

CONCEPTUALISING AND IDENTIFYING SOCIAL INNOVATION IN AGRI-FOOD SYSTEMS

Introduction

Contemporary food systems face many environmental and social challenges, such as pollution, food waste, biodiversity loss, access to healthy and sustainable food, power asymmetries, the marginalisation of farmers, etc. A transition to sustainable food systems requires initiatives aiming to transform the dominating practices. In this regard, social innovations (SI) are seen as a promising way forward. However, the concept is used in many, and occasionally disparate, ways, and social studies of food have not been immune to this.

In order to develop an academically robust account of SIs and their potential to contribute to the sustainability of food systems, this paper aims to arrive at a workable definition of SI in agri-food systems, and to identify the spectrum of SI in food provision in terms of their objectives, key agents, collaboration arrangements, as well as difficulties and obstacles encountered in their implementation.

Methods

The study is based on a systematic review of the literature focusing on SI in relation to food provision. Specifically, we examine the use of the concept of “social innovation” in EU-funded projects and the latest academic literature on rural development, agriculture, and the food sector. After determining the salient characteristics of SI, we propose its definition in agri-food systems that is applied for the broader purposes of mapping and classifying sustainable food initiatives. The review identified four key themes to be discussed in the context of social innovations: (1) spectrum of sustainable food initiatives; (2) issues and needs; (3) agents driving SI; (4) difficulties and obstacles.

Results

The literature presents SI in the agri-food sector mainly through a wide spectrum of sustainable food initiatives that address the problems and challenges of current agri-food systems. Based upon an examination of a range of examples of bottom-up and top-down initiatives operating at micro, meso, and macro scales, we classify the examples of SI in agri-food systems identified in the literature in the following clusters: (i) labels, trademarks, certification schemes, (ii) short food supply chains and local food systems, (iii) urban agriculture, (iv) food security, (v) reduction of food waste, (vi) awareness and education, and (vii) movements and networks.

The issues and needs addressed by SI in agri-food systems are related to several aspects of Food and Nutrition Security (FNS). These include both environmental problems (e.g. climate change and pollution) and economic and physical barriers (e.g. low-income level, long distance to distribution points) that

ultimately result in either malnutrition or food waste. The literature illustrates that technological barriers (e.g. unsuitable tools for preparing food), knowledge gaps, and the instability of food systems are also issues addressed by SI in food provision. Our research further suggests the presence of concerns related to food sovereignty, exemplified by grassroots initiatives that go against the conventional market system.

As regards the agents driving SI into the agri-food sector, our research has yielded findings regarding the role of different food system actors (e.g. producers, consumers, researchers, municipalities, civic groups, regulators) and the various collaboration models. This may include minor changes in the relationships among members of a community and extend to different groups (e.g. NGOs, media, corporations, governmental institutions) learning and working together to improve their food procurement system. The analysis of the governance of SI draws attention to the differences between sustainable food provision initiatives run and managed at different levels. These differences mainly concern the organisation of decision-making and workflow, and maintenance of local, national, and international networks.

Finally, we also consider difficulties and obstacles to SI development that prevent them from achieving their intended goals. We apply the distinction between intrinsic challenges and diffusion challenges. While the former is related to the development and initial everyday operations of SI, the latter is related to upscaling, replicating solutions in different contexts and becoming part of the mainstream. In view of the fact that SIs have pronounced social objectives and are seldom commercially motivated, their main intrinsic challenges are financial constraints and reliance on volunteer work or public support.

Based on the results of the literature review we suggest that SI in the realm of food provision should be perceived as a reconfiguration of social practices, that comes as a response to challenges of agri-food systems. The social nature of SI lies primarily in the process rather than its result. This process - the reconfiguration - seeks to enhance outcomes towards sustainability of agri-food systems and societal well-being and necessarily includes the engagement of civil society actors. However, SI can be driven by any actor (public, private, third sector). Similar to other innovations, a success related to outcomes does not define whether the initiative can be called an SI, as SI is not always a “success story”.

Discussion and Conclusions

The analysis revealed that there is no shared definition of SI neither generally nor even more so with regards to its application in studying agri-food systems. It is also often the case that novel food provision initiatives described in the literature do not necessarily explicitly frame those as SIs, though they feature elements of an SI. Nevertheless, the analysis allowed to map the diversity of existing initiatives across the world (dominated by bottom-up processes) to identify the issues addressed by those along with the FNS domains dealing with availability, accessibility, utilisation, and stability of food. The analysis can

provide a basis for developing a more refined typology of SI exemplified by diverse sustainable food initiatives via looking also into the various governance arrangements, levels of formalisation, scope, target audiences, addressed elements in the food chain, and outcomes.

Acknowledgements

This research is funded by the Latvian Council of Science, project SINFO (Social Innovation in Food Provision: Pathways to Sustainable Production and Consumption), project No. Izp-2018/1-0344.

References

- Bock, B. B. (2012). Social innovation and sustainability; how to disentangle the buzzword and its application in the field of agriculture and rural development. *Studies in Agricultural Economics* 114: 57-63.
- Chiffolleau, Y., Loconto, A. (2018). Social Innovations in Agriculture and Food: Old Wine in New Bottles? *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 24(3): 306-317.
- Eichler, G. M.; Schwarz, E.J. (2019). What Sustainable Development Goals Do Social Innovations Address? A Systematic Review and Content Analysis of Social Innovation Literature. *Sustainability* 11(2).
- Goland, C. (2002). Community Supported Agriculture, Food Consumption Patterns, and Member Commitment. *Culture & Agriculture* 24(1): 14-25.
- Hebinck, A., Galli, F., Arcuri, S., Carroll, B., O'Connor, D., Oostindie, H. (2018). Capturing change in European food assistance practices: a transformative social innovation perspective. *Local Environment* 23(4): 398-413.
- Neumeier, S. (2017). Social innovation in rural development: identifying the key factors of success. *The Geographical Journal* 183(1): 34-46.
- Pelka, B., Terstiep, B. (2016). Mapping Social Innovation Maps. The State of Research Practice across Europe. *European Public & Social Innovation Review* 1(1): 3-16.
- Pickard, D. (2018). Factors for Effectiveness of Social Innovations in Urban Agriculture. *The International Journal of Sociology of Agriculture and Food* 24(3).
- Polman, N., Slee, B., Kluvánková, T., Dijkshoorn, M., Nijnik, M., Gezik, V., Soma, K. (2017). *Social Innovation in Marginalised Rural Areas. Report D2.1 Classification of Social Innovations for Marginalized Rural Areas.* <http://www.simra-h2020.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/D2.1-Classification-of-SI-for-MRAs-in-the-target-region.pdf>

Contact information

Lina Orste*, Lasma Ozola, Krista Lemberga, Emils Kilis, Anda Adamsone-Fiskovica, Mikelis Grivins, Talis Tisenkopfs
Baltic Studies Centre, Riga, Latvia

* lina.orste@gmail.com