

# Why do Social Innovations in Rural Development Matter and Should They be Considered More Seriously in Rural Development Research? – Proposal for a Stronger Focus on Social Innovations in Rural Development Research

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## Abstract

The article discusses social innovation from a rural development perspective. The central questions addressed are: What are social innovations and why are they important for rural development? How can we gain more insights into the role and functioning of social innovations in rural development? Drawing on different approaches to conceptualise social innovations pursued in economy, management, sociology, psychology and regional economics, planning and development studies, the article outlines the central aspects on which the concept is built. Based on these insights a proposal for a concise basic definition of social innovations is given and a model of the social innovation process is introduced. Reasoning that a lack of social innovation is often one of the strongest restraints of the vitality and further development of rural communities in developed, democratic, capitalist, industrial countries, the second part of the article highlights the need to put a stronger focus on social innovations in future rural development research. Building on these insights, the third part addresses open research questions and explains why an actor-oriented network approach seems to be a promising potential methodological way to approach social innovations in rural development research.

## Introduction

An Internet search for the keyword 'social innovation' will return approximately 1.750.000 hits. A combined search for 'social innovation' and 'rural' results in at least around 576.000 hits (Google, 9 June 2011). Thus one might conclude that social

innovations in rural development are already broadly recognised and well researched, so that it is not worth addressing these topics in one's own research. However, a close consideration proves that the opposite is true. The term 'social innovation' is quite carelessly used as highly popular buzz-word, especially in lay as well as political discourses. This is often done without referring to a sound conceptual or methodological framework which could explain the exact meaning of social innovations.

The shift from sectoral to territorial rural development strategies as a result of socioeconomic structural change in rural areas resulted in a stronger focus on neo-endogeneous<sup>1</sup> strategies in rural development. Thus, many authors propose that social innovations could play a central role in the development of rural areas. They argue that the success of these neo-endogeneous regional development processes is strongly dependent on the possibility of mobilising a public, where participation not only concentrates on sustaining traditions but may lead to social, economic and cultural renewal (for example, Häußermann and Siebel 1993, p. 223 cited by Scholz 2003, p. 59). Or, as Magel (2000) says:

It is basically about the development of sustainable structures and establishing a form of balance that, on the one hand, enables innovation, creativity, new ideas and visions in action; and, on the other hand, maintains the necessary stability (Magel 2000, p. 73, translated by author).

But what are social innovations and why do they matter in rural development? Is there a need to take them more often into consideration in rural development research? How can we approach the analysis of social innovations in rural development methodologically? These are the questions the article addresses.

Section two discusses the concept of social innovation by comparing different views on what social innovations are. Based on the different perspectives the chapter summarises the main aspects upon which the concept of social innovations builds.

Section three examines in more depth why social innovations matter in rural development. Section four focuses on open research questions and explains why an actor-oriented network approach seems to be a promising potential methodological way to approach social innovations in rural development research.

### **What are social innovations?**

Innovation research and policy deal, according to the common understanding of innovation, mainly with technical and economic innovation.<sup>2</sup> Here the focus is on material and product innovation, and on methods of production process innovation, as well as marketing and organisational innovation in the field of economics (Gillwald 2000; Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2005, 2011). Whereas innovations with a clear economic intention are well researched and defined, understandings of so-called social innovations are not as well elaborated (Adams and Hess 2008, p. 5). As a result, in public discussions and in policy, innovation is still almost exclusively treated and perceived as economic innovation focusing on technical efficiency as well as the commercialisation of science and technology (Adams and Hess 2008, p. 5). An analysis of the scientific innovation literature dealing with social innovations reveals that the term 'social innovation', as well as the concept behind it, is not defined uniformly and can refer to the effort, method, result or change initiated

by collaborative actions (for example, Schumpeter 1949; Ogburn 1964; Zapf 1989; Gillwald 2000; Mumford 2002; Moulaert *et al.* 2005; Adams and Hess 2008; Pot and Vaas 2008; Pol and Ville 2009; Howaldt and Schwarz 2010). Furthermore, the difference between purely organisational innovations and social innovations as such is not always precisely considered.

The selection of different ways to define social innovations presented in the next paragraph clarifies these aspects, and will help in developing a more concise understanding of social innovations.

### *Approaches to defining social innovation*

In his early works the economist Schumpeter (1883–1950) was one of the first to address social innovation indirectly as a vehicle for producing economic growth in his theories of creative destruction (Schumpeter 2004 [1934], Adams and Hess 2008; Fuglsang 2008; Phills *et al.* 2008). Besides technical and marketing innovations, Schumpeter's definition of innovation as 'new combinations' (Hagedoorn 1996, pp. 885–886; Schumpeter 2004, p. 65) also addresses organisational aspects by stressing the importance of the creativity of entrepreneurial activities as cooperative activities. According to Schumpeter, the decisive element of creative labour is embodied in the entrepreneur who is described as agent of economic change carrying out new combinations (Hagedoorn 1996, p. 889; Schumpeter, 2004, p. 74). Towards the end of his career Schumpeter picks up this discussion and concludes that 'the entrepreneurial function need not be embodied in a physical person and in particular in a single physical person. Every social environment has its own ways of filling the entrepreneurial function.... Again the entrepreneurial function may be and often is filled cooperatively' (Schumpeter 1949, pp. 71–72). One can conclude that social innovations in the sense of Schumpeter are a new form of co-operative entrepreneurial acting leading to new forms of organisation and resulting in technical and marketing innovations.

Similar to Schumpeter (1949), the Nijmegen School of Management at the Radboud University, The Netherlands, in its considerations about economic innovations, came to the conclusion that the concept of social innovation goes beyond that of organisational innovation (Pot and Vaas 2008, p. 468). Their concept includes dynamic management, flexible organisation, working smarter, development of skills and competences, and networking between organisations which are seen as being complementary to technological innovation (Pot and Vaas 2008, p. 468). According to the authors, social innovations are part of process innovation as well as product innovation and include the modernisation of industrial relations and human resource management (Pot and Vaas 2008, p. 468). Unfortunately Pot and Vaas (2008) do not clarify in what way their concept goes beyond that of organisational innovation, which is close to Schumpeter's (1949) concept of social innovations. But by closely examining their concept one can infer that they explicitly include the development of skills and competencies, as well as networking activities.

