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SOCIAL INNOVATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT. TWO LONGITUDINAL CASE STUDIES FROM THE NORTH-EAST ROMANIA

ABSTRACT

Social innovation has an incontestable role in the vitality and development of rural communities, as it results from the literature devoted to this subject. However, due to the difficulties of defining, identifying and measuring social innovation, there are still many unclear aspects, leaving room for different interpretations. In this paper we address some theoretical aspects pointed out by the authors who have studied social innovation indirectly, as a mean by which economic growth can be reached, but also directly, from a sociological perspective, as a determinant of social change because it constitutes a solution to a social problem which leads to the improvement of the existing situation, respectively to the increase of the quality of life for groups of individuals, communities and society as a whole. Through the examples presented in the paper, we will show how social innovation can contribute to reducing social inequalities within local communities, to economic well-being, to developing entrepreneurial spirit and to balanced and sustainable territorial development of rural space.

Key words: social innovation, social entrepreneurship, development, longitudinal studies.

Jel Classification: O3, L31, R11.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term *social innovation*, as well as the concept behind it, is a contested one, with multiple meanings that go beyond the academic environment (Ayob *et al.*, 2016: 635), not being defined uniformly (Neumeier, 2012: 49), arousing the interest of specialists in different fields and generating numerous scientific debates over the years. The university and academic environment in Romania was no stranger to these concerns, as there is a whole series of works dedicated to this term (Zamfir, 2006; Zamfir & Stănescu, 2007; Zamfir & Stoica, 2006, 2009; Matei, 2009; Preotesi, 2009 etc.). Social innovation is usually defined by them as “a new structural solution to a social problem” and which “produces a social change in the sense of improving the existing situation”, respectively of “increasing the quality of life for groups of individuals, communities and society as a whole, a solution that was disseminated and adopted ”(Matei, 2009: 91).

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As it results from the definition, the elements of social innovation are: the social problem, the new solution, the assimilation in the collective practice and the social change produced.

The *social innovation* term is closely linked to the *social development* one. Social development involves “orienting a community towards achieving a desirable state” through a “time-planned process” and a “set of combined actions” (Zamfir & Soica, 2006, 2009), and social innovation contributes to achieving social goals. Some Romanian authors approached the term *community development*, being defined as “voluntary change in, through and for the community” (Sandu, 2005: 15), so also a form of social innovation. In general, the main conclusion of these authors was that social innovation has an indisputable role in the development of rural communities in Romania.

In this paper, as novelty, we tried to identify the ingredients needed for social change to become permanent in the case of rural communities. To this end, we analyzed two case studies from Romania, following especially the dynamics of communities over time, through a longitudinal approach.

2. STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

The first to study social innovation was the economist Joseph Alois Schumpeter (1883–1950) who, in his theory of “destructive creation,” described the key process of economic change as being generated by waves of innovative activity hitting the economic system at different times (Schumpeter, 1912, quoted by Hospers, 2005: 23). At the same time, he was the one who stressed the need for social innovation in ensuring the effectiveness of technological innovation.

Analyzing the history of the evolution of the concept of social innovation, Amsassan and Ayegou (2018) identified four main directions in which it was developed: (1) in the social sciences; (2) in the multidisciplinary approach of management practices, respectively of the complex relationships between business success, social progress and the environment; (3) in creative arts and sciences; (4) in territorial development.

Pol and Ville (2009: 884) mentioned that “desirable social innovation is based on creating new ideas with a positive impact on quality and / or quantity of life”, thus suggesting this definition, in support of interdisciplinary research and communication. Social innovation has also been defined in terms of innovative activities and services that are motivated by the goal of meeting social need and that are developed and disseminated mainly through organizations whose primary purpose is social (Mulgan et. al., 2007: 8). Other authors (Bosworth et. al., 2016: 5) opine that social innovation should be seen as an opportunity to do something better, to create social value or to respond to local circumstances.

Due to the multiple benefits it can generate, social innovation has become an emerging field of research. Van de Have and Rubalcaba (2016) developed a study in which they analyzed precisely this emerging field of social innovation through the prism of 172 publications in an attempt to track the evolution of the concept in different thematic areas: community psychology, creative research, social challenges and societal, local development. They concluded that there is still a great diversity of definitions because social innovation is a complex phenomenon, multifaceted and with a wide range of activities and, therefore, the inter- and multidisciplinary approach is important. For this, they recommend approaching social innovation through social change (system, structures) for the purpose of a common goal (social needs) or for solving a relevant social problem (Van den Have & Rubalcaba, 2016: 1932).

