



SIMRA Final Conference

Since starting in 2016, the Horizon 2020 project “**Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas**” ([SIMRA](#)) has been at the forefront of promoting the contribution of social innovation to social, economic and environmental development in disadvantaged rural areas. As a transdisciplinary research project, SIMRA has managed to address numerous facets of the current world context such as Sustainable Development Goals, the Paris Agreement, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, etc. and to make its research relevant in the real world.

The project team has explored vibrant examples of community-led projects to determine triggers and drivers, development patterns, factors of success and evaluation criteria for social innovation in rural areas. Through this work, the SIMRA project has demonstrated that social innovation can be a vital ingredient to address rural challenges such as outmigration, diversification of rural businesses, climate change, changing lifestyles, and restructuring of rural economies.

Much of the social innovation process is made up of capacity-building at the local level and co-learning, in order to engage and empower local communities and to enhance societal well-being. However, the building of social capital and reconfiguring of social practices at the local level can be supported by policy measures and political support. During this final conference, the project’s main findings were presented and their policy implications for all levels (EU, national, regional and local) were discussed, including with regards to the legislative reforms still in discussion for the next EU programming period 2021-2027.



Key-note address | The role of power dynamics in transformative social innovation

Flor Avelino works at the Dutch Research Institute for Transitions as Assistant Professor and Senior Researcher in the politics of sustainability transitions and social innovation. She specialises in power and empowerment theories.

The keynote address focused on transformative social innovation, which is what SIMRA attempted to do through its Innovation Actions in rural areas. Transformative social innovation is at the crossroads between social innovation, sustainability transition, social movements and the social solidarity economy. It is deeply related to the current political debate of how to ensure a just transition to a sustainable society and the associated power plays.

Very similar to the SIMRA definition, Flor Avelino's definition of social innovation, which emerged from the [TRANSIT](#) project, assimilated the concept of new ways of doing, new ways of thinking and new ways of organising. To take a specific example, energy communities are not an innovation per se as they are based on technology and an old cooperative model, but they induce new relationships between neighbours and between citizens and governments in today's world.

However, a social innovation is not necessarily transformative, the transformation only occurs if the innovation challenges, alters or replaces the current system. The phenomenon of eco-villages is a good example of such transformations. These settlements are inhabited by volunteer citizens willing to develop a lifestyle in close cohabitation with nature (through agroecology practices, eco-buildings, etc.). In these villages, the inhabitants have had to create new forms of governance and conflict resolution to achieve the aims they set themselves. The interesting aspect to pinpoint here is that although ecovillages are deeply embedded in their landscapes, they are organised in a global movement and reach out of their network.

This empowerment of people through both local embeddedness and global connectedness was defined as "translocal empowerment" by Flor Avelino. It is a strong enabling condition for transformative social innovation but not enough to face the current global challenges such as inequality, oppression, exclusion, exploitation, or injustice. Flor Avelino's research question therefore was **How and to what extent are social innovations challenging and/or reproducing power relations?**

The definition of power is complex and defines relationships between actors and structures, within actor groups, or within structures, with individual or collective goals. The keynote address focused on three power contestations: consensual versus conflictual power, centralised versus diffuse power, constraining versus enabling power. What emerges from Flor Avelino's research is the boundaries between State, market and third sector can shift to make space for social innovation, but can also create imbalances in the process, when market takes over for instance and overpowers civil society.

To conclude, when looking at new alternatives and innovations, there is always an underlying paradox of replicating old models when replicating and upstreaming social innovations. The question of maintaining transformative power while giving social innovations more power is a real one. Indeed, mainstreaming is often associated with market and commodities, and bureaucracy, but rarely socialisation and community. Part of the solution could be to fully embrace the paradox and re-politicise the social innovation discourse, provoke policy debate and occupy more public space. The social innovation discourse would therefore be more connected to current social discontent, which is where the researchers have a role to play to analyse politics. Some shared principles amongst stakeholders, policy-makers and researchers were established in the [TRANSIT Manifesto for Transformative Social Innovation](#), such as that social innovation should never be an excuse to dismantle public services and that it is a promising response to the challenge of globalisation.

Session 1 | How is Social Innovation making a change in rural areas?

What is social innovation in rural areas and how does it benefit rural communities and economies?

