

Social Innovation and Young Rural Entrepreneurship: Identifying an Integrated Research in Less Favored Portuguese Rural Territories

Maria João Horta Parreira

*Faculty of Social and Human Sciences
of NOVA University of Lisbon (FCSH-NOVA)
Lisbon, 1069-061, Portugal*

mjoaoparreira@gmail.com

Mónica Freitas

*Faculty of Social and Human Sciences
of NOVA University of Lisbon (FCSH-NOVA)
Lisbon, 1069-061, Portugal*

monica.freitas@fcs.unl.pt

Abstract

Schumpeter's entrepreneurship theory associates entrepreneurship not only with organizations of businesses but also with innovation, where the human factor is a key. Concepts as entrepreneurship, innovation, social innovation need to be better understood in specific contexts, as for instance in the rural development context, developing new approaches and models, criteria and metrics, to explore, experiment, evaluate and rescale good practices and procedures, to achieve the common goals. In several countries, rural communities are vulnerable to different threats, requiring measures for territorial cohesion and the resilience of people, communities and ecosystems. The recent Portuguese statute "Young rural businesspeople" (Decree Law 9/2019) creates incentives for attracting young entrepreneurs to less favored rural areas, contributing to the dynamization of local economies and the valorization of endogenous resources. Furthermore, that legal figure aims to promote entrepreneurship and synergies between agriculture and other economic sectors, revitalizing the rural society and rural-urban partnerships, one of the challenges of the Portuguese National Program for Territorial Cohesion. In this article, we analyze the concept of social innovation and its operationalization in the context of rural development and rural entrepreneurship, specifically for empowering young people. We present insights and results from a literature review and pilot research about the potential of social innovation, specifying the research required to design tailored place-based policies for rural areas, in line with the goals of both Portuguese and European Networks for Rural Development.

Keywords: Youth Empowerment, Rural Development, Rural Entrepreneurship, Social Innovation, Territorial Cohesion.

1. INTRODUCTION

A globally accepted definition for social innovation does not exist, but it is generally agreed that social innovation is understood as a process of the transformation of social practices and of the production of new outputs, products and services, new models and new organizational forms (Ravazolli *et al.*, 2021). According to Bock (2012), social innovation may be interpreted in different perspectives:

- A social innovation mechanism: focus on the process itself;
- Social responsibility for innovation: focus on the involved social agents and in their degree of involvement;

- The need to innovate in society: focus on results, on the impact of social innovation.

By focusing in those three perspectives, the aim of this article is to create new ideas for new research on social innovation by answering the following two exploratory questions (EQ):

- EQ1: what is the relevance of social innovation for rural development, specifically in the context of entrepreneurship of young rural people?
- EQ2: in the EQ1 domain, adapting to each territorial socioeconomic particularities, which gaps and/or opportunities can be investigated more systematically?

In Portugal 79.0% of the national territory is located in predominantly rural areas, in contrast to 6.4% in predominantly urban areas (European Commission, 2018). Despite the rural society includes more than agriculture, the agrarian activity maintains a strong influence on the territorial and social dynamics of rural areas with farmers as key agents (Rolo and Cordovil, 2014). Farmers have a relevant role for society, creating food security, being the first stewards of the natural environment. At the same time, as food consumption is expected to increase, following population growth and dietary transition, farmers will have to deal with challenges like climate change, resource scarcity and reduction of the ecological footprint associated with food production and waste (Pires, 2018). Additionally, rural areas are suffering from a "rural young business problem", low generational renewal rates in the farming sector and low capacity for attracting and retaining young people (Eistrup *et al.*, 2019). These challenges are exacerbated in peripheral rural areas facing depopulation, population ageing, lacking attractiveness and a fragile social and economic cohesion (Cavaco, 2004).