In another study, analyzing 94 representative articles due to the large number of citations, published between 1900–2019 and indexed in the Web of Science Core Collection, for the terms *rural innovation* & *rural*, Vilela (2019) found that 90% of them were published from 2015 to the last year analyzed, thus proving that it is an emerging field. The most cited work of those analyzed by Vilela is that of Neumaier, entitled *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* (2012), denoting that it is a reference in addressing the importance of social innovation for rural development. Neumaier concluded that social innovations are shaped by the social system (legal framework, actors involved in the development of innovation), and there is a reverse influence on it, given that social innovation is defined by "changes in attitudes, behaviors or perceptions at the level of group of people interacting in a network of aligned interests that lead to new or improved cooperative (collective) actions "(Neumaier, 2012: 64–65).

One of the most recent and complete definitions of social innovation is the one developed within the international project SIMRA (Social Innovation in Marginalized Rural Areas). According to SIMRA (Polman et. Al., 2017: 12, Ravazzoli *et al.* 2021), a social innovation "refers to the reconfiguration of social practices in response to societal challenges and which pursues the well-being of society and necessarily includes the involvement / the commitment of civil society actors".

We must not forget that the main actor in social innovation is the community and that the success of its implementation depends very much on its characteristics (Butkevičienė, 2009: 87). The development of communities, especially rural ones, depends to a large extent on how they manage to develop self-organizing processes to solve their problems and, in particular, to get out of the state of "lagging" (Zamfir, 2006: 4). Philips and Pittman (2009) define community development as a process that aims to increase people's ability to act together in order to improve the standard of living of the community.

There are a number of factors on which the success of community development depends (Moulaert *et al.*, 2005), grouped into three main categories, as follows (Mattesich, 2009): (1) community characteristics – the extent to which the community is aware of the need for initiatives; the existence of motivation; clear delimitation of the area - the smaller the community is in terms of geographical area, the easier it is to obtain a visible result; flexibility and adaptation; pre-existence of social cohesion; communication skills, dialogue, cooperation; the existence of pre-identifiable leaders; the existence of similar previous positive experiences; (2) characteristics of the community development process – good communication system; as many direct beneficiaries as possible; links with organizations outside the community; systematic collection of community data and analysis of information on local needs; participatory decision making; training courses to increase community skills; the existence of organizations that provide technical assistance; the right mix of resources; (3) the characteristics of community development organizations – a better understanding of the profile and needs of the community; relationships based on trust; significant previous experience; flexibility and adaptability. The increase of the social capacity of the community leads to the increase of the well-being, respectively to the local economic development and to the sustainable improvement of the quality of life.

In order to study the socio-economic phenomena in the Romanian rural area, more precisely the way in which social change occurs and to identify the elements of social innovation in practice, we resorted to the integral method of economic research, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis, with the ultimate goal of outlining conclusions as close as possible to the reality of the investigated territory. Thus, we will present two case studies from the North-East Development Region of Romania, from Vaslui and Iași counties, observed and analyzed longitudinally during about twenty years.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

To conduct this study, we consulted some of the literature available on the Web platforms of Science, Science Direct, Springer Link, De Gruyter, Research Gate, Academia.edu, Google Scholar, in order to identify relevant texts for the topic. The main aspects investigated were: the history of the concept of social innovation; how the term social innovation is defined in different fields; its connection with rural development; important factors for facilitating social development; social innovation and community development. At the same time, we also consulted the websites of some complex international projects implemented in recent years, relevant for the approach to social innovation through methodology and theoretical substantiation.

The field research was based on the case study method, being a way of intensive research of a collective entity, in this situation allowing the observation

of how social change took place over two decades. In our endeavors, we used qualitative research methods, such as in-depth interviews, observation and research-intervention. At the same time, we collected and processed statistical data, data provided by the territorial administrative units, as well as from various entities and bodies with relevant activities for the analyzed case studies.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In recent years, several national and international projects have been implemented, which aimed to clarify the concept of *social innovation* (SI), identify success factors, ways to measure, promote and stimulate local initiatives. Of these projects, several stand out through the progress made and impact:

- RAPIDO (Rural Areas, People and Innovative Development), implemented between March 2007 and February 2009, identified ways to facilitate social innovation and knowledge transfer in rural areas of Europe (strengthening local networks; investing in rural areas, especially in infrastructure and education; support for small initiatives, diversified and multisectoral, fostering an environment of trust and cooperation), link: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/44264/reporting>;

- TEPSIE (The Theoretical, Empirical and Policy Foundations for Social Innovation in Europe), implemented between January 2012 and December 2014, differentiated the concept of social innovation from that of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. SI has been defined as a new approach to responding to social needs, through means and purpose, which involves and mobilizes beneficiaries and helps to transform social relations, improving beneficiaries' access to power and resources, link: <https://www.dti.dk/tepsie-european-social-innovation/32866>, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/290771/reporting>;