The sociologist Ogburn (1888–1959) was the first to theoretically differentiate technical from social innovations more directly as the main drivers of social change in his work 'On Culture and Social Change' (Gillwald 2000, p. 1). In his work he

identified inventions that he subdivided into mechanical and social inventions as the main drivers of social change (Ogburn 1964, pp. 23, 30). Thus, social inventions are inventions in non-material culture (Ogburn 1964, p. 30). Ogburn's social inventions, which we could also call social innovations, are the collective knowledge and know-how achieved by a society in order to achieve some form of cultural or technical change.

The sociologist Zapf (1989) defines social innovations on the basis of modernisation theory quite generally as new societal practices, especially new forms of organising and new forms of regulating new lifestyles that change the direction of social change, solve problems better than former practices and are worth being imitated and institutionalised (Zapf 1989, p. 177). Additionally Zapf (1989) stresses the following three aspects that he thinks are important for such social innovations: novelty, especially novelty in the subjective perception of the individuals involved, a concentration on changes of attitude (in contrast to technical innovation) and the practical implementation that is connected with a certain superiority in comparison to traditional methods so that the imitation of the new method or solution seems to make sense (Zapf 1989: p. 173).

The sociologist Gillwald (2000) further refines the concept of social innovations and elaborates a wider theoretical concept. Also using a modernisation theoretical standpoint, she defines social innovations as societal achievements that, compared with already established solutions, provide improved solutions that are to a lesser extent defined by their absolute novelty more than by their consequences (Gillwald 2000, p. 42). Social innovations are thus seen as being part and product of social change, respectively societal modernisation, and can be found in all areas. They can be organisational, structural (namely, institutional) or procedural and are targeted either at the internal affairs of the individuals involved or at third party matters. As a result the central issue is acting or operating; social innovations are acts of change (respectively, acts of modernisation) meaning changes of attitude and – to the extent that active participation occurs, forms of societal acting (Gillwald 2000, p. 41). The main characteristics of social innovations are their differences from previous practices (criteria of 'novelty in relation to former practices'), their diffusion and stabilisation, that also encompass amendments and adjustments in surrounding fields, their stability beyond temporary fashions, and, because of this, their effects on society, combined with their effects on future societal development. Gillwald (2000) also notes that the decision on what improved societal achievements are and what they are not is decided in discourses and is always to some extent subjective (Gillwald 2000, p. 42), so for some the social innovation might not necessarily be an improvement if they belong to a group that might experience disadvantages as a result of these changes.

The economists Pol and Ville (2009), after discussing different ways of addressing social innovations, came to the conclusion that the term 'social innovation' has several overlapping meanings, including concepts such as institutional change, social purposes and the public good (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 881). For these authors, social innovation and business innovation are different, yet overlapping, concepts (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 884). Based on these insights, they suggest defining social innovation as any new ideas with the potential to improve either the macro-quality

of life<sup>3</sup> (quality of life in relation to a group of individuals) or the quantity of life (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 882). They thus highlight the fact that the macro-quality of life focuses on a set of

valuable options that people can choose from, so that when the size of the opportunity set grows there is actual improvement of the macro-quality of life, but not necessarily well-being improvement for each resident. (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 882)

So with the sophisticated concept of the macro-quality of life, Pol and Ville simply address the scope of action that a group has. All in all, Pol and Ville (2009) suggest conceptualising social innovations as driving forces for the improvement of the overall living conditions of people (Pol and Ville 2009, pp. 883, 884). Thus Pol and Ville (2009) conclude 'the ultimate end of social innovation is to help create better futures' (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 884).

Similar to Zapf (1989), Gillwald (2000) and Pol and Ville (2009), in their theorising on social innovation as a new public administration strategy against an economic background, Adams and Hess (2008) conclude that social innovation represents a simple idea; namely that social change is a process that has distinctive preconditions and stages and that those preconditions and stages can be understood and acted upon to promote innovation (Adams and Hess 2008, p. 1) Thus 'at a practical level, social innovation can be defined as mould-breaking ways of confronting unmet social need by creating new and sustainable capabilities, assets or opportunities for change' (Adams and Hess 2008, p. 3). Adams and Hess conclude that the fundamental characteristics of social innovations are their focus on asset-building rather than needs, in which the community is interpreted as a social agent and agency is imputed to communities (Adams and Hess 2008, p. 3).

In contrast, the psychologist Mumford characterises social innovations as the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organise interpersonal activities or social interactions to meet one or more common goals (Mumford 2002, p. 253). According to Mumford (2002) the products of social innovations can be manifold. They can be new ideas about social organisation or social relationships. They might involve the creation of new kinds of social institutions and the formation of new ideas of government or the development of new social movements as well as involving the creation of new processes and procedures for structuring collaborative work and the introduction of new social practices in a group or the development of new business practices (Mumford 2002, p. 253). In contrast to Gillwald (2000), Mumford explicitly includes changes of attitudes in his definition of social innovations.

Conducting research on social innovation in territorial development at the School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Newcastle University, Moulaert *et al.* (2005) conclude that social innovation is the structuring concept in integrated area development that was defined at the end of the 1980s as an alternative to sectoral top-down strategies in local development (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1973). According to these scholars, 'for local development to be successful, various domains of intervention (economy, housing, education and training, local democracy, culture, etc.) had to be integrated' (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1973). They

conclude that the integrating dynamics have to come from social innovations in at least two ways:

social innovation through the satisfaction of unsatisfied or alienated human needs; and innovation in the social relations between individuals and groups in neighborhoods and the wider territories embedding them. (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1973).

These social innovations are path-dependent and contextual and refer 'to those changes in agendas, agency and institutions that lead to a better inclusion of excluded groups and individuals in various spheres of society at various spatial scales' (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1973). They further refine their concept by explaining:

Social innovation is very strongly a matter of *process innovation* – i.e. changes in the dynamics of social relations, including power relations. As social innovation is very much about *social inclusion*, it is also about countering or overcoming conservative forces that are eager to strengthen or preserve social exclusion situation. (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1978).