SIMRA defines Social Innovation as **“The reconfiguring of social practices, in response to societal challenges, which seeks to enhance outcomes on societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors”** (Polman *et al.*, 2017) which encompasses a wide range of initiatives in rural areas. **Diana Valero from the University of Highlands and Islands** illustrated that diversity through the presentation of one of the main outputs of the SIMRA project, [a database of social innovations in rural areas](#). Information on more than 300 initiatives has been collected by project partners or proposed by external innovators through the project website, covering a variety of topics, forms, and target population groups. For example, Diana Valero gave the examples of the Souliyatés’ network of Moroccan women who are fighting for equal rights for women to collective land access; of the Integra Todos social enterprise in Spain which is offering dressmaking and farming training to people at risk of social exclusion; and of the Tíree film club for children in Scotland, UK.

Support for these types of initiatives can be mobilised at the European level through the Smart Villages component of the rural development policy, explained **Paul Soto from the European Network for Rural Development (ENRD)**. The Smart Villages initiative was launched in 2017 by the European Parliament and is now the focus of a working group in the ENRD. Based on the following working definition of a Smart Village, **“Communities in rural areas that use innovative solutions to improve their resilience, building on local strengths and opportunities”**, the initiators of the concept have succeeded in asking for a Smart Villages result indicator in the CAP Strategic Plans even though there is no associated measure. It is important to note that digital technologies are not a pre-condition to the development of Smart Villages. Over the last few years the work of SIMRA and the ENRD have been complementary and have identified many common characteristics of rural social innovation: it can start small, it is driven by people’s needs, it spreads via cooperation, it builds on local assets, etc. The ENRD has developed a toolkit of rural development measures that Member States can implement to support Smart Villages, and thus Social Innovation, including: Cooperation (and in particular LEADER), Knowledge exchange, CAP Networks, Installation of young farmers and rural business start-up, Investments, etc. However, it has recommended that there is also a need for more flexible support measures to innovation in non-agricultural activities.

The example of Forest Defense Groups (Catalan acronym: ADFs) was presented by **Carmen Rodríguez (Centre Tecnològic Forestal de Catalunya)** and **Xavier Jovés (Secretariat d’Agrupacions de Defensa Forestal de Catalunya)**. ADFs were officially created in the 1980s and are associations formed by forest owners, agricultural and environmentalist’s associations, and municipalities. Their purpose is to work on wildfire prevention, surveillance and first response to forest fires, as well as to reforest affected areas within their territories. ADFs are active in most of Catalonia’s territory, however their origins are to be traced back to the rural areas of Central Catalonia, where *pagesos* (Catalan peasants) had traditionally joined forces to protect their properties from forest fires, during a time in which firefighting systems were not as advanced as they are today. ADFs have been operating for over 30 years in Catalonia, partly due to the strong linkages with their territory and its customs and traditions. Continuous support from the regional government was identified as a success factor for this social innovation. Their success is also showcased by how their example has been transferred from rural to urban contexts in Catalonia.



Session 2 | Emerging innovative practices and their facilitation

Rural social innovations can emerge in different ways: cooperatives, community trusts, networks, seed funding, etc. This session analysed the drivers of rural social innovation, including policy drivers.

The SIMRA project studied the social innovation process through **Social Innovation Actions**, which are a new way of collaborating between research and practice. Social Innovation Actions aim at creating collaborative learning and networking opportunities at different scales, with continuous interactions amongst researchers, 'knowledge brokers' and stakeholders to foster and mainstream social innovation. The process should enable rural stakeholders to test and exploit their potential for social innovation, with the aim of realising impacts in the territory and the market, in businesses, investments opportunities and in building capacity within local governments. **Elena Górriz-Mifsud from the European Forest Institute** explained that SIMRA had managed to identify five needs for social innovators to succeed, based on the study of 7 Social Innovation Actions:

1. Time and opportunity: to structure reflection, to work around volunteer timetables, to allow for an iterative learning process
2. Leadership, coordination and commitment: building relationships and a working group, sharing responsibilities, developing a shared vision, managing risks and conflicts
3. Skills: bridging both local and external knowledge is important to design and implement the social innovation, as well as ensuring sufficient exchanges and networking to build social capital
4. Finance: for seed money and operational support, without burdening the community
5. Supportive environment: through integrated and flexible legal frameworks at all scales and through political recognition of the benefits of the social innovation

One of the seven Social Innovation was the [Growing Club](#), in Lancashire and Cumbria, UK, presented by **Sophie Alkhaled from Lancaster University**. The Growing Club provides an alternative model for business training and coaching of women entrepreneurs living in urban and rural areas, coming from a range of socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Three back-to-back courses have been set up for the women: the **Sowing Club** which is a pre-start up courses for women; **Roots and Shoots** is a start-up course for those ready to start a small business; and the **Bloom and Grow** programme is designed with coaching and support structures to help significantly grow the small business and accelerate its success. The establishment of this Innovation Action helps empower women by alleviating them from poverty and becoming independent from governmental subsidies thus improving the local economy and ensuring the social integration of vulnerable women and their families into society.