- BENISI (Building a European Network of Incubators for Social innovation), implemented between May 2013 and April 2016, identified social innovation in different sectors, created cross-sectoral networks and so-called *ambassadors of social innovation*, link: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/604868>;

- CrESSI (Creating Economic Space for Social Innovation), implemented between February 2014 and January 2018, contributed to the analysis of the life cycle of social innovation and to its measurement, analyzed the institutions, networks and norms that influence the impact of SI on the vulnerable and marginalized population, link: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/613261>, and <http://siresearch.eu/socialinnovation/project/cressicreating-economic-space-social-innovation>;

- SI-DRIVE (Social Innovation: Driving Force of Social Change), implemented between January 2014 and December 2017, elaborated the global atlas of social innovation with over 1000 case studies; the atlas provides information on different types of SI around the world and different approaches used by the actors involved

(Howaldt, 2018). The success factors of SI were identified in seven different areas: education; employment / labor market; medium; energy; mobility / transport; health and social assistance; poverty and sustainable development, link: <http://www.si-drive.eu/>, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/612870>;

– TRANSIT (TRANSformative Social Innovation Theory), implemented between January 2014 and December 2017, created a balance between abstract theorizing and in-depth observation of empirical cases; defined transformative SI as a process of changing social relations, which involves challenging, modifying or replacing dominant institutions in a specific context, link: <http://www.transitsocialinnovation.eu/>;

– SIMRA (Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas), implemented between April 2016 and March 2020, aimed at understanding and improving social innovation in marginalized rural areas by: explaining the spatial variability of social innovation and empirical diversity; building a new set of assessment tools; developing knowledge on the determinants of success; identifying ways to support governance for social innovation. Within the project, a set of methods for assessing SI and the impact generated was developed, applicable at different levels and contexts, link: <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/677622>, <http://www.simra-h2020.eu/>.

The aim of the project was to better understand the role of social innovation in building territorial capital and improving sustainable development by applying a systematic theoretical and operational framework for social innovation and the governance of social innovation in rural Europe and Mediterranean regions outside Europe. According to the analyzes carried out within the SIMRA project and subsequently by the members of the implementation team during the sustainability period, it resulted that the impact of social innovation is felt in the long term and is reflected in different dimensions of territorial capital and can be best observed in the case of communities characterized by various forms of marginalization (Ravazzoli *et al.*, 2021: 1823).

Among the most important results of the SIMRA project, we mention, in this article, the interactive database created, which currently contains (February 2021), 88 case studies, classified according to different criteria: location (Eastern Europe, non-European countries). -Mediterranean, Northern Europe, outermost regions, Southern Europe, Western Europe), theme (access to land, crafts/artistic creations, IT, youth, cooperatives/collective actions, community agriculture, crowdfunding, education, employment/work/employment, women's empowerment, energy, entrepreneurship, environmental conservation, fire prevention, fish farming/aquaculture, forest management, livestock/grazing, local development, local products, immigrant integration, mobility, mycology, networking/social work, others, service provision, social farms, organic/sustainable agriculture, tourism, vulnerable population, waste recycling, water management, welfare), field (agriculture, forestry, rural development), alphabetical order of project/case study (<http://www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/>

simradatabase/). Among the SIMRA case studies, we will describe below the one that we consider unique, interesting and with great potential for replication.

4.1. CASE STUDY FROM SPAIN: AN ENVIRONMENTAL, SOCIAL AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

Apadrinaunolivo (Adopt an olive tree) (<https://apadrinaunolivo.org/en>) is a project initiated in 2014 in Oliete, Teruel, Spain, in a predominantly rural, arid, mountainous area, with demographic, poverty and social exclusion, unemployment and environmental problems, with over 100,000 olive trees and a long history in their traditional cultivation, dating back to the time of the Phoenicians and Romans (Plana, 2019). The problems that needed to be solved were related to the maintenance costs of the plantations, the lack of labor, the economic decline of the area and the need to save the olive plantations abandoned for 30 years.

The innovation consisted in identifying a crowdfunding method that would allow public participation in saving the plantations, to promote the tourist potential of the area and to create different social and economic relations that would generate a stop of the depopulation of the villages. Thus, through an IT application (Mi Olivo.org), you can adopt an olive tree (which will have a label with a scannable symbol – see Figure 1), for the amount of 50 Euro per year, and adoptive parents receive periodically pictures of the olive tree, information on the weather conditions, the situation of the work carried out and are entitled to 2 liters of extra virgin olive oil per year. They can also benefit from organized visits to see the olive trees. The olive tree owners receive 10% of the harvest starting with the sixth year of the olive's entry into the project. At the same time, there is the possibility to work on a voluntary basis for the restoration of olive trees and to support the ATADI organization in facilitating the access of people with disabilities to these activities. Within the project, a first collective oil press/mill was established (Sustainable, Social and Solidary Oil Mill)(<http://www.simra-h2020.eu/index.php/description/?id=5>).



