Social innovation in rural areas

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This special issue is dedicated to the various forms of social innovations in rural areas. In 2017, at the biannual Conference of the Austrian Sociological Association in Graz, the Working Group “Rural Social Research” organized three sessions covering this topic. The decision to address this issue was motivated by the fact that rural areas are facing significant challenges: migration, demographic change, dismantling of infrastructure, to name but a few, with more or less serious consequences affecting the quality of life of the rural population. However, in some places these challenges are being actively addressed with new ideas. This special issue aims to present the results of these sessions and to discuss current and innovative answers to tackle the challenges faced in rural areas. Before doing so, we want to reflect upon the concept of social innovation by asking what is meant by the term, in which contexts it is taken up, and who has a particular interest in promoting this idea and why.

First mentioned in the 1970s (Zapf 1989), the concept of social innovation has been increasingly discussed, gaining particular momentum since the 1990s (Christmann 2019). In 1992, a new perspective was developed at the programmatic level of European research and innovation policy, by expanding the content of innovation and understanding it as a social phenomenon (Aderhold 2016). As a result it was picked up by different disciplines, like economics (Pol and Ville 2009; Murray et al. 2010), sociology (Howaldt and Schwarz 2010; Bock 2016; Richter 2016), psychology (Mumford 2002) and regional planning and development (Moulart et al.

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2005; Franz et al. 2018; Christmann 2020). In 2015 the European Commission even published a research proposal under the Horizon 2020 framework, in which social innovation was presented as a novel tool for rural development (Bock 2016, p. 553).

This brief outline of the history of the term shows that it has gained importance with the rise of neoliberal policies and is therefore inextricably linked to them. During the last decades, the state gradually withdrew from formerly public tasks and outsourced them to private actors. After the financial crises, austerity policies and associated cuts in government spending affected provisioning of the welfare state and increased pressure on individuals, which led to growing social inequality. This is the societal context in which social innovation has been promoted as a new panacea for realizing development and economic growth and addressing social problems (Bock 2016, p. 552).

In general, two approaches to social innovation can be distinguished. On the one hand, they refer to the micro-level and address individual actors and the cooperation between them aiming at a goal-oriented empowerment of certain target groups (Anderson et al. 2015) in order to enlarge their space of action (The Young Foundation 2012), or to increase their quality of life (Pol and Ville 2009). On the other hand, they refer to the macro-level and focus on processes of governance. For example, Howaldt and Schwarz (2010, p. 54–58) describe social innovation as changes in routines, formal and institutionalised regulations, patterns of action, forms of governance and of practices. Similar findings are also drawn within the framework of the European project “TEPSIE—Theoretical Empirical and Policy Foundations of Social Innovation in Europe”, where researchers found the term applied to processes of social change, aspects of organization management, social entrepreneurship, practical development of solutions for social problems, as well as the process of developing capacities and resources of certain communities (The Young Foundation 2012). Ultimately, development results from social interaction and collaboration (Bock 2016, p. 553), confirming the conclusion of Aderhold (2016, p. 24) that the responsibility for dealing with major societal challenges rests upon the shoulders of many individuals. This entails that important questions of what is socially desirable, what role do traditional patterns of legitimacy play and what is the power and influence of elites, not to mention the decision-making processes of political and state actors, are completely lost from sight. Or, as Murray et al. (2008) suggest, social innovation serves as an approach to solve societal problems where established institutions fall short.

Many scholars point out that the concept of social innovation is rather fuzzy, vague and very broad (Butkeviciene 2009; Caulier-Grice et al. 2012; Howaldt et al. 2014). This might be due to the fact that the connection between “social” and “innovation” allows rather broad associations. The meaning of “social” for example is initially difficult to grasp, since the social point of view is not sufficiently clear-cut to define scientific problems (Weber 1988, p. 165). There is basically nothing under the sun that is not mediated by human intelligence and human thinking, which is why Adorno (2003, p. 32) refers to the “infinity” of the social. In this sense, all forms of innovation whether technical, economic, political, family, or artistic ones, should first and foremost be conceived as social innovations (Aderhold 2016, p. 30). This all-embracing meaning can also be applied to the term of innovation itself, since it

is a characteristic of human existence to be creative; man has to be understood both as a creator and a creature of his environment (Landmann 1961). For this reason it is not surprising that people are often not even aware that they are doing something “socially innovative” (Franz et al. 2018, p. 7), because practice and “use often lead to invention and innovation” (Edgerton 1999, p. 123).

These short remarks already highlight the difficulties in approaching this term, which might explain why the concept is still in need of a theory (Oosterlynck 2013). A possible obstacle to a sound theory may be the normative orientation of the concept and the fact that social innovation is generally considered as desirable and positive (Bock 2016; Meichenitsch et al. 2016). In general, too little attention is paid to understand the dynamics behind social change and social innovations, possible conflicting motivations that go along with them, or the role of power on different levels.