Social innovation has increasingly been present in the European Commission's approach to emerging socio-economic problems, as explained by **Katalin Somody from DG EMPL**. In order to adequately respond to new challenges, the European Pillar of Social Rights was proclaimed on 17 November 2017. The Pillar sets out 20 guiding principles and rights of equal access to the labour market, fair working conditions and adequate sustainable social protection. The human capital aspect of this policy was further reinforced in the recent communication "[A Strong Social Europe for Just Transitions](#)". Resources allocated to social policy innovation to mainstream policy innovations and scale-up successful experiences are channelled through the **European Social Fund (ESF)** and the **Programme for Employment and Social Innovation (EaSI)**. Several calls have been launched over the past few years by DG EMPL to directly support social policy innovation initiatives in the EaSI Participating Countries. The 2021-2027 budget proposal for the EU focuses on the implementation of the European Pillar of Social Rights. The new ESF+ will aim at enhancing synergies between different funds and encouraging cross-sectoral cooperation.



Session 3 | How can public policies support Social Innovation in rural areas?

Having discussed the emergence and the benefits of social innovation in rural areas, this session offered a panorama of the policy measures supporting social innovation and of their implementation at all levels.

Over the past four years, SIMRA has explored the challenge of raising the profile of social innovation in policy making, because although social innovation may happen as a result of citizen action alone, its impact can be significantly enhanced by the design of supportive policies.

Orsolya Frizon-Somogyi from DG AGRI went into the detail of how the next Common Agricultural Policy 2021-2027 would strive to reach such an impact, through political engagement, awareness-raising activities, interventions, simplified procedures and financial support. The legislative proposal for the new CAP 2021-2027 clearly highlights the needs both for innovation and for solutions that are sustainable from the economic, environmental and social perspectives. DG AGRI is conveying the message both at EU-level through toolkits, events, etc. and to the Member States through the negotiations over the CAP Strategic Plans. DG AGRI is stressing the importance of involving the rural community in the design of the interventions, to build on & to build with the rural community the structure that will facilitate social innovation in rural areas. Possible interventions to include in the Plans to support social innovation comprise: cooperation possibilities (LEADER, EIP-AGRI, Smart Villages), roll-out of broadband, training and advisory services, and networking. For the time being, the peer-to-peer learning from networking is an obligation from the regulation, as is a minimum spending of 5% of the EAFRD envelope on LEADER. Through those different actions, DG AGRI would like to increase the financial uptake for social innovative actions under the CAP, which would contribute to tackling rural areas' social challenges. As a conclusion, Orsolya Frizon-Somogyi informed the participants that the European Commission is launching a new initiative for a '**Long-term vision for rural areas**' that will be prepared based on a wide consultation process.

During the session, two examples were given that show how social innovations could influence policy. The first example was the Italian **Social Farming National Forum** presented by **Ilaria Signoriello**, a community of practice for stakeholders to discuss and promote social farming. Since its inception in 2011, the Forum urged the institutions to proceed to define a regulatory framework for Social Agriculture. The legislative process they started led to Italian law 141/2015, which recognises the value of social agriculture as a driver for inclusive local and rural development. Thanks to this recognition, social farming has been used as a tool to fight against the exploitation of migrants in agriculture and to revalorise the land confiscated from the mafia.

The second example presented by **Mohammed Bengoumi from the FAO** was the 2015 Tunisian law on supporting dairy professional organizations through public-private partnerships. Considering the relevance of the small-scale dairy sector in Tunisia (80% of farmers), this national programme aimed at supporting Producers Organisations to improve milk productivity and livelihoods of small farmers. The FAO supported the Tunisian government in the implementation of this programme by developing a participatory project aiming at transferring extension and milk control activities from a national institution to three existing cooperatives, thus initiating dialogue and providing technical support. As a SIMRA partner, the FAO used the newly developed evaluation framework to collect data on the process and the impact of the socio-economic situation of producers. The results were sufficiently convincing that the Tunisian government revised the original law.