Source: <https://apadrinaunolivo.org/en>

Figure 1. Adopted olive tree within the *Apadrinaunaolivo* Project

To date, more than 2,400 olive trees have been adopted out of a total of 100,000 neglected in the last 30 years. With the money generated, more than 10,000 olive trees were recovered and 10 jobs were created. There were over 18,000 visitors, over 5,000 sponsors, and the whole area thus benefited from the promotion of tourism, being stopped the demographic and economic decline. Within six years of the project, the Mi Olivo brand has become a recognized one (triple-impact oil: environmental – biodiversity and ecosystem conservation by recovering abandoned centuries-old olive trees; social – by generating the well-being of local farmers and employing people with risk of social exclusion, rural development – by repopulating rural areas and their sustainable development), in 2020 receiving the award for the best extra virgin olive oil in Bajo Aragón (<https://miolivo.org/>).

4.2. TWO CASE STUDIES FROM THE NORTH-EAST REGION OF ROMANIA

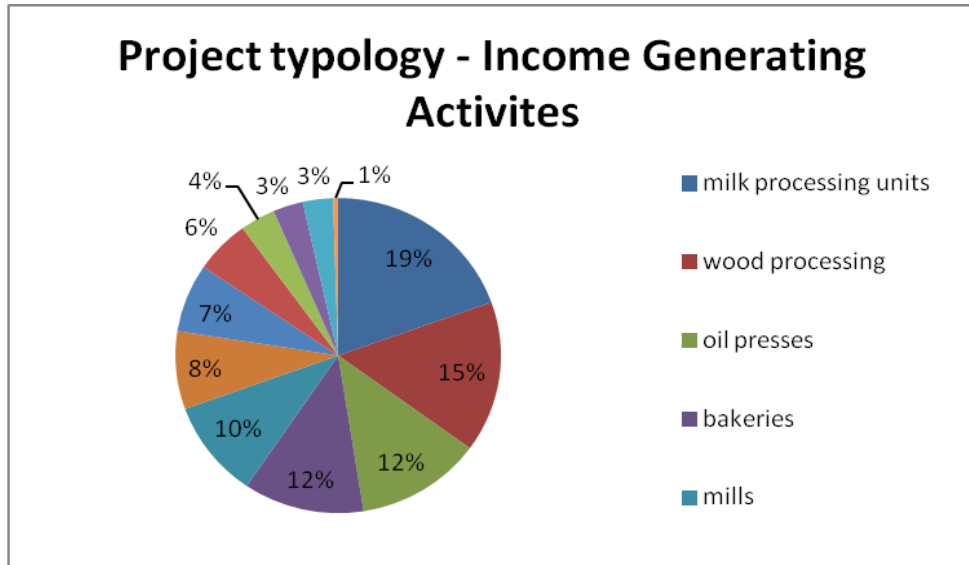
In order to find out what is the long-term impact of the social innovation, we choosed to analyze two case studies from the North-East Development Region of Romania, initiated as projects almost twenty years ago.

The first case study is located in Vaslui County, in Deleni commune. *Adormirea Maicii Domnului Moreni Monastery* (Assumption of the Virgin Mary) is located 27 km away from Vaslui city, in an isolated village. In 2003, the condition of the roads was poor, the town was not connected to the gas supply network, and the 19 nuns coordinated by an abbot lived on the income from the sale of priestly vestments woven at the monastery and donations, existing a high degree of dependence. The opportunity arose in 2003, when the monastery found out about the existence of the Romanian Social Development Fund (RSDF), a body of public interest, established by Law 129 of June 24, 1998, amended by Emergency Ordinance 120/2000, which had the aim of improving the quality of life of the inhabitants of poor villages and people belonging to disadvantaged groups, to develop initiatives, capacity for organization and mutual aid at local level, to contribute to the decentralization process, by financing projects initiated locally to rehabilitate small rural infrastructure, income generating activities and community social services (<https://frds.ro/istoric/>).

The general objectives of the RSDF are to reduce poverty, involve citizens in the development of their own community and increase the capacity to develop and carry out local development projects to solve social problems in poor rural communities through the capacity to develop collective problem-solving activities (Zamfir, 2006: 6).