Therefore social innovations explicitly refer to an ethical position of social justice, as well (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1978). For these authors social innovations are a comprehensive concept, pointing to a multidimensional process of social change (Moulaert *et al.* 2005, p. 1973).

So we can conclude that social innovations in the sense of Moulaert *et al.* are new forms of civic involvement, participation and democratisation (also termed innovations in government dynamics [Moulaert and Nussbaumer 2005, p. 62]) contributing to an empowerment of disadvantaged groups and leading to better citizen involvement which may, in turn, lead to a satisfaction of hitherto unsatisfied human needs, resulting in an improvement in the quality of life in a region.

In summary the considerations above allow one to conclude that in general, the following three different approaches of defining social innovations can be differentiated:

- An organisation-centred approach in which social innovations are seen as new ways of organising the business practices, the workplace or the external relations of an enterprise (Schumpeter 1949; Pot and Vaas 2008).
- A first sociological approach accentuating overall social change. Here social innovations are seen as societal achievements that change the direction of social change and that provide improved solutions compared to already established solutions to meet one or more common goals to help create better futures for a society (Ogburn 1964; Zapf 1989; Gillwald 2000; Adams and Hess 2008; Pol and Ville 2009).
- A second sociological approach accentuating the change in the common goals of a specific group of people. Here social innovations are seen as the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organise their interpersonal activities or social interactions to meet one or more common goals. Not societal improvement, but the improvements in such things as acting, organising and know-how of a group of people are the goal, measured at the group's horizon of experiences and thus based on the already existing know-how and experiences of the group involved (Mumford 2002; Moulaert *et al.* 2005).

### *Theoretical concept of social innovations*

As we have shown, the different ways of defining social innovations constitute a broad and inconsistent range of meanings – descriptive, heuristic, voluntaristic or normative. No one, sound and generally agreed upon definition exists. Instead, the different definitions are always to some extent context based. As a consequence, the pictures drawn by the different definitions, some partly overlapping, make it difficult to isolate the essence of social innovations. Although the different existing definitions are not inconsistent, they delineate a fuzzy concept rather than a clear and concise picture of what social innovations are. This might easily lead to the conclusion that the term ‘social innovation’ is less a sound scientific concept with a well-established methodological and conceptual basis, than a buzz-word used quite non-reflectively in current political and lay discourse. Nevertheless, scientists from different disciplinary backgrounds still struggle to conceptualise the character of social innovations. This with good reason. Social innovation is an interesting concept that is worth being taken seriously and better elaborated. It differs substantially from the traditional concept of innovation, especially economic innovation. Therefore, in the next paragraphs, in order to clarify the concept of social innovation based on the review of literature, we attempt to elaborate a more adequate common, non–context-specific definition. We then introduce a model of the social innovation process.

In general, innovations are defined as the conversion of knowledge and ideas into a benefit, for either commercial use or the public good, whereas the benefit may be new or improved products, processes or services (Reffitt *et al.* 2007, p. 2). Intended purpose and objectives of social innovations differ notwithstanding the fact that their outcomes (for example, improving economic performance) may overlap (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010). With social innovations the innovation does not occur in the medium of technical artefacts but at the level of social practice (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010, p. 21). So with the term ‘social innovation’ a very specific form of innovation, namely sustainable social benefits – new forms of collaborative action – that are immaterial and intangible goods is conceptualised (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010, p. 21).

Thus, as can be seen in the different attempts of defining social innovations, the theoretical concept builds strongly upon the following central factors:

- Only collective acting can lead to social innovations. A single individual cannot bring about a social innovation. Social innovations occur as a result of collaborative groups acting in a network of aligned interests, but only if a certain critical mass of actors decides to enrol in this actor network. So social innovations are grounded in the alliances of different actors. Thus, the potential for social innovations is strongly related to the existence of social networks and the social capital<sup>4</sup> available.
- The development of social innovation is similar to technological or economic innovation in that it is always triggered by an initial impetus (for example, a need or incentive to change attitudes or behaviour). This initial impetus can be triggered by factors that are either internal or external to the actors involved in the social innovation process.
- Social innovations are generally not teleological. That means they successively develop in a process of collaborative acting.

- They build on the aspect of relative novelty; that is, novelty in the subjective perception of the individuals involved.
- They concentrate on changes of attitude, behaviour or perceptions.
- Their practical implementation is connected to their superiority in comparison to existing methods so that the imitation of the new method or solution seems to make sense for the people involved.
- Social innovations are non-material: their material outcomes are solely a supplementary result and they focus not on needs but on asset building.

After having concentrated on the central aspects of the concept, we conclude that an understanding that sees social innovation as new ways of organising in business practices, the workplace or external relations of an enterprise is short-sighted. On the other hand, conceptualising social innovation as a kind of overarching driving force for improving the overall living conditions of people, leading to the creation of better futures for the whole society (such as, for example, the introduction of democracy) is too broadly defined. In our understanding such understandings of social innovations are not incorrect but they represent very distinctive, special cases that are better be addressed as organisational and management innovation in the former situation and societal social innovation in the latter.