SIMRA's policy recommendations

Robert Lukesch from ÖAR presented **SIMRA's policy findings and recommendations**. Based upon the premise that social innovation can create more inclusive politico-social institutions, through the reconfiguration of social practices, SIMRA has analysed the EU's policy framework through 3 lenses: sectoral policies (i.e. social care), structural policies (i.e. CAP measures, such as LEADER for instance), institutional policies (i.e. legislation on associations and cooperatives).

SIMRA's policy recommendations stem from this analysis and highlight the importance and breadth of scope of social innovation which should be better recognised in policies. The 4 key concepts associated to social innovation as identified by SIMRA - innovation ecosystem, social capital, niche development, creativity - should benefit from a supportive enabling policy framework to empower social innovators in rural areas to take action with minimum risk-taking thus providing solutions and alternatives to their local challenges. SIMRA's nine key messages for the policy community are accessible in our final policy brief "**How policy can help bring about social innovation in rural areas**".

Panel debate | Changes in policy and practice to enhance social innovation in rural areas – Where next?

- **Franc Bogovic**, Member of the European Parliament (EPP/SL)
- **Tom Jones**, Member of the European Economic and Social Committee
- **Jean-Louis Diman**, French National Research Institute for Agriculture, Food, and Environment (INRAE)
- **Maya Mathias**, Social Innovation Team, CIPRA International

Examples and presentations given throughout the conference proved repeatedly that creativity and bottom-up initiatives lie at the heart of social innovation. So, the panellists were first asked to react to **how can policy be used to develop and support creativity in marginalised rural areas**. For Tom Jones, creativity is associated with innovation and cultural heritage which are vectors of inclusive rural development, both protecting local cultural heritage and adapting it to welcome newcomers. Whereas for MEP Franc Bogovic and Maya Mathias, policy support towards young rural dwellers and young farmers fosters creativity as they maintain an intergenerational link and avoid rural depopulation, thus giving an opportunity for young people to explore their ideas and projects. Jean-Louis Diman pointed out that supporting policies towards experimentation are also needed as a precondition to a supportive environment which empowers social innovation.

For Tom Jones, an important **policy instrument** is the proofing of policies, whether rural-proofing or future-proofing, to assess any and every policy in a sustainable way considering intergenerational challenges, rural-urban linkages, etc. As an Alpine-rooted NGO, Maya Mathias of CIPRA pointed out the importance of project programmes and giving municipalities and local levels of decision-making opportunities and a voice. MEP Franc Bogovic recalled the Smart Villages initiatives which has the potential to support social innovations in rural areas in a flexible and integrated way.

The question arose of **the role of each sector**: public, private, third sector. Panellists agreed that there is a need for: i) a participatory approach is necessary at the local and regional level to ensure inclusiveness and community buy-in; and ii) targeted funding to foster the exchange of good practices and the promotion of successful initiatives notwithstanding the origin of the social innovation. Indeed, as Elena Gorris mentioned earlier in the day, **funding** is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for social innovation, which was also emphasised by panellists. Jean-Louis Diman highlighted that building social capital and showcasing experimentation results could lead to sustainable funding later in the implementation of the social innovation, and MEP Franc Bogovic recalled the opportunities offered by smart specialisations to build on local assets.

The last point discussed focused on the **alignment between social innovation on the ground and policy**. Policy will always carry constraints such as evaluation and application processes for grants which social innovators will need to work with to ensure accountability to citizens and operationalisation of research. However, some progress has been made on all counts: the European Court of Auditors has recently pointed out the need to simplify over-complicated tenders; Horizon 2020 has developed targeted calls depending on the development stage of the social innovation (research versus operationalisation); and finally, the European Parliament's intergroup on Rural, Mountainous and Remote Areas & Smart Villages, co-chaired by MEP Franc Bogovic, has included social innovation in their working programme.



Wrap up | Key lessons for socio-economic changes in rural areas through social and community innovations

SIMRA's work has been focused on the co-creation and co-delivery of social innovation by policy-makers, stakeholders and researchers. As Flor Avelino illustrated in her keynote delivery, social innovation leads to new ways of doing, new ways of thinking and new ways of organising. An important aspect developed by the SIMRA project is the importance of the local social capital as fertile ground upon which to build social innovations, as well as the enabling and hindering factors of the resilience of a social innovation. Some factors were explored during the conference both from the policy and the practice perspectives, thanks to SIMRA's new conceptual frameworks and methodologies for the Case Studies and Innovation Actions.