The perspective assumed by RSDF was that of a development starting within the communities, with their involvement and active participation. Its strategic objectives were to reduce poverty among beneficiaries (poor rural communities and

The projects in the category of income-generating activities aimed at: processing and marketing of food and non-food raw materials (milk, meat, wool, wood, vegetables, fruits, etc.); production and marketing of handicrafts; rehabilitation of markets, local fairs, storage facilities; solariums, greenhouses; rural bakeries. A distribution by main categories of activities is shown in Figure 3.



Source: author's calculations based on RSDF data for the years 2003–2004

Figure 3. Income Generating Activities (share by typologies), the SDF program of the RSDF

Most of the projects for income-generating activities aimed at setting up milk processing factories. This was also the goal in the case of the Moreni monastery (Figure 4).



2003



2004



2010

2019

Source: the personal archive of the author

Figure 4. Case study *Adormirea Maicii Domnului Moreni Monastery*, Deleni commune, Vaslui county (visual data 2003, 2004, 2010 and 2019)

In 2003, the *Adormirea Maicii Domnului Moreni Association* (Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary) was established, the project for the milk processing factory was elaborated and the grant was obtained from the RSDF (20,000 USD). The implementation of the project started and new problems appeared: lack of knowledge on the primary records of financial-accounting documents, procurement procedures, business management, marketing; inconsistencies in the requirements of the specialists regarding the technological flow, respectively additional costs for the arrangement of the production space. In order to solve these problems, the financier (RSDF – the funding agency) provided training for the initiation and implementation of the project, procurement procedures and aspects regarding the marketing of agri-food products (participants – the abbot and 2 nuns). A nun took accounting courses and purchased a special software for the primary record of documents. The equipment supplier trained the staff (workers and nuns). It was requested to double the grant after the supervision visit of a construction specialist (RSDF) in order to complete the redevelopment according to the most demanding requirements in the field of dairy processing; the application was approved and the project implementation period was extended (total 30 months) (Figure 4).

Thus, from an entity that was economically dependent on the support of the community and pilgrims, the monastery became self-sustaining and a promoter of local development. In the 17 years since obtaining the RSDF grant, the monastery has managed to develop more and more so that it has: its own animal farm (dairy cows, goats, sheep, pigs, birds), bee families, fodder base necessary, vineyards, own bakery, fish pond, building with accommodation facilities for 40 people

(completely rebuilt after the previous building burned down in 2015), shop in Bârlad city, workroom for knitting and sewing priestly garments, museum of religious art and workroom for painting icons on glass, and the number of nuns increased from 19 to 33.

The social (philanthropic) activities provided by the monastery consist of meals served to the elderly in the neighboring localities, accommodation and meals for the needy and pilgrims; access to health services for nuns (transport and payment). Last but not least, we mention the fact that the *Adormirea Maicii Domnului Moreni Association* is one of the founding members of the Podu Înalt Vaslui Local Action Group (2010).

Based on the presented facts, we consider that, in the case of Moreni Monastery, the sustainable results targeted by RSDF through the SDF program were achieved, respectively: developing entrepreneurship in rural communities, increasing initiative and civic engagement, reducing poverty and training leaders with potential in local development (FRDS, 2007: 9).

Unfortunately, there is not much information on the survival over time of RSDF projects dating back to the beginning. In an internal report of RSDF elaborated in 2004 (Câmpean, 2004a), based on the analysis of 56 projects with income-generating activities, it was found the following: only 62.5% of them were still working, some not being able to work never because they did not meet the requirements for obtaining an operating license. Among the most frequently mentioned problems for the cessation of operation, we note the following: lack of working capital; competition with strong companies in the field; difficulties in securing the raw material; supply difficulties due to community isolation; lack of self-financing capacity; difficulties in obtaining loans; difficulties in selling production; lack of experience; management issues and involvement of group members. There was a tendency of disintegration at the level of groups in the case of units that did not function due to the refusal of members to perform activities in the absence of immediate income (Câmpean, 2004a: 20).

However, it should be noted that each project is considered to be a social experiment that will provide information on what works or does not work in a given context (Sandu *et al.*, 2007: 39). Whether or not there was really social change for these RSDF-funded communities, only time can tell. Certainly in the case of Moreni Monastery, the social innovation is lasting, and the community develops sustainable and durable. But about the factors that contributed to this success and that generally favor social innovation, we will mention in the next subchapter.