To reverse that situation and improve local development, rural areas can make use of rural entrepreneurship (Fortunato, 2014), use territorial marketing for branding their identities and resources, improving communication (Uvarova, and Vitola, 2019) and innovation (Oliveira *et al.*, 2019; Parreira *et al.*, 2020). Local and regional authorities with local action groups of civil society may play a key role to develop that potential (Ceapraz, and Delhoume, 2017; Tarasovych and Tamuliené, 2017; Zawadzka, 2017), especially when they create synergies through cooperation (Lukeschet *et al.*, 2020). The process of 'thinking together' is a key process where people, facing the same problems in their joint area of interest, can redevelop knowledge instead of simply transferring it (Pyrko, *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, there is a need of more practice-oriented design methods that policymakers and practitioners can apply directly (Hoolohanand Browne, 2020).

Social innovation can have an important synergetic effect on policy intervention, enhancement of the social relations and the empowerment of local communities, boosting well-tailored strategies for local development (Lombardi *et al.*, 2020), but this requires a long-term, future-oriented perspective of development and collective action (Bruckmeier and Pires, 2018). In sectors as agriculture and in marginalized contexts, there is a lack of research about social innovation (Ravazolli *et al.*, 2021), especially about integration of top and the bottom, not merely top-down or bottom-up approaches (Murray *et al.*, 2010). Although the representation of people and territories is important for their valorization (Moreno, 2013), there is a lack in literature of validated tools for evaluating social innovation initiatives in the agricultural context (Baselice *et al.*, 2021). These authors demonstrated the adequacy of an evaluation framework based on an empirical application of the five types of criteria of the OECD: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability, which may be replicated or adapted in future works.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, we explore the relevance of social innovation for rural development in a global perspective, based on existing literature, to identify knowledge gaps and opportunities. The global perspective is specified for the needs of social innovation in

Portugal. In section 3, we specify the requirements of social innovation more concretely for rural entrepreneurship and empowerment of young people. In section 4, we translate the results for the literature review and own preparatory research on rural entrepreneurship in methodologically specified perspectives and approaches for new research. In section 5, we discuss the research requirements critically with regard to policy options and draw some conclusions.

2. SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

As political frameworks have a strong influence on governance processes and on civil society initiatives, Lukesch *et al.* (2020) developed a heuristic model to explore the conditions that foster or hinder social innovation. Those authors concluded that social innovation would create most benefits when a triad of actors works together: the state, intermediary organizations, and local actors. According to Bock (2012), social innovation presumes a search for social justice and the public goods in a meticulous and systematic analysis, looking to the inherent failures and obtaining answers throughout a debate: “What to change and how?”.

Murray *et al.* (2010) identified six stages in the process of social innovation (figure 1). Those authors alert these six stages do not need to be always sequential and can include feedback loops. These six steps can be understood as overlapping stages, with different contexts, cultures and skills. Their main purpose is to achieve a functional framework to reflect and explore the challenges, addressing not only the symptoms of problems, but also their root causes, formulating relevant questions to obtain better solutions.



FIGURE 1: The Process of Social Innovation.
Source: Murray *et al.* (2010, p. 11).

In theory the concept and the importance of social innovation for rural development is acknowledged, but the mechanisms involved in that process and the capacities of the involved actors are not yet understood very well (Borzaga and Bodini, 2014). These authors emphasize the necessity to distinguish social innovation from other kinds of innovation, and to identify practices, supporting policy interventions that improve specialized social innovation policies. How policy measures that support social innovation can be designed to create and maintain social innovation within rural development is insufficiently known, although it is known that social innovation requires collective learning, co-ordination and communication processes in that domain (Neumeier, 2017).

