symptomatic treatment and access the deeper cultural and social layers that maintain the current conditions. Roma–non-Roma tensions often are ethnic in nature, but this is only the surface. Deep down, there are social structural fractures, the segregating functioning of the education system, the closed nature of the labor market and structural inequalities in housing.

The isolation of Roma communities without mobility channels, spatial separation at the settlement level and the lack of a common social space reproduces distrust and social distance. *Ethnic conflict* is thus a misleading concept: it is not a moral or policing issue, but a deeply structured social problem that can only be addressed through complex, integrated, long-term development policy intervention. The rethinking of the region cannot be postponed any longer. If we are serious about the future, we must redefine what "village" and "community" mean today. The former cultural and economic density has been replaced by fragmented,

alienated social structures in which community life has completely emptied. Rebuilding community relations is not only a symbolic but also an existential issue. The first step in this is to bring back community spaces and institutions – not only in a physical sense, but as a shared social experience.

Then, integrative economic developments can follow that offer not only jobs, but also social status and a framework for interpretation. Ensuring real access to education does not mean supplements, not “school-like” side solutions, but a systemic increase in opportunities. All of this must be accompanied by a conscious, reflective memory policy that does not allow the single-handedness, the Reformed culture, the Roma presence, or the history of the region to degenerate into folklore – these are collective social experiences that need to be retold. Processing the past of the Ormánság is not optional: it is a prerequisite for building the future. Local communities cannot be able to redefine themselves if they perceive their own past exclusively as a history of loss. Collective reflection – in which the self-liquidation of the Reformed peasantry is included as well as the exclusion of the Roma communities – is essential for social self-interpretation.

The formation of Roma identity requires special attention, as it takes place through a different logic than in the case of the majority population. The identity of the majority, Reformed villages, flees into nostalgic enclosures, while the identity of the Roma communities is being formed between the lines of strengthening ethnic self-awareness and social exclusion. This identity is not institutionally or culturally articulated but is often built on survival strategies: internal assistance, residential cohesion, a robust system of norms – in enclosed, defensive structures.

The duality of self-image – torn between internal pride and external stigmatization – causes conflict, especially in the younger generations. One path is assimilation, the other is distancing, but neither is a truthful answer until there is a third path: an autonomous, self-interpreting Roma identity. Its formation is currently local and fragmented: often linked to families, not to movements. Deep poverty and a segregated environment only further limit this process. Yet, new spaces for identity formation are also emerging through education, religious communities, and digital media. The Gandhi Gymnasium or the scholastic schools, for example, create opportunities for the formation of a dual identity – Roma and intellectual. Evangelical and Pentecostal communities open a new moral horizon, where family, self-discipline and community ethics take on a new role. In the digital space, young Roma try to give their own face to their culture (e.g. rap culture), reflecting on social stereotypes and creating new publics. Identity is therefore not merely a cultural issue, but a survival strategy.

In Ormánság, Roma identity formation is both a response and a constraint: it provides a response to exclusion but cannot break through structural barriers. It can only become a resource if it is able to extend to political, economic, and cultural dimensions. However, external support is not enough for this: internal involvement, grassroots initiatives, Roma community leaders and role models are needed. The question is therefore not whether the Roma community is capable of renewal – this question is prejudiced. The question is whether it will be given the opportunity to become capable of renewal. Currently, there are serious deficits in terms of education, social capital, relations with institutions and the attitude of the majority society. But these are not insurmountable – if there is political will, if there are long-term, mentored, facilitated programs, and if we truly view Roma communities as partners. Roma communities do not need passive stakeholders, but potential change-makers, if they are given the opportunity and space to develop. The aim of this study was to explore the peripherality of the

Ormánság region, regarding the long-term effects of ethnic and demographic processes, as well as the possibilities for social renewal. The focus of the study is on the so-called theory of intermarginal disintegration, which we have put forward to describe the mutually reinforcing processes of social and territorial marginalization in this region.

The Ormánság region is not only suffering from economic deprivation but is also undergoing a complex social decline in which the loosening of community structures, loss of identity, the degradation of the institutional background and ethnic tensions occur simultaneously. The historical legacy – especially the single-handedness as a communal rationality – has undermined the demographic sustainability of the local society in the long term, while the rise of Roma communities is not a cause, but a consequence of this structural crisis.

To describe this specific state, the thesis introduced a new concept: *intermarginal disintegration*, which denotes the socio-territorial crisis where regional underdevelopment (e.g. economic exclusion, transport and infrastructural exclusion) and ethnic-social marginalization (e.g. segregation, stigmatization, low education) are embedded in each other and mutually reinforce each other, maintaining the loss of social function. Recovery cannot be achieved simply by applying development policy tools, but by a profound social reinterpretation. Place embeddedness – i.e., the reactivation of local identity, cultural heritage, historical experience, and community ties – can be the basis for social regeneration. The currently underutilized human and material resources found in the villages of the Ormánság – such as vacant properties, land, local knowledge – can be suitable for creating the foundations for community enterprises, agricultural cooperatives, care services or even agrotourism developments.

The possibilities for recovery can only be imagined in multi-level and intersectoral cooperation. The active participation of stakeholders, i.e. those affected, is essential in this process. Local communities, local governments, state actors, civil organizations, churches, and Roma communities are only able to rebuild the social fabric of the region in cooperation, not separately. Development can only be sustainable if it is based on will and capacity formed locally, not externally directed. Strengthening the currently missing grassroots willingness to act and community initiative is a basic condition for all interventions.

In this framework, actors promoting social innovation cannot function as mere “developers” – they must become embedded mediators, able to mediate sensitively between local realities and strategic interventions. The goal is not to restore old structures, but to rethink a new, community-based village world.

6. Future Research Directions

This study identifies several key directions for future research that aim to deepen our understanding of rural disintegration, demographic decline, and ethnic restructuring, while further empirically validating the concept of *intermarginal disintegration* introduced herein.

A primary objective is the settlement-level application of the SEK-index developed in this paper – comprising five indicators: Roma population ratio, early school leaving rate, change in unemployment, dependency index, and infrastructure-to-services ratio – across all 52 municipalities of the Ormánság. The use of this composite index allows for high-resolution comparative analyses and the detection of spatial patterns of disintegration. Integrating these indicators into a GIS-based platform (e.g., GPS mapping) would provide visual representation of marginalization dynamics, supporting more targeted and spatially informed development policies.

Another significant direction involves linking historical demographic trends with local community narratives, through interviews, participatory mapping, and archival research. This approach would help uncover the cultural and identity-related dimensions of social fragmentation beyond the statistical indicators.

Furthermore, comparative regional studies – with areas experiencing similar processes of dual marginalization, such as parts of eastern Slovakia, northern Serbia, or Romania’s Székelyföld – would enable a broader understanding of whether and how the Ormánság fits into wider patterns of structural crisis in post-socialist rural peripheries.

Ultimately, future research should not only serve descriptive or diagnostic purposes but also contribute to transformative agendas. The goal is to support place-based, inclusive development strategies that offer real agency to the communities of intermarginal areas – strategies that are rooted in local knowledge, shared identity, and long-term participation

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Acknowledgements and Financial Disclosure

None reported.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research took place without any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Published by the Krakow University of Economics – Krakow, Poland

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