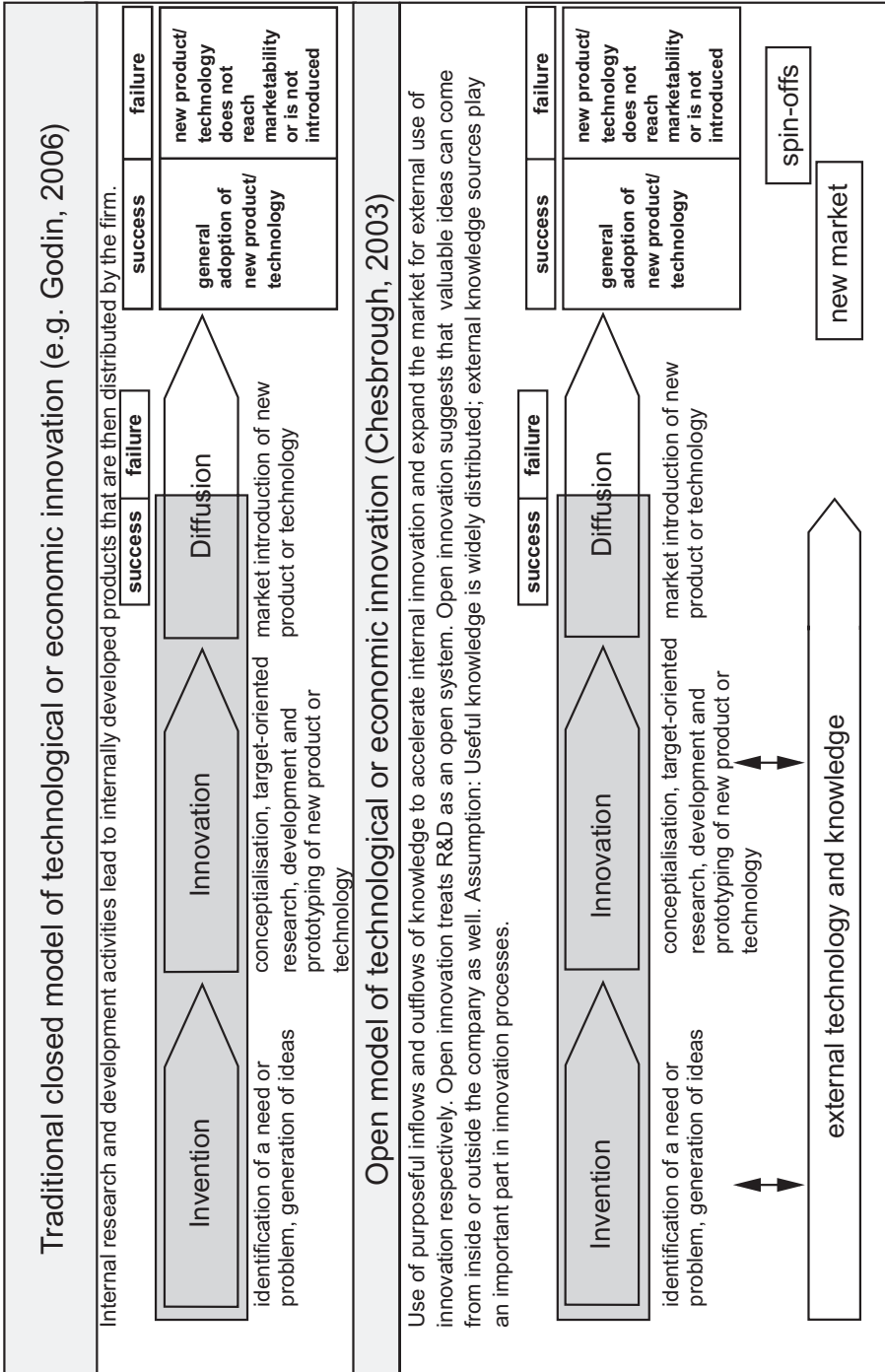
Based on these considerations, together with the reflections above we tend to an essentialist conceptualisation of social innovations that strikes a balance between both positions. Therefore we define social innovations as changes of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that in relation to the group's horizon of experiences lead to new and improved ways of collaborative action within the group and beyond.

So a social innovation occurs when a network of actors change its way of doing things, which leads as a result to some kind of tangible improvement for the actors involved or even beyond. Thus, the improvement has to be seen in relation to the context in which the social innovation is embedded. For example, in a rural development context such tangible improvements can occur in the area of a region's economic performance, overall living conditions or public goods, for example, the co-operation of different communities leading to a joint land utilisation plan that envisions one common area zoned for the economic activities of all of the communities (social innovation) resulting in more industrial locations and in consequence more industrial tax revenues for all of the communities involved (tangible improvement).

It has to be stressed that the social innovation is not the tangible improvement itself but the change of attitudes, behaviour or perceptions resulting in a new form of collaborative action that enables the improvement in the first place. This also explains why social innovations, unlike technical and economic innovations, are quite difficult to identify.

Drawing on findings from participation and governance<sup>5</sup> as well as innovation<sup>6</sup> research we propose the following theoretical concept for depicting the process from the formation to the implementation of a social innovation, illustrated in Figure 1. Here the traditional closed model of the process of social innovation formation is contrasted with the more recent open model of technological or economic innovation