According to Filipe Santos, Dean of Catolica-Lisbon, social innovation allows the development of new responses and solutions to social problems, at a low cost for the State, through the involvement of experienced entrepreneurs, third sector entities, communities and municipalities, ensuring the anchoring of innovative solutions in the territories. He emphasizes that social innovation needs to meet the wishes of new generations who want to improve and transform their

society. In an article written by him, published recently in July 2021 (available in this link: <https://bityli.com/6gKZH>), he highlights that:

"The innovation and social entrepreneurship ecosystem emerged in Portugal about a decade ago, through the development of new responses to social problems in favor of the common good, developed mainly by social entrepreneurs. The ecosystem is more solid, as it has a wide range of entities that develop social innovations, incubators that support them, public and private financing programs and dozens of success stories, many of them with replication and international reputation. However, it will be important to continue the social innovation policy successfully started in Portugal 2020 and which has become an international reference, as Portugal runs the risk of losing its leadership and pioneering position in Europe if the Social Innovation program is not continued in the forthcoming framework program."

Generally, the concept of development is often associated with economic development, being measured by the Gross Domestic Product. Many authors discuss this critically as a reductive view, given the complexity of current socio-economic and environmental challenges, and the finite nature of natural resources (da Rocha Salles *et al.*, 2017). Innovation, both in terms of territorial dynamics and strategic planning, can leverage sustainable development in different dimensions beyond the economic. Porter and Kramer (2019) highlight the concept of "shared value", a new way to achieve economic value that creates value for society, where businesses must be connected with social progress, causing a new shift of business thinking. There are still many challenges in networks of cooperation, online or offline, of which the interaction between technology and territories is required to achieve a collaborative innovation and a creative territorial networking (Covas and de Mendonça, 2019).

In Portugal, rural areas have been suffering from demographic decline, the loss of importance of agricultural activity, depopulation, and the duality of development between remote rural areas and rural areas closer to large urban centers (Figueiredo, 2014). At the same time, new trends are emerging, as the migration of individuals from urban to rural areas with the aim of creating micro-enterprises. The same author highlights that more than the old vision centered in the dichotomy urban and rural, can local and regional differences explain the spatial changes of competitiveness, relevant to combine rural development to local development. In this perspective, it will be pertinent to replace endogenous development policies by others in which the local-global relationship occupies a prominent position, trying to address the deficiencies of each rural area with its social actors, to create diverse and unique spaces. At the local level, external knowledge and resources will be required, as it is not easy to do everything by own initiative (Bosworth *et al.*, 2016). Distinguishing between agrarian and rural development will be useful. According to Covas (2007), the agrarian development can be interpreted as a commercial act, where the products sell the territory they use but are not so concerned with reproducing the context they consume. On the other hand, Covas (2007) highlights that rural development is, more than just a commercial act, an act of cultural foundation based on the principles of multifunctional agriculture and on the production of positive externalities, that is, on the production of context. Chaudhuri *et al.* (2021) also highlight the links between agrarian development and rural development, the first one more rooted in technocratic solutions than in the social dimension of agricultural innovation.

Although research on rural social innovation has been developing, directing attention on community-led approaches to rural development, the meaning of social innovation requires further clarification, innovative means, practical support and evaluation of social innovation initiatives (Bosworth *et al.*, 2016). The authors highlight that rural communities are innovative when they have the necessary space and power to act, when limitation that remains is identified, and when scientific research becomes a source to guide the design of policies. The innovation of managing agriculture systems is crucial for the adaptation to economic, social and environmental changes, as the capacity to implement new practices according to the Agricultural Knowledge and Innovation System (AKIS) framework. Oliveira *et al.* (2019) highlight the necessity to review

critically the definition of innovation applied to agricultural systems for the purpose to boost rural development. The AKIS system links people and organizations in Europe to promote mutual learning, both from public, private and non-profit sectors in an organizational diversity of production and exchange of agricultural knowledge in each European country (Knierim *et al.*, 2015). These authors argue that, given the complexity and diversity of national institutions, laws and cultures in each European country, it is not possible to compare directly the AKIS diagrams. But they can be characterized in a continuum: strength (from weak to strong), and of level of integration (from fragmented to integrated). Furthermore, they mention that Portugal has a weak and fragmented AKIS profile: farmers are not reached neither benefit from advisory services and different knowledge networks exist without strong coordination and cooperation. Although agriculture is one important economic and social driver of rural areas in Europe, a lack of validated tools for evaluating social innovation initiatives remains (Baselice *et al.*, 2021).