To close the conference, **Alexia Rouby from DG AGRI**, the project policy officer for SIMRA, recalled that the project was funded to give a rural perspective on social innovation and congratulated the partnership for creating knowledge which will be useful both for researchers and local practitioners. According to her, the project delivered in terms of new knowledge through the wealth of examples collected, through the development of new tools such as the evaluation framework and methods manual, and by delivering impact on the ground through the Innovation Actions.

Some take-away messages for the DG AGRI were the core importance of people and localities, and therefore the need for flexible frameworks to empower people to solve their challenges, by building up skills and giving leadership to local communities. It is also key to connect people and communities which can be done through the rural networks and to support facilitation on the ground.

Future perspectives for social innovation will exist in the wave of new policies being prepared for 2021-2027, notably through the CAP and its opportunities for a smart mix of support measures bringing together Cooperation, LEADER, Smart Villages, etc. and the European Social Fund to support skills development and social inclusion. A topic which was discussed less during the conference was the upcoming Horizon Europe programme which is expected to support community-based innovation.

Finally, social innovation is also reflected in the new set of European Commission priorities embedded in the Green Deal and encompassing a long-term vision for rural areas, an action plan for the social economy, a digital strategy fit for the future, and last but not least, the guiding principles of leaving no one behind.

Useful links

- ✓ Presentations and photographs of the conference: www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/newsevents/simra-final-conference/
- ✓ Database of good practices: www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/simradatabase/
- ✓ "Social Innovation: A Practice guide": www.simra-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SIMRA_SI_Practice_Guide_interactive.pdf
- ✓ Policy brief "How policy can help bring about social innovation in rural areas": www.simra-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2020-02-03-Policy-brief_Slee-Mosdale_FINAL.pdf
- ✓ SIMRA Innovation Action participatory videos: www.youtube.com/channel/UCjfhfN3zAv6yYxxHUIsLitg
- ✓ SIMRA deliverables: <http://www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/deliverables/>
- ✓ SIMRA's collections of good practices (case studies, rural services, Balkans, mountain areas, Innovation Actions): www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/resources/collection-of-examples/

Workshop | Learning how to use SIMRA's results

During this workshop, participants were trained on how to use the tools developed by SIMRA to support the implementation of social innovations, to evaluate social innovations in rural areas and to discuss policy-making bottlenecks and enablers in the field of social innovation.

“How to develop a social innovation in rural areas?” – Facilitated by the European Forest Institute

This session introduced participants to the Innovation Actions methodology used within the SIMRA project to support local initiatives in a socially and economically sustainable way. Innovation Actions constitute one of the most important tasks carried out by SIMRA as they enabled researchers to apply the co-creation methodology and learn from along with the practitioners. Research on Innovation Actions touched upon several important parameters to be taken into account such as properly engaging with the community, building human capital locally, but thanks to external knowledge too, and never underestimating the importance of local context. Some key messages for success and transferability are summarised in a 7-step guide intended for practitioners which was also presented during the workshop.

“How to evaluate social innovation in rural areas?” – Facilitated by the University of Padova

This session familiarised the participants with the evaluation framework developed by the SIMRA partners. The framework takes into account both the process and the impacts of social innovation in marginalised rural areas. During the establishment of this framework special attention was given to the social, economic, environmental and institutional/political (governance) aspects of social innovation. This well-constructed set of methods will enable evaluators to develop an accurate picture of impacts and outputs of a social innovation, at different scales and in various levels of detail. This evaluation framework of social innovation is proving to be a very useful tool to answer the difficult challenge of measuring social innovations, and to prove the value of an initiative in order for it to obtain funding and improve people's well-being in rural areas.

“How can public policies support social innovation in rural areas?” – Facilitated by the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU) and Wageningen University and Research

This session explored the challenge of raising the profile of social innovation in policymaking, because although social innovation may happen as a result of citizen action alone its impact can be significantly enhanced by the design of supportive policies. By using examples from different policy fields, the workshop aims to highlight factors that foster or hinder the role of policies in supporting social innovation, such as policy architecture being designed in silos, and how they could be improved.

Apart from the coverage of methods and tools, this training workshop also contextualised the ways in which these SIMRA results could be used to answer current societal challenges such as climate change, social inequalities, complex demographics, democratic crises, social inclusion, etc. We hope you will use them!