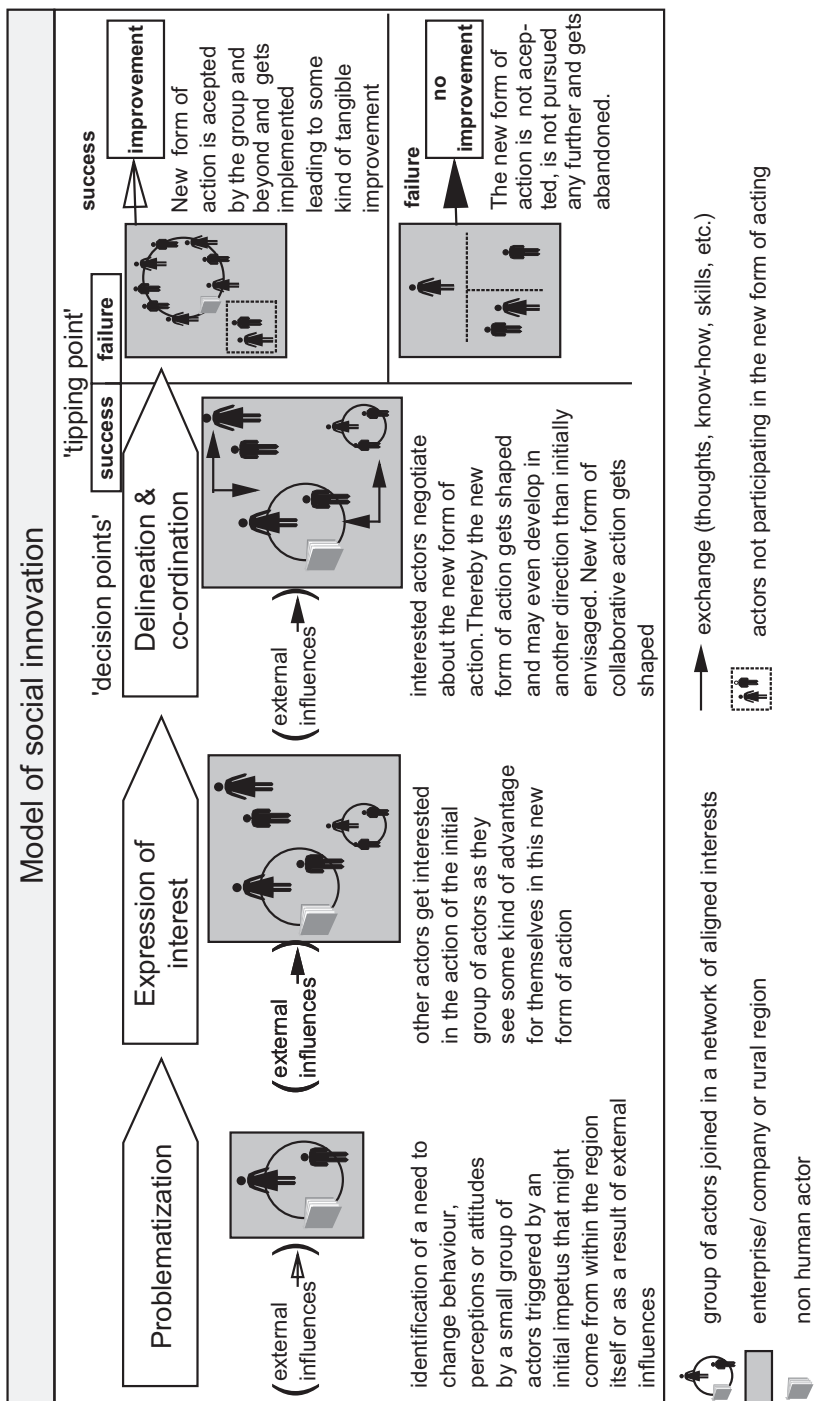


Figure 1: Social innovation process in comparison to technological or economic innovation process

introduced by Chesbrough (2003). According to Godin (2006) the open model of technological or economic innovation developed in three stages from 1945 onwards developed in three stages from 1945 onwards.<sup>7</sup>

The traditional closed model sees a technological or economic innovation as the result of internal research and development conducted in a company or institution that leads to the market introduction of a new product, service or technology. Thus, a successful innovation is one in which the new product, service or technology finally gets generally adapted. The open innovation model of technological and economic innovation is an antithesis to the traditional vertical innovation approach proposed by the closed model. Building on the 'voice of the customer' (Griffin and Hauser 1993) and 'customer-active paradigm' (Hippel 1978) approaches the open model treats R&D as an open system. Open innovation suggests that valuable ideas can come from inside or outside the company as well. Purposive inflows and outflows of knowledge accelerate internal innovation and expand the market for external use of innovation respectively (Chesbrough 2006, p. 1).

In contrast to technological and economic innovations, social innovations are not teleological and may not necessarily have an economic impetus. Building on findings from participation and governance research as well as the considerations due to social innovation above, the following three stages of social innovations can be identified:

*Problematisation*: triggered by an initial impetus, an actor or a small group of initial actors decides to change their behaviour and attitudes. The initial impetus can be an idea or the identification of a problem by the initial actor or initial group of actors or an external influence (as, for example, a new rural development programme).

*Expression of interest*: through their contacts with the initial actors, other actors hear about the changed behaviour and attitudes and become interested. If they can see some kind of advantage for themselves in adopting these new forms of behaviour or attitudes, they decide to mimic or adopt them.

*Delineation and co-ordination*: in a developed actor network of aligned interests, participating, as well as newly interested, actors negotiate the new behaviour and attitudes. In the actor networks co-evolutionary learning processes take place. Gradually the new form of action becomes shaped and solidifies (it may also develop in another direction than that initially envisaged). Thus, the actor network is not a fixed or stable network but one that is in a state of constant flow as new actors might enrol in the network while others might leave it, and the role attributed to the actors involved might shift over time.<sup>8</sup> If a critical mass of actors decides to adopt or mimic the new form of action so that it is generally accepted, leading in consequence to some kind of tangible improvement, the social innovation has been successfully implemented. If it is neither adopted nor mimicked, gains no general acceptance (beyond the small group of initial actors) and does not lead to some kind of tangible improvement the implementation of the social innovation fails.

We need to be aware of the following aspects of social innovation not elaborated here. The improvement has to be understood in a relative sense, as what is seen as an improvement by a majority of actors might be disadvantageous to a minority. To define social innovations as we have done does not predict when an idea or new way

of action may become a social innovation. We recommend that this is always decided on a case by case basis in relation to the process under consideration and its context. Thus, identifying a social innovation, especially the tipping point responsible for its success or failure, may be quite difficult.

### Why are social innovations important for rural development?

After having discussed the theoretical concept of social innovations, the next paragraph focuses on the role of social innovations in rural development in developed, democratic, capitalist, industrial countries. It will be shown that social innovations in rural development have not yet been well researched although they seem to play an important role in rural development according to rural scientists like, for example, Magel (1998, 2001), Ray (2000), Lee *et al.* (2005), Thomas (2003), Laschewski and Neu (2004).