Concerning the literature about rural development in European territories, the role of the LEADER approach is a core theme, where innovation has a key role in the last years. There is, however, a need to improve the level of sophistication of innovation, specifically in the social innovation domain (Navarro *et al.*, 2018). The authors stress social innovation as one of the axes for neo-endogenous rural development and for the LEADER approach, as it implies the components of trust, cooperation, partnerships, leadership, common vision, bottom-up approach, governance and local linkages. One recent Portuguese research highlights the importance of the LEADER program and the role of the Local Action Groups (LAG) in the rural development strategy of the regions in Portugal. In this work, a limitation of LEADER was identified in the objectives previously assumed in this program related to innovation and the diversification of activities (Nascimento, 2019): the author warns that innovation is not included in the eligibility criteria to approve the projects. Consequently, the criteria of innovation remain vulnerable, each LAG can decide to assign or not about its importance for the respective approval of projects. In relation to the diversification of activities, it is observed that a large part of the investments have been made in a small number of sectors, with emphasis on agriculture and tourism. One of the conclusions of the study is to promote improvements in the Portuguese LEADER approach, studying in detail, and for each territory, the work carried out by the LAG communities. The geographical vision of social innovation by Bock (2012) highlights that social innovation efforts in rural areas must be a national concern, that is, it must address the interrelated effects of social changes, instead of looking for solutions in individual rural areas. The author presumes that urbanization and rural marginalization are two sides of the same coin, and, for that reason, rural-urban linkages, their interactions and mutual dependencies should be evaluated.

According to the considerations in the previous paragraphs and exploring answers to the two exploratory questions exposed in the introduction, the statute of young rural businesspeople (YRB) can become a promoter of social innovations for rural development. More than entrepreneurs and businesspeople, the YRB statute can be a driver of social and solidarity economy, whose focus, far beyond financial profits, may be on the notion of the “shared value” as highlighted by Porter and Kramer (2019). In the publication “54 LEADER 2014-2020 projects for the development of rural territories” (available in this link: <http://leader2020.minhaterra.pt/54-projetos-leader-2014-2020-para-o-desenvolvimento-dos-territorios-rurais.T1016.php>) we can consult relevant projects supported under the Measure 10 / LEADER of the 2020 Rural Development Program in mainland Portugal. They show the diversity in the implementation of projects: from investing in new production, diversification of farms, requalification of local markets, heritage enhancement, to the creation of agro-tourism units, sharing the same vision of territories and communities, and favoring local development. Regarding the 54 projects, 34 were developed by collective entities (municipalities, companies, cooperatives) and 20 projects by individual entities, 13 men and 7 women. More than 60% of the projects were implemented by collective entities, which may be pertinent to (re)think the applicability of the YRB statute, which can be requested either individually or collectively. There is a knowledge gap in this domain in Portugal: whether this statute can potentially function to drive social and rural development. One important

reference is Mariana Mazzucato and her vision that Europe needs clear, targeted missions, a powerful tool to focus our research, innovation and investments on solving critical problems. Figure 2 illustrates the movement from grand challenges to mission projects.