The second case study, from the North-East Region of Romania, comes from Iași County. In 2003, the Iași Prefecture found that it could not allocate money for various investments to the communes in Iași County, given that they did not have local development strategies (85 communes). Also in that period, the initiative regarding the establishment of the Iași Metropolitan Area appeared. It has become necessary for the general urban plans to be restored mainly due to the pressure of the city on the lands of

the neighboring communes, necessities generated by the development of the airport. The local public administration of Aroneanu commune found that it cannot cope with these requirements if the local community is not involved.

The opportunity came in the form of the GRASP program (Governance Reform and Sustainable Partnerships) funded by the U.S. International Development Agency, which encouraged partnerships between local authorities and civil society to improve the quality of life in local communities in Romania. The Academic Foundation for Rural Progress “Terra Nostra” Iași, at the request of APL Aroneanu, initiated, submitted and won the “Pilot Project for the elaboration and implementation of the Local Economic Development Strategy for peri-urban communes”. The project aimed at: improving the correlation of local economic development with the development of the metropolitan area; increasing the degree of community involvement in the realization of the local economic development strategy; improving the institutional system for local economic development (by creating an advisory group and an operational working group); creating the premises for multiplying the accumulated experience; improving the business climate in the commune with the effect of increasing local revenues; increasing the capacity of the local public administration in democratizing the decision-making process; increasing transparency in local decision-making. The project activities consisted in setting up working teams, developing the strategy in a participatory way starting from the SWOT analysis carried out in the villages, adopting the strategy after consulting the population and disseminating the project results (Dobay & Lina, 2004).

The first sign of some social changes, respectively of awakening the civic interest of the citizens of Aroneanu commune was the fact that, at the local elections in 2004, out of the 9 candidates, 7 were from the commune's advisory group set up to implement the pilot project.

A few years after the implementation of the project, we could see that the commune has become an active one with many projects from European and national funding (Dobay & Talmaciu, 2018). The population has increased by over 30% in recent years (3,995 in 2018 compared to 2,737 in 2004) (INS, DJS, 2019; TEMPO ONLINE). Quality of life has significantly improved. The number of economic agents has increased a lot and new businesses continue to be initiated, so that, in 2019, a total of 364 units with a turnover of about 12.8 million euros and an average number of 345 employees were reached, compared to 2017, for example, when there were 272 economic agents with 5.3 million euros and 213 employees (Dobay & Talmaciu, 2018), (<https://www.topfirme.com/judet/iasi/localitate/aroneanu/>).

Would these changes have taken place if the population did not begin to be involved in decision-making on local economic development? Given the proximity of Iași municipality, Aroneanu commune is a peri-urban locality located just 4.5 km north of the metropolis, probably that it would have developed anyway, at an accelerated or slower pace.

So what was the impact of social innovation in 2004? We believe that in the high civic sense, transmitted to the next generation is reflected the impact of social change, in addition to the economic and social effects mentioned above, which led to increased attractiveness of the locality. Here are other arguments. The community is also active in the Ștefan cel Mare Local Action Group, which includes, as members, the local public administration Aroneanu, 6 private partners and 3 NGOs from the commune (<http://galstefancelmare.ro/componenta-gal/>).

The high degree of citizen participation in decision-making also results from the Development Strategy of Aroneanu commune (2015–2020) and from the fact that, for the position of mayor, in 2020, 5 people ran, and the current re-elected mayor was part of the Group since 2003. More, on December 5, 2019, the commune of Aroneanu received the title of European Youth Village 2020 within the European Youth Village Program which aims to facilitate the necessary framework for the consolidation of public youth policies in rural areas, at national level being coordinated by the Association for Active Development and Go Free- Association for Civil Society Support (<http://www.gofree.ro/2019/12/09/comuna-aroneanu-a-preluat-titulul-de-satul-european-de-tineret-2020-mesajul-tinerilor-si-al-primarului/>).

Following the success, since December 2020, the second term of Aroneanu commune began the second mandate within the European Youth Village program, this time for 2021 (<http://europeanyouthvillage.eu/lansarea-programului-satul-european-de-tineret-2021-in-comunele-aroneanu-cleja-grivita-si-slimnic/>).

To answer the question of whether or not there was social innovation in the two case studies presented also from a theoretical-scientific point of view, we analyzed how the necessary requirements established in the SIMRA project are met (Polman *et al.*, 2017) for social innovation to be recognized as a process or product based on the questions in the checklist developed for this purpose (Table 1).