As a result of the socioeconomic structural change in rural areas throughout most developed, democratic, capitalist, industrial countries, especially in Europe, a shift from sectoral to territorial development strategies can be noticed (Ray 1998; Lee *et al.* 2005). As a reaction, the European Union has begun to redirect funds away from sectors (horizontal) and towards territories (vertical) (for example, Ray 1998, p. 5). Thus, against the assumption that citizens of a region know best which problems their region has to deal with and what activities are necessary to tackle them (Magel 1998; Lee *et al.* 2005), the mobilisation of neo-endogenous development strategies is attracting more and more interest (Ray 1998, 2000; Magel 2001; Thomas 2003; Laschewski and Neu 2004). Thus, some proponents of the neo-endogenous development paradigm believe that in order to develop rural areas it is necessary to mobilise endogenous potentials to outweigh different interests and to strengthen regional identity as a central precondition for both regional development and the success of neo-endogenous regional development (Laschewski and Neu 2004). In this regard Magel (2000) and Häußermann and Siebel (1993) have stressed that the success of neo-endogenous regional development processes is strongly dependent on people's ability to develop sustainable structures, and in doing to establish a balance that, on the one hand, facilitates all forms of innovation, creativity, new ideas and visions in acting, and, on the other hand, maintains necessary stability.

Similarly, Cooke (1998) stresses that with the convergence of evolutionary theory and industrial district theory it has become clear that differences in the development of regions can no longer be explained as a result of physical and financial resources only. Instead, they have to be seen as a result of the different organisational and technical abilities of regional actors to apply practical and technical know-how to the regional resources available (Cooke, in after Klich 2003, p. 37).

Thus, collective learning, co-ordination and communication processes between different actors in teams, actor networks and other means of co-operation, that are new in relation to the horizon of experiences of the people concerned are, amongst others,<sup>9</sup> important factors for the success of neo-endogenous regional development. Therefore rural development building upon neo-endogenous strategies can be successful only if it also builds upon, encourages and supports the development of social innovations. Because of these aspects, social innovations do matter in rural

development as they are one pillar of sustainable rural development processes. Indeed although social innovations may not necessarily emerge in such processes, it is questionable whether neo-endogenous development can be sustainable without social innovations. This matter is worth considering in more depth.

The following examples will help to clarify the theoretical aspects elaborated above and specify more precisely what is meant when speaking of social innovations in rural development.

*Example 1: Weissensee, district Spittal/Drau, Kärnten, Austria  
(Pollermann 2004: p. 138.)*

In 1989 a local development concept developed by external experts on behalf of the provincial government of Kärnten motivated local actors from tourism, agriculture and local affairs to turn towards the development of a *Leitbild* for the communities of Weissensee and Stockenboi. They decided to develop the *Leitbild* (development concept) using a bottom-up approach, moderated by an external consultancy and involving the local population. The motto of the *Leitbild* was '*Spielplatz der Natur*' (playground of nature). Its main aim was to reconcile tourism with nature conservation. One result was the introduction of communal acreage payments for the ecologically sound cultivation of agricultural areas. All in all, this motivated nearly all the farmers in Weissensee to abandon the use of pesticides and chemical fertilisers. This also resulted in an abandonment of planting commercial crops (for example, silage corn) in favour of grassland farming.

*Example 2: Ökomodell Achental e. V. (incorporated society eco-model Achental), Bavaria, Germany (Pollermann 2004: 167pp.)*

In 1997, within the scope of the EU-initiative INTERREG II, the mayor of the community of Schleching initiated a proposal for better co-operation in the border region between Bavaria and Austria. The aim of the INTERREG II initiative was to promote ecologically sound community development, the diversification of agricultural products, the introduction of ecologically sound tourism and the linking of biotopes. In 1998 seven other communities in the Achental valley decided to submit a similar proposal. Finally in 1999, the eight Achental communities decided to establish an incorporated society eco-model Achental (in 2000, another community joined the eco-model). The executive board of the eco-model Achental consists of the mayors of the participating communities. The conceptual work is done in several working committees comprising interested citizens as well as experts. Thus, both the planning and the concepts of collective direct marketing, visions for village renewal, and so on, are discussed and conceptualised collaboratively across these communities.

In both examples, social innovations can be identified as the driving force behind the observed development. In Weissensee the decision of the communities of Weissensee and Stockenboi to develop a joint *Leitbild* and introduce communal acreage payments leading on the one hand to a reconciliation of tourism with nature conservation and on the other hand to a change of behaviour due to methods of cultivation

on behalf of most of the farmers can be identified as a social innovation. In Achenal valley the establishment of an incorporated society with the aim of pursuing collective planning aims and direct marketing across communities can be identified as a social innovation.

In both regions an initial group of people (actors from community politics, tourism and agriculture in Weissensee; mayors in the Achenal valley) joined in a network of aligned interests. Both examples also show that such social innovations do not emerge from nothing. Some kind of impetus is necessary. In both examples the initial impetus for the social innovation described came from outside the regions. In Weissensee the local development concept initiated by the provincial government in Kärnten was the initial impetus. In the Achenal valley the initial impetus was participation at the INTERREG II initiative. Both examples thus show that factors external to the people involved, like regional development programmes, might play an important role in triggering social innovations in rural development.

In the groups' changes of attitudes, perceptions and behaviour that is new to the people involved can be observed. In Weissensee the communities of Weissensee and Stockenboi decided to develop a joint *Leitbild* and to introduce a communal acreage payment as an incentive to change to ecologically sound forms of cultivation that are in accordance with the *Leitbild*. As consequence most of the farmers decided to follow the *Leitbild* (join the actor network of the *Leitbild* proponents) sustain from the use of pesticides in the future and shift from agronomic uses to grassland farming as new form of cultivation.

Using the example of the farmers, the Weissensee example also shows that collaborative acting only occurs when every single actor can identify the benefit of joining an actor network to themselves (communal acreage payment as enhancement of or compensation for the farmer's income).

In Achenal valley the mayors of the nine participating communities decided to approach community planning aspects collaboratively. Gradually other regional actors like farmers or innkeepers joined the network of collaborative acting resulting in the eco-model Achenal.

In both Weissensee and the Achenal valley, the collaborative acting across community borders, in planning and regional development was something new in relation to the regional actors' horizon of experiences in both regions. In both Weissensee and the Achenal valley, the idea of the new concept spread so that other actors joined the initial network of aligned interests.