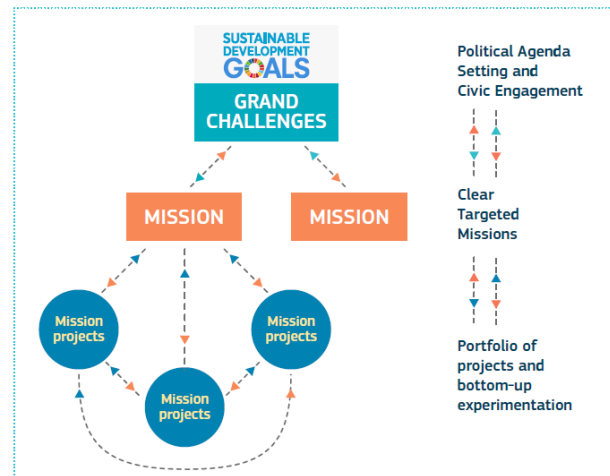


FIGURE 2: Mission oriented vision by Mazzucato: from grand challenges to missions.
Source: Mazzucato (2018, p. 11).

Missions are both a means of setting goals and a vehicle to get there and we must assume risks to launch a new vision of a problem-solving approach to innovation-led growth (Mazzucato, 2018). The relevance of social innovation to rural development, referring to the vision of Mazzucato, can be explored both as a means and as a vehicle, in different shapes and contexts of innovation missions. Complementing with the perspectives pointed out by Bock (2012) about social innovation, we can develop the research agenda for social innovation with such innovative components as process-oriented, agency and participation-oriented, result- and measurement-related processes and programs of socially inclusive rural development, where the impact of social innovation is a key criterion. Cristofaro *et al.* (2021) identified the need research and publications that deal with different management aspects, for themes as Entrepreneurship, Social Issues Management and Organization Development and Change. In the fourth section of the paper we specify these new research agenda.

3. RELEVANCE OF SOCIAL INNOVATION FOR RURAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

Entrepreneurship is more than creation of companies, when it is understood as involvement of different entrepreneurs, individual or collective, in a cooperative process of territorial valorization or “business function” (Moreno, 2009). According to Moreira (2006), more than the figure of the entrepreneur matters the business function, which implies a broad notion of entrepreneurship: every individual, group of individuals, institutions and even state bodies carry out that business function. For Schumpeter, the most important business function is that of innovating. In the scenario of the social innovation potentialities, it will be pertinent to change the focus from individual entities to that collective function. Thinking about the relevance of social innovation for rural entrepreneurship, it becomes necessary to develop the traditional entrepreneurship “business function” through the capacity of creating social innovation.

Malerba and McKelvey (2020) propose a novel conceptualization of knowledge-intensive innovative entrepreneurship, which, they see as the most important type of entrepreneurship in the modern knowledge economy. Inspired by sets of theory from Schumpeter entrepreneurship,

evolutionary economics, and innovation systems, they point out insights from their analysis of innovation systems concerning entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship:

- Entrepreneurs are highly dependent upon the knowledge infrastructure, the supporting actors and the institutional context. They are creators of opportunities, but, at the same time, the geographical and sectoral dimensions, in which they are acting, restrict them.
- Entrepreneurship is affected by the complementary knowledge and skills of actors linked with the innovation systems. Furthermore, it depends from the existence of networks and channels through which knowledge is communicated, shared or generated.

According to Pato and Teixeira (2018), not all the entrepreneurs who operate and manage a venture in rural areas are rural entrepreneurs in a strict sense. The authors distinguish between “Entrepreneurship in Rural Areas” and “Rural Entrepreneurship in a strict sense”, meaning that rural entrepreneurs are mainly motivated and working for the well-being of the place and community and less motivated by monetary benefits. To understand in greater depth the potential of rural entrepreneurship for rural development, highlighting potential limitations and constraints (Pato, 2020), more efforts and research of the type described in the fourth section are needed. This author argues that governmental and other regional entities should promote a culture of entrepreneurship based on local and endogenous resources, supporting the entrepreneurial initiatives, for example, in training or financial support. Pato (2020) mentions, in addition, that the concept of rural entrepreneurship, in the work of Wortman Jr. (1990), following the concept of innovation by Schumpeter, is still understood in the limited sense of the development of enterprises in rural areas to promote rural progress.