The case study from Vaslui County responds to the requirements of the SIMRA checklist as follows: (1) attitudes and values were reconfigured, the community reducing its degree of economic dependence and becoming proactive; (2) although the geographical context did not differ, a reconfiguration of the group took place, this time by economic and social functions; (3) the active participants are members of civil society - members of the established NGO; (4) the reconfiguration of social practices took place intentionally and required the increase of the actors' commitment, the nuns being more and more involved in the new economic activities and thus contributing directly to the sustainability of the monastery; (5) the precarious economic situation, even if it was not necessarily a cause for a crisis, once the opportunity was seized, became a possible problem to solve; (6) indirectly, the RSDf was the leader of social change, but the initiator was the NGO created; (7) the initiative was private; (8) the ethical values are clear and noble since the intention was that from an entity supported by the community, the monastery should become the engine of the economic development of the area; (9) new social practices involved interaction with other people and institutions outside the group/community:

RSDF evaluators and supervisors; training suppliers, equipment, raw materials; institutions that have issued authorizations; accountant; buyers, etc., the number of these people, relationships and institutions increasing with the development and diversification of the monastery's activities; (10) certainly increased the level of well-being of the small community (nuns from the monastery), but there were also benefits at the level of the locality (commune) due to infrastructure development (modernized road to the monastery, methane gas), tax revenues, promotion tourism of the area, etc.; (11) as a result of social innovation, various benefits have emerged for different beneficiaries: poor and elderly families in neighboring villages supported by free hot meals; nuns who were helped with medication, treatments, visits to doctors and hospitalizations; pilgrims who were hosted at the monastery etc.

Table 1

Evaluation of the case studies in the light of SIMRA requirements for defining social innovation

No	Verification question	Required level	Case study Vaslui	Case study Iași
<i>Social innovation as process</i>				
1	Are there processes of reconfiguring social practices in response to societal challenges?	Necessary to fulfill	Yes	Yes
2	Does the novelty / reconfiguration take place in a new geographical context or in relation to the previously decoupled social group (s)?	Necessary to fulfill	Yes	Yes
3	Does the reconfiguration process involve members of civil society as active participants?	Necessary to fulfill	Yes	Yes
4	Does the reconfiguration process result in new social practices that increase the commitment of civil society actors?	Possible but not absolutely necessary	Yes	Yes
5	Does SI occur as a result of a crisis or a seemingly unsolvable problem?	Possible but not absolutely necessary	Yes	Yes
6	Can a public agency / institution be the initiator and / or leader of SI?	Possible but not absolutely necessary	No	Yes
7	Can SI be initiated by a private agency / institution?	Possible but not absolutely necessary	Yes	Yes
8	Is the SI process based on certain ethical values and positions?	Possible but not enough	Yes	Yes
<i>Social innovation as product</i>				
9	Do new social practices voluntarily engage civil society actors (in relationships / collaborations / networks / institutions / governance structures) as a result of SI?	Necessary to fulfill	Yes	Yes
<i>Results / impact of social innovation</i>				
10	Do these reconfigurations lead to an increase in general well-being, ie are they related to society, the economy, the environment or any combination of them?	Desirable, but not necessary to take place	Yes	Yes
11	Is it possible that different combinations of types of benefits or beneficiaries occur as a result of SI?	Possible but not absolutely necessary	Yes	Yes

Source: adaptation after Polman *et al.* 2017:13.

The case study from Iași county responds to SIMRA requirements as follows: (1) reconfigured social practices respond to societal challenges related to the economic and social decline of rural areas, at the level of 2003, even 2007–2008, Aroneanu commune being considered poor having the Community Development Index 45, being in quartile 2 (Dobay & Talmaciu, 2018); (2) the novelty takes place in a somewhat different geographical context, as the social change initiated in 2004 takes place within the development of the metropolitan area and later in that of a larger territory (LAG); (3) the essence of social innovation consisted in the involvement of the members of civil societies in making decisions on the development of the locality by taking part in a participatory strategy of development of the commune, and later of the Iasi Metropolitan Area and the LAG; (4) the commitment and involvement of civil society actors has increased; (5) the social innovation appeared as a result of a crisis because all the ways of dialogue between the Aroneanu LPA (local public administration), the citizens and the county authorities regarding the development directions of the commune seemed to have been exhausted; (6) the initiator was Aroneanu LPA together with an NGO (7); (8) the values that underpinned social innovation were ethical, the partnership between the LPA and civil society aiming to identify and solve community problems, objectively and equidistantly; (9) the implemented project was based on the voluntary activity of the members of the Consultative Group of the commune; (10) by the participation of the citizens in the decision-making and by transmitting the civic spirit to the next generations, the general well-being of the commune was increased, materialized by increasing the number of economic agents, jobs, improving living conditions, developing social infrastructure, etc.; (11) There are certainly many categories of beneficiaries as a result of social innovation because the commune has become attractive and the negative demographic trend has been reversed, the population reaching an increase of about 30% in the analyzed period.