These examples of the importance of social innovation in rural development are not new; instead they have long been recognised and integrated into regional, national and supranational development programmes striving for a sustainable integrated rural development like LEADER, Agenda 21 and Regionen Aktiv, at least theoretically.

By evaluating these development programmes the attention is, on the one hand, turned to directly measurable regional development effects against the background of the programme's logic of intervention and aims. On the other hand, the evaluation also concentrates on the importance of local knowledge, regional identity and social networks which also play an important role in the emergence and formation of social innovations as shown above. In consequence, the field of social innovations in neo-endogenous rural development should be thoroughly researched.

Paradoxically, however, although it is well known and accepted that community engagement is one key aspect for successful rural development, it is not well supported by local, regional and national institutions and funding bodies (McSorley 2008, p. 22). Furthermore, Schleicher-Tappeser (2000 p. 3), in analysing different regional development processes, identified the lack of social innovations as one important constraint on a region's vitality and further development.

So one can conclude that either the findings of the evaluation of development programmes are not properly taken into account when initiating new programmes or processes or that there are still open questions concerning the driving forces behind social innovations in rural development and how to support the creation of social innovations.

By analysing these evaluations of rural development programmes we came to the conclusion that the latter is the case, as following statements illustrate:

How can regional authorities and local actors ensure that the principles of an integrated development are embedded in the common policy? The focal point of research should therefore be research about factors that are responsible for success or failure in order to achieve results that are regarded by policymakers. (Europäische Beobachtungsstelle LEADER 2001, p. 60, translation by author)

In almost all LAGs [local action groups] the actors, interest representatives and project execution organizations were sensitised; however, the development strategies were seldom anchored in the broad population. This closely relates to the LAG working method and the organizational structures of partnership ...; the phase of mobilization is supposed to become more important in the future in order to generate a higher degree of [the community's'] own initiative/dynamic. So, the LEADER prerequisites need to be implemented understandable for the 'average citizen'. Synergies with Agenda 21 activities are valuable for the bottom-up approach. (ÖIR 2003, p. 98)

The development of regional management as well as the organization of the collaboration of regional actors was the area most often left open and that was afflicted with the most question marks in the survey. (Gehrlein 2004, p. 10 translation by author)

The above conclusions about the low levels of attention that are still given to social innovations and their role and functioning in rural development research is confirmed by the OECD. In its Oslo manual on innovation, after stating that innovation knowledge is embodied in people and their skills, the OECD remarks that methods for measuring the role of this human capital in innovation are not well developed, and limited information is available from innovation surveys (OECD 2005, p. 43). Similarly, in their current consideration about LEADER and innovation Dargan and Shucksmith (2008) came to the conclusion that social innovations play an often underestimated role in rural development in spite of their doubtless importance for the success of every rural development effort (Dargan and Shucksmith 2008). Based on these findings it is possible to summarise that although the importance of social innovations for rural development purposes has been well recognised and discussed in theory, it has obviously not yet been very well researched. It can be assumed that the difficulties in defining, identifying and measuring social innovations is one reason for this.

### Proposal for future research

If social innovations are difficult to define, identify and measure, we first need to establish appropriate methods for evaluating them in rural development. Governance research has shown that for the success or failure of governance processes, so-called decision points (strategic decisions) and tipping points that develop in dynamic processes are crucial for governance processes to become stabilised (Fürst *et al.* 2006, p. 202). The analysis of social innovations in rural development should build on these insights by focusing on factors that are responsible for the stabilising of social innovations and on the decision points responsible for the emergence of social innovations. In doing so, the skills that are required by local as well as by extra-local actors in public and policy to support the creation and emergence of social innovations also need to be studied.

Further research could, for example, concentrate on identifying and analysing factors that contribute to an exploitation of social capital in rural areas and that may result in the establishment of milieus<sup>10</sup> that promote social innovations. As shown in the examples of Weissensee and Aachental, external incentives and factors might be important for the development of social innovations (such as the development concept initiated by the district government in Weissensee and INTERREG II in Aachental). It is likely that the initial impetus for innovation is triggered by external factors, as ideas or the identification of a need to change one's behaviour very seldom arise in a vacuum, without any external influence or stimulation. Thus research on the importance of external influences and their role in social innovations is needed. Against the background of rural development in particular, the role and significance of development programmes and other incentives as catalyst for regional social innovations should also be addressed in more depth. Thus, attention should also be given to how to shape such programmes so that they explicitly foster the creation of sustainable social innovations.

Another aspect worth investigating is the actor constellations that lead to successful social innovations. Here research could aim to detect successful patterns of participating actors, as well as the role that third-sector organisations or the surrounding context, plays in the development and stabilisation of social innovations in rural development. Lastly, it is worth considering whether active citizen involvement in regional development really is the key to sustainable social innovations.

The identification of potential fields of research could be continued further, but we think that this article has provided enough detail on this matter. The main aim of such research should not be to evaluate rural development programmes but explicitly to further question and examine factors that forward or hinder the development of social innovation in the area of tension between bottom-up and top-down rural development approaches.

The question now arises as to how to address these aspects methodologically. Unlike the general works in the field of development studies that concentrate mainly either on structural, institutional or political economy analyses (Long 2001, p. 1), we propose to address social innovations in rural development using an actor-oriented approach. The reason for this is that this perspective permits the exploration of the self-organising practices of actors involved in rural development by focusing on how



'actors (both "local" and "external" to particular arenas) are locked into a series of intertwined battles over resources, meanings and institutional legitimacy and control' (Long 2001, p. 1), instead of solely concentrating on conditions, contexts and driving forces of social life (Long 2001, p. 1).

For example, social network analysis, a structuralist method aiming at the analysis of social relationships between social actors<sup>11</sup> reveals only patterns of human contact, for example by focusing on the centrality of actors (those that are connected with many others are more central than those with only a few connections). But social network analysis neither reveals the motivation that animated actors to join, for example, a rural development process, nor the dynamic of the actor network (actor networks sometimes pass through different stages, during which the composition, as well as the centrality, of actors can change (Neumeier 2005; Herrmann and Neumeier 2007) or the importance that the actions of non-social actors have on social actors' decisions (Neumeier 2005; Herrmann and Neumeier 2007). For a comprehensive overview and discussion of different actor-oriented approaches and their theoretical framework see Long (2001).