According to Pato (2020), the concept of social innovation is interconnected with that of rural innovation. We think this interconnection is useful to contextualize and materialize them for the specific situation in a territory, with the participation of local actors, to apply, monitor and evaluate social innovation processes and outputs, in accordance with defined objectives. More than searching for solutions directly, it will be necessary to work on the causes of the identified problems, through which solutions can emerge in directly. In one analysis of the relationship between territory and social inequalities in territories with low population density, the results show the persistence of inequalities, with greater incidence in territories with a rural matrix and further away from the large urban centers and their influence (Mauritti *et al.*, 2019). Focusing on the social responsibility for innovation perspective, we highlight the fact Mónica Freitas showed: networks which engage hospitals and universities were much more persistent and competitive because they promoted exchange of knowledge among the actors, as well as the inclusion of new ones (Freitas, 2016). To explore the networking potential among specific stakeholders in the connection of social innovation and rural young entrepreneurship can become a criterion for successful development.

With the pandemic crisis, youth unemployment has been growing and reaching alarming levels in Portugal. Self-employment and (youth) entrepreneurship are current alternatives, but “we must acknowledge that supporting self-employment and entrepreneurship is indeed a policy focus that will reach only a limited portion of young people, that is, those with the appropriate education, skills, and business ideas and it certainly cannot be regarded as the primary or sole solution for addressing youth unemployment” (Tosun *et al.*, 2016, p. 7). The National Plan for Youth was approved in Portugal by the Council of Ministers Resolution number 114-A/2018. One of the operational objectives of this resolution is “Diversifying the economic base of the rural world, through the entrepreneurial initiative of young people”. A corresponding measure is suggested as: “a set of incentives attracting and retaining young people in rural regions according to the Young Rural Businesspeople Statute”. Thinking about that statute, with a maximum age of 40 years to access it, we think that the age factor in accessing this statute may be a limitation to reach the

potential associated with the objectives. One of the general objectives of the strategic plan of the Portuguese Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is to strengthen the socio-economic context of rural areas along with specific objectives as the following: attract young farmers and facilitate business development in rural areas, promote employment, growth, social inclusion and local development in rural areas, including the bio-economy and sustainable forestry.

How to promote the inclusion of the huge number of Portuguese farms, about 40% of which according to Cordovil (2021) are currently excluded from CAP support? How to support the generational renewal of farmers, to maintain the continuity of family farming, access to resources, and the integration of new rural people? How to interconnect rural and urban youth, including both in participatory practices to explore new and innovative business ideas? How to strengthen the coordination, coherence and complementarity of policy measures with a territorial impact (environment and spatial planning and economic cohesion, social and territorial) from national to local level? We see these questions as most important to guide the research on new development paths for rural areas. Synthesizing research and managing expert and non-expert communities are two key skills to improve policy decisions through research (Parreira *et al.*, 2020). Stakeholders are looking, more and more, to challenges, which demand enormous data sets and calculations. At the same time, supercomputing demonstrated that is a vital support to boost problem solving approaches and decision-making, to solve current challenges, to uncover new problems in different domains of knowledge (including rural development and youth empowerment). In that vision, we point out supercomputing as a great ally in the domain of social innovation, due to its potential capability and capacity to support and obtain accurate results, with regard to innovation. Artificial intelligence is researched by Dargham *et al.* (2021), to find out how it contributes to the creation of social impact and how it can impact social innovation. In-depth, long-term research is required to better understand the processes of creating agency and social innovations, to deal with the challenges through digitalization in rural areas, and to monitor the inherent risks (Sept, 2020).

The literature review shows several possibilities to reduce the knowledge gaps on social innovation through combination of themes and integration of research perspectives. The significance of such integrative research can be substantiated through the neglect of rural areas in the social innovation research, although these areas represent a considerable part of the world's territories and population (de Fátima Ferreiro *et al.*, 2021). Following the suggestions of Cristofaro *et al.* (2021), we want suggest for the investigation of entrepreneurship, social issues management, and organization development or change new integrating approaches and perspectives.