4.3. FACTORS INFLUENCING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

We come to the natural question: what do the case studies presented have in common? The common elements observed are: the existence of leaders with vision and determined to produce the social change necessary for the community; the existence of organizations whose primary purpose is social or facilitating socio-economic development; local circumstances; the community because the success of the implementation depends very much on its characteristics, especially in rural areas.

It is considered that among the factors influencing social innovation, an important role belongs to the profile of the society, a modern society, open and concerned with improvement, further favoring its emergence (Zamfir & Stoica,

2009: 24). Equally important is interpersonal trust, communities characterized by high levels of it usually having economic well-being, positive entrepreneurial behavior and low levels of social inequality, corruption, etc. (Preotesi, 2009: 156).

Neumeier (2017: 37) grouped the success factors of innovation in the following categories: (1) important factors of the innovation process in general, specified and detailed especially in theories on the diffusion of innovation, with reference to the adoption rate that depends on the advantages perceived relative, compatibility, complexity, degree of experimentation and observability; (2) factors influencing the creation and development of social networks related to it, the initiatives launched by the actors involved in social change themselves being the most promising because they have a bottom-up approach; (3) factors that influence the participatory process of social innovation, such as actors and their relationships. Neumaier (2017: 38) is also the one who highlighted the importance of barriers or factors with a negative effect on social innovation, such as: risk aversion of organizations; closed-type systems that favor the emergence of a single idea-solution; lack of communication and trust; lack of skills and reduced capacities for accessing resources, infrastructure, training, monitoring, etc.). Among these factors, communication is considered to play a special role in the community because it generates community commitment, a sense of belonging and creates collective learning processes (Suryani *et al.*, 2020).

Although there is still much information to be collected and analyzed on the role of social innovation in rural development (Novikova *et al.*, 2020), well-known authors who have studied social innovation in connection with the LEADER initiative believe that it is easier to stimulate social innovation in communities where participatory processes or collective actions have already taken place (Dargan & Shucksmith, 2008; Bock, 2012; Pisani *et al.*, 2014; Dax T. & Oedl-Wieser T., 2016; Bosworth *et al.*, 2020).

Esparcia (2014) mentions that social innovation is a complex process, which requires the right combination of local knowledge, tacit or implicit, expert knowledge (explicit or formalized) and the support of extensive networks (p. 1). Innovative initiatives are not born in isolation, they are part of the territorial dynamics of different actors (Bock, 2012; Esparcia, 2014: 3) and should be seen as an opportunity to do something better, to create social value and to respond to local circumstances and requirements (Bosworth *et al.*, 2016: 5; Katonáné Kovács *et al.*, 2016: 22; Gamito *et al.*, 2013). Although it is accepted that social innovation is unpredictable and manifests itself in many forms (Slee, 2019), some authors (Mulgan *et al.*, 2007: 6) consider that it can be stimulated by: leaders who encourage and reward innovation; funding directly aimed at innovation, especially in the early stages; markets open to social solutions; incubators for social innovation models; new methods of forming partnerships for research and development; tools made available to innovators to encourage them; institutions that systematically coordinate changes in different areas, such as the environment

or general well-being; new transnational approaches; new technologies; different ways of promoting innovative culture, etc. The latest studies (Sarkki *et al.*, 2021) analyze the “reconstructive cycle of social innovation”, in which women initiate and lead social innovation and contribute to the progressive reduction of gender inequalities in rural areas.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Social innovation contributes to economic well-being, to the reduction of economic inequalities, to the development of entrepreneurship, aiming at the balanced, sustainable and durable development of the rural area, as it resulted from the case studies presented. We could consider it a true universal panacea for our rural area and yet most experts admit that it has not yet been sufficiently studied because it is a complex process almost impossible to predict in terms of emergence and evolution. And yet, in one form or another, it has always been present, every time something has become different, better, opportune, by a group of people, as a result of a social (and societal) need identified in common.

As we have shown in this paper, many disciplines have used the concept of social innovation since the early twentieth century, as there is no single universal model valid because its forms of manifestation are very different: from social enterprise to voluntary citizen participation, to various collective actions of citizens, etc. Depending on the challenges they have to meet in an existing local community context, there are also opportunities for different actions / activities. Through social innovation, new jobs can be created, resources can be better used, citizens can be empowered, economic and social inequalities can be reduced, the social inclusion of all vulnerable categories can be ensured, etc.

Although serious progress has been made, especially in recent years, in understanding and even measuring social innovation, such as in the SIMRA project, there are still insufficient studies on its dynamics over time. From this point of view, we consider that the information provided by the case studies presented from North-East Romania, analyzed longitudinally over a period of almost 20 years, comes to complete with useful information this level of knowledge of social change.

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