It goes without saying that the conceptual ambiguity of social innovation outlined here cannot be resolved by this publication alone. This special issue is characterized by the fact that new forms of agricultural production and economic activity play a major role, however, the approaches of the four contributions to this thematic issue are quite diverse, each echoing certain aspects and mirroring various interpretations mentioned above:

Theresia Ödl-Wieser examines the potential of gender and diversity for social innovations in rural regions of Austria, taking the European participatory, territorial and innovative rural development approach LEADER as an example. She finds that rural development programs have so far only scarcely taken social categories like gender and diversity into account when defining their priorities and measures. She analyses local developmental strategies of Austrian LEADER projects submitted to a call in 2014, where gender and diversity were explicitly mentioned. The empirical results of her neo-institutional analysis indicate that the consideration of gender and diversity is an important pre-condition to generate social innovation, as well as social transformation in rural areas. Ödl-Wieser is looking into processes of empowerment especially for women in rural areas. The LEADER projects are intended to enlarge their space of action.

The article of Gramm, Giuliani, and Hoffmann presents the diversity of social farming concepts and its framework conditions in South Tyrol/Italy, contextualizing them through case studies of social farming in five European countries. Predominantly, South Tyrolean farmers provide childcare, educational services and elderly care on their farms. In the fields of rehabilitation, therapy, social inclusion, and work integration they cooperate with professionals from the social or health sector organized in social cooperatives. These are the main organizational forms of providers of social services on farms in South Tyrol and Italy in general. The field of social farming constitutes a new form of organizational management. The special legal situation of social cooperatives creates opportunities for cooperation, which are (at least at the moment) not present in Austria. The cooperatives help to solve societal problems where the responsible organizations are increasingly under pressure.

The contribution of Plank, Hafner and Stotten sets off from the notion of a currently unsustainable capitalist “imperial mode of living” in the global North and examines the potential for alternative value-driven approaches provided by commu-

nity-supported agriculture (CSA) in Austria to contribute towards a transition of the current dominant food regime. The paper introduces an interdisciplinary conceptual framework for values-based modes of production and consumption where three categories—institutions, values, and materiality—inform the empirical analysis. It analyses the extent to which CSA can realize their values-based approach and how they transform the current food regime. At present, CSA is a niche in Austria, sharing different forms of solidarity and community attachment as central ideals of their members and supporters. Moreover, the paper highlights institutional, social, and material challenges crucial for the long term success of CSA. The authors perceive CSA as a solution to the problems of an imperial mode of living; they present an alternative to the failures of the current global food regime, by proposing a new organizational form where producers and consumers participate symmetrically. Equal power relations and forms of risk sharing are at the core of this form of social entrepreneurship. At the same time, consumers develop new capacities by involving themselves into issues of food production.

The paper of Höllinger, Haring-Mosbacher, and Eder deals with aspects of social innovation at the level of individual farms. They present innovative strategies of farm survival in Austria beyond the prevailing paradigm of growth-orientation and cost minimization. Instead, the farms aim to achieve a sufficient income through qualitative improvements in niche production and direct sales, or by starting non-agricultural activities on farm. A mixed methods approach uses a quantitative questionnaire survey to examine to what extent certain characteristics of the operational structure and farm management foster operational innovation. The qualitative analysis of two contrasting cases shows that innovators do not only emphasize the financial aspect, but want to realize their personal ideas of good agricultural practice and a good life at the farm. Again, these innovations provide an alternative to the mainstream. They involve new, non-agricultural stakeholders into their strategies despite the farmers remaining the driving actors.

Bock (2016) identified three main interpretations of the concept of social innovation, which provide a different set of categorizations: the *social mechanisms* of innovations, their *social responsibility*, and their contribution to an *innovation of society*. The contributions of this thematic issue touch on all three interpretations of social innovation. The first interpretation signals that innovation takes place in a social context and in interaction with social relations, practices, norms, and values. The success of the social innovation depends on the context, potential users, and their demands. This refers to the contribution of Gramm et al., who focus on the role of the institutional settings and factors of success. But Plank et al. also touch upon this point and the farm strategies described by Höllinger et al. exhibit a different value system compared with the mainstream economic perspective.

The second interpretation provided by Bock stresses that innovations should be socially acceptable, relevant, and ethically appropriate. Therefore, the relevant stakeholders should be engaged in the innovation process. According to Bock, successful social innovations result from collective action, which entails creative social learning. Especially the CSAs examined by Plank et al. fall into this category as producers and consumers are involved at the same time. Similarly, social farming in South Tyrol

is embedded into local social networks and the LEADER groups are also examples of a collective action.

Considering the third interpretation, the innovation of society, the idea is that social innovation contributes to creating a better society through providing greater equality, social inclusion, and social justice. The aspects of gender and diversity in LEADER projects obviously target this aspect. CSA provides a niche for societal transition to sustainability and a new configuration of rural-urban relationships. Social innovations at the farm level, as researched by Höllinger et al., ensure farm resilience in light of changes in society at large and enable social inclusion of marginalized groups in rural areas.

The four papers exemplify the diversity of social innovation currently observed in rural areas of Austria and South Tyrol without aiming to be exhaustive. Innovations can be found at different levels, from farms to regional projects. The content of these innovations vary between economic strategies and social goals. Beyond exhibiting this variety and diversity, the selection of papers proves that rural areas are not residual, passive spaces dominated by societal demands articulated in urban centers, but that they are equally nodes of social change and may substantially contribute to a more sustainable and resilient future.

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