4. RESULTS ORIENTED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE RESEARCH ON SOCIAL INNOVATION IN RURAL TERRITORIES

In the next figure 3, we draw exploratory linkages between social innovation and rural entrepreneurship, in line with the designed suggestions, explained below. Its purpose is to show the integration of different thematic components, relevant for future research on social innovation in rural areas.

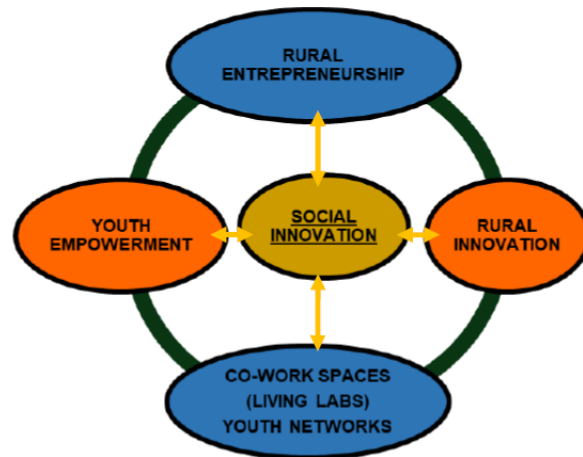


FIGURE 3: Exploratory linkages between Social Innovation and Young Rural Entrepreneurship
Source: Own elaboration.

The aims of integrative research on social innovation in rural areas are twofold:

- to understand the potential of the Young Rural Businesspeople (YRB), a Portuguese legal norm from 2019, to boost social innovation initiatives;
- to assess the relevance of social innovation in rural young entrepreneurship, including the potential of knowledge exchange networks between rural young entrepreneurs and other social agents, especially research institutions, non-profit organizations, state and private entities committed to rural development.

Research to achieve these aims requires case studies in actor-oriented network approaches, to provide knowledge for the:

- sharing and diffusion of knowledge (establishing networks between young entrepreneurs/farmers and other stakeholders);
- exploring the potential of social innovation for the development of more cohesive and resilient rural territories (through the involvement of several social agents);
- prospecting of an evaluation of the diversity of activities in rural areas (highlighting the connected opportunities and constraints).

More specifically, the research to carryout should enable:

- to evaluate, how the YRB statute can stimulate the articulation of agriculture with other economic sectors, fostering social innovation initiatives;
- to assess, how knowledge exchange can help rural young entrepreneurs to use effectively diverse and volatile networks (to be able to shape the networks according to the most relevant needs);
- to determine the key constraints/opportunities that influence the rural youth adherence to YRB;
- to elaborate a model to assess the relevance of social innovation in rural young entrepreneurship (identifying the key stakeholders and their influence in social innovation initiatives).

For integrating the research and action to carry out, the PDCA cycle can be followed: Plan - Do - Check - Act (through local partnerships, cooperation and networking, in an iterative process). In this preparatory phase, several rural municipalities can be chosen for case studies (based on the annex I of *Portaria* 143/2019: rural areas for the attribution of the statute of Young rural businesspeople), as well as the *Portaria* 5/2019 (list of less-favored Portuguese areas). Case studies should include the following criteria: population density, typology of agricultural production (small or large-scale), inland/coastal, rural-urban transition zones, existence/absence of rural entrepreneurship programs and Higher Education Institutions.

The complexity of the connected systems and processes requires mixed methods research with procedures and techniques widely used in science and action-oriented research (literature review, interviews, focus groups, questionnaire surveys, and specific methods for expert consultation). Additionally, Portuguese policies for rural young entrepreneurship should be analysed (to identify regional and sectoral asymmetries and possible alternatives).