As social innovations always take place as a co-evolutionary learning process occurring in networks (Leeuwis and van den Ban 2004 cited in Dargan and Shucksmith 2008), network research seems to be suitable to address the topic methodologically. Thus the focus should lie on the empirical analysis of local interactions, dynamics in the actor network, information sharing within the actor network and between and across different interlinked actor networks as well as on the analysis of how and why actor networks emerge, persist, change or dissolve. The approach should also take into consideration the interactions and patterns of interactions between people, tools and natural resources, as it is necessary to explore how actors, whether they are people or things, are intertwined and how they influence each other as well as the creation, maintenance, success or failure of social innovations. In short, it should not be limited to the consideration of social networks alone but permit the analysis of hybrid networks consisting of human and non-human actors (Brunori *et al.* 2008, p. 7). The reason is, as Butkevičienė (2009) states:

social innovations are shaped by [the] social system (legal framework, actors involved in innovation development, etc.) and that at the same time are influencing the social system, as they [are able to] change some aspects of the social system. (Butkevičienė 2009, p. 83).

## Summary and final discussion

Starting with an analysis of the theoretical concept behind the term 'social innovation', the article has discussed the importance such social innovations have in neo-endogenous rural development. The literature review has shown that the theoretical concept of social innovation is neither clear nor concise. Social innovations are either addressed as new ways of organising the business practice, workplace or external relations of an enterprise to improve economic activities (organisation-centred approach), as the generation of new ideas that function as drivers to overall social change (according to the first sociological approach) or as the generation and implementation of new ideas about how people should organise interpersonal activities to

meet one or more common goals (according to the second sociological approach). Thus, the concept drawn by different ways of defining social innovations is a rather woolly one.

Therefore, we attempted to define and refine the concept with the aim of arriving at a more adequate general and non-context-specific definition. We came to the conclusion that social innovations can be generally understood as a change in the attitudes, behaviour or perceptions of a group of people joined in a network of aligned interests that, in relation to the group's horizon of experiences, leads to new and improved ways of collaborative action in the group and beyond. Such an essentialist understanding does not entail that the organisation-centred approach or first sociological approach are incorrect. Instead it conceives of organising business practices, workplaces or external relations of an enterprise as well as the generation of new ideas that function as drivers to overall social change to be very distinctive, special cases of social innovation. Using this concept, we see that social innovations play an important role in integrated rural development and that quite a few open questions remain to be analysed.

It was shown that in rural development a structural change in rural areas in developed, democratic, capitalist, industrial countries also caused a shift from sectoral to territorial development strategies. Thus, against the insight that citizens of a region know best which problems their region has to deal with and which activities are necessary to tackle them, the mobilisation of neo-endogenous development strategies is attracting more and more interest. As the success of such strategies is also strongly dependent on the possibility of mobilising public participation which leads not only to sustaining traditions but to social, economic and cultural renewal. The lack of social innovation has been identified to be one important constraint on the regions' vitality and further development.

Paradoxically, however, although social innovation seems to be one of the key requirements of successful rural development, its role in this area is often underestimated. Social innovation is not directly addressed in development programmes and its creation is still not well-supported by local, regional and national institutions and funding. One reason for this may be that in spite of its importance, there are still open questions about social innovation, especially concerning the driving forces behind it in rural development and ways to support the creation of successful social innovation. Thus, it is necessary to put more emphasis in the analysis of social innovations in future rural development research. As social innovations always take place as co-evolutionary learning processes occurring in hybrid networks consisting of human and non-human actors, and spread through networks, an actor-oriented network approach was identified as one possible promising way to address social innovations in this field.

Lastly, the importance of social innovations for the success or failure of sustainable neo-endogenous rural development should not be underestimated. An in-depth analysis of this phenomenon might give us interesting new insights into why development efforts proved to be sustainable in one region but fail in others. Thus, further in-depth analyses of social innovations in rural development might bring us a step closer to an explanation why regions with similar initial conditions arrive at quite different stories of success in the end.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term 'neo-endogenous development' has been concretised by Ray (2006) to mean the process of development in the area of tension between bottom-up and top-down approaches (Ray 2006, p. 278).
- <sup>2</sup> See also the OECD definition of innovation (OECD 2005; p. 46).
- <sup>3</sup> In contrast, Pol and Ville (2009) use the term 'micro-quality of life', which they define as the quality of life in regards to a particular individual, to address things that a person can do that are generally accepted by the civil society (Pol and Ville 2009, p. 882).
- <sup>4</sup> For an overview of the concept of 'social capital' see Johnston *et al.* (2000, p. 746).
- <sup>5</sup> See also Pollermann 2004, p. 49; Fürst *et al.* 2006; Benz *et al.* 2007; Herrmann and Neumeier 2007 p. 22.
- <sup>6</sup> See also Smelser and Baltes 2001; Chesbrough 2003; Gassmann and Enkel 2004; Chesbrough *et al.* 2006; Reichwald and Piller 2006, p. 7530.
- <sup>7</sup> The precise source of the model is not known. According to Godin (2006) it gradually developed around 1945. A history of the linear model is given by Godin 2006.
- <sup>8</sup> See also Herrmann and Neumeier (2007).
- <sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the factors of success in neo-endogenous rural development, which are the commitment and abilities of the actors, organisational structure, quality of concept, level of acceptance and co-operation and access to material resources, see Neumeier and Pollermann (2011).
- <sup>10</sup> Here the term 'milieu' refers to socially embedded relationships between different regional (but also extra-regional) actors participating in regional development and promoting or advancing social innovations. Unlike discussions about innovative and creative milieus and learning region (MacKinnon *et al.* 2002; Fromhold-Eisebith 2004) aiming mainly at economic regional development, non-economic forms of regional development are explicitly addressed as well.
- <sup>11</sup> The term 'social actor' characterises conscious, thinking individuals or collectives of individuals who exercise agency.

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