A Glance report can serve as a model (a result of the OECD-Eurostat Entrepreneurship Indicators Programme, EIP). EIP started in 2006, with focus on exploiting existing sources and data to inform policy design through the development of policy-relevant indicators.

What can be expected from action-oriented research including the component mentioned are models for integrated assessment of the relevance of social innovation in less-favored Portuguese rural territories, specifically to boost rural young entrepreneurship initiatives, exploring key criteria as knowledge exchange, place-based policies and stakeholder influence in that dynamics (Meneguzzo et. al., 2014). Such models, complemented with practical tools for their application, will be useful to understand the concept of social innovation for rural young entrepreneurship. The integrated framework should be replicated, adapted and/or upgraded in other rural areas and in future research.

Based on such forms of integrated research it will be easier in future to develop road maps and guides for the assessment of regional/local trends identified in case studies, to be used as business cooperation models for rural young entrepreneurs and other stakeholders in rural development. Experimental mentoring platform scan, furthermore, be imagined (to be used by rural young entrepreneurs/farmers and potential mentors), helping to develop future workshops and their innovation potentials.

5. DISCUSSION AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Reliable and comparable data, showing the relevance of social innovation for rural development initiatives and youth empowerment, can improve future-oriented decisions in the interfaces between science, policy and society. To build social innovation frameworks for rural areas, boosting new collaborative approaches for rural young entrepreneurship initiatives, is especially important in countries as Portugal, where the rural component is still strong.

The suggestions described and discussed in this article can help to improve more effectively than prior non-integrated research, also to boost measures in rural development programs and to strengthen rural-urban partnerships, through processes of co-creation and social innovation. These components can be formulated in new systemic visions of rural development, that can be matched with the broader scenarios of socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development that underlie the policies of the European Union and its member states.

The great challenges for such research should not only be shared it with the international scientific community. Necessary will be critical debates about such integrated research that crosses the boundaries between the disciplines and sub-disciplines specialized in rural research,

requiring inter- and trans-disciplinary cooperation of scientists, decision makers and other stakeholders in rural development.

At a time when it is urgent to obtain more examples of win-win situations in rural development, we highlight the importance of creating new data, integrated models, and new forms of organization, for effective knowledge and production of knowledge, which can be used by all stakeholders and social actors.

Due to pressing societal challenges, as the ageing of Europe's population, high index of young people unemployment, global competition, social inequalities and problems through climate change, there is a growing need for new approaches, conceptual processes, organizational changes and tools, which may contribute to the achievement of solutions through interdisciplinary research on interconnected social, economic and environmental challenges.

Social Innovation has not been ignored, as we showed in this article, but underestimated in its significance for rural development to meet the global challenges just mentioned. The concept of the “business function”, interpreted as a collective effort with an important political role, gains here new importance. As Michael Porter emphasizes in a TED talk (available in this link: <https://youtu.be/0ilh5YYDR2o>), the government does not have to be the only one to make decisions in the face of increasingly urgent social problems, it cannot be the only one establishing partnerships, cooperation, and, the creation of shared value requires new models of governance where non-governmental actors participate.

We stress the need of new research avenues to address the most pressing problems of our time (as environmental risks and social inequalities) through an integrative approach of social innovation research in rural areas. This strategy will be closer to an interactive dialogue between the scientific community and the rural communities, in a multi-actor approach, which applies different sources of knowledge in the co-construction of solutions to tackle complex problems.

Joining efforts in the building capacity to better represent diminished social groups in rural areas, as well as encouraging the co-design of rural policies in collective initiatives, can promote open and flexible governance structures that have not yet materialized in less favored territories.

Given the current uncertainties and unpredictability, we believe it is essential to open the scientific discussion, incorporating social actors and dimensions that traditionally would not be part of this dynamic. Specifically in the integration of various components of social innovation to improve the capacity to create social innovation missions in different forms and contexts, stimulating territorial cohesion and the empowerment of young people and entrepreneurship in rural territories.

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