

## **THE STUDY OF SOCIAL INNOVATION THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR ENHANCING OF RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND AGRICULTURE IN LATVIA**

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**Abstract.** The paper provides an overview of social innovation theoretical aspects and presents a study of endogenous and exogenous opportunities to develop social innovation ideas that enhance more efficient collaboration between the producers of agricultural products and their customers, thus contributing to the overall rural development of Latvia.

The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of social innovation development in agricultural enterprises focusing on food producers. In the scope of the elaboration of the paper, the authors have analysed theoretical literature on social innovation and rural development as well as aggregated: secondary information from Latvian rural and national planning documents; data by Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia and EUROSTAT, and consumer cooperatives in Latvia.

The study revealed that due to increasing competition in agricultural products' market, rural entrepreneurs had parallel to existing forms of collaboration to seek for a more holistic market approach. Nowadays, the retention of the market share and ensuring of sustainable food consumption play an important role, which requires that consumers are also involved in the creation of the product value chain.

**Key words:** social innovation, rural development, sustainable consumption

**JEL code:** O31, Q13

### **Introduction**

The paper presents the authors' research aimed to identify the opportunities for developing social innovation in enterprises which produce agricultural products in Latvia<sup>§</sup>. A great deal of research works have shown that although social innovation is primary focused on meeting social needs of the population, entrepreneurs involved in social innovation also gain substantial

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benefits derived from its implementation. Based on the theoretical framework of social innovation and case studies, the authors intend to analyse creative ideas and holistic approach to value chain organization in enterprises of agricultural products; this approach has become topical being already partly exploited by some entrepreneurs.

The *aim* of the paper is to provide an overview of opportunities of social innovation development in agricultural enterprises focusing on food producers. This has set the following *tasks*:

- 1) to study the theoretical aspects and topicality of social innovation development;
- 2) to summarize the challenges and problems caused by social and economic transformations in rural areas of Latvia;
- 3) to identify the opportunities as well as promoting and hindering factors of social innovation development in food and agricultural product sectors in Latvia.

The research *object* is social innovation; the research *subject* is benefits of social innovation for enterprises which produce agricultural products and provide overall rural development. In the context of the elaboration of the paper, the authors have analysed theoretical literature on social innovation and rural development based on the sources mentioned earlier within the Latvian and European frameworks.

## **Research results and discussion**

### **The nature and topicality of social innovation for rural development**

In recent years, in the world there is a growing interest in social innovation, enhanced by a number of successful implementations of social innovation, e.g. shopping cooperatives, microcredit groups and even such huge projects as Open University and Wikipedia for their nature can be regarded as social innovations, which have found their expression in practical life. All these above examples are united by the fact that these ideas have in their early stage been focused directly on consumer needs, improving their quality of life (Mulgan G. et al., 2006).

If the theoretical literature on business innovation today is very extensive and versatile, the systematic analysis of social innovation is currently still in the process of formation. Although the management process and the generation of financial resources in raising social innovation has much in common with business innovation, still social innovation develops only if it contributes to the common goals of society. These are innovative activities and services, motivated by goal - to meet a social need. Thereby, a key difference of the rest of the business innovations from the social innovation is a focus on profit maximization. Behind business innovation usually stands targeted investor but social innovation requires different and diverse set of support resources, including policy makers' recognition and support, and often volunteering and charity (Mulgan G. et al., 2006).

Self-sufficient and stable world community would likely be very little interested in the development of social innovation. However, under current conditions, when not only weak but also the strong economic systems are no longer able to function adequately, the role of social innovation is increasing. The necessity for social innovation is determined by the growing gap between what social services offer and what is really necessary to people.

Cities are most often associated with development, while rural areas – with problems due to dispersed human capital, comparatively less developed infrastructure, unemployment, social exclusion etc. (Sumane S., 2010). Consequently, there is a need for new innovative approaches to various social issues in rural areas, for example, there is lack of opportunities for getting different levels of educational services which causes stratification of society. The authors consider that the necessity for the development of social innovation in rural areas today is determined by a number of essential facts. First, approximately 30% of all Latvia residents still live in rural areas. Secondly, agriculture and related industries account for about 3.7% of the Latvia GDP (LR CSP, 2014). Thirdly, looking at a larger scale, agriculture is one of those sectors of economy, which is not only closely related to the particular country's economic development but also with the development of all the European Union rural areas as such, and has repeatedly been defined as a significant stabilizing factor for the overall European Union's common development. Consequently, in the coming years, the objectives of Latvian national importance are: purposeful use of each hectare of agricultural and forestry land in order to make rural entrepreneurship as efficient as possible, ensuring the highest possible production of value-added and higher income rural enterprises. As a result, the situation in rural areas would improve - people would have work, and rural areas would become a more attractive place to live. This Latvian Rural Development Programme 2014-2020 (2014) strategy is subordinated to the National Development Plan of Latvia for 2014–2020 (2012), which, in its turn, is the supreme national-level planning period document. It is closely linked to the European Union planning documents and set priorities and thematic objectives, among which: production of high quality exportable products; provision of internationally competitive services; and ensuring excellent business environments are especially emphasized as of high importance. And finally, the need to improve the well-being of the rural population, reduction of poverty and social inequality as well as sustainable use of natural resources are referred to as the *Millennium Development Goals*, the goals of all countries. In achieving these goals, alongside with smart rural development policy it is also important to enhance rural population's ability to organize themselves and being able to change their attitude towards existing environmental factors.

For the last decade, it has been observed that the existing models of society both in Latvia and even more developed European Union countries are unable to handle many social problems (e.g. ensuring education and health care services throughout the country) due to formation of unfavourable regional differences because they are retrospectively oriented or oriented to

some involved parties' financial gains at the expense of the existing problems (Mulgan G. et al., 2006).

### **Challenges and problems caused by social and economic transformations in the rural areas of Latvia**

Dramatic decrease of population in the Latvian countryside during the 21st century is one of the nation's most acute survival issues that need urgent solution. Unfortunately, policy makers are often eager to discuss the re-emigration plan and the means for its implementation and increasing their effectiveness. However little attention has been paid to those communities in rural areas, where a small population of the territory are able to achieve good space functioning and development results, which demonstrates that the population's coverage in the local space is not the most crucial factor for the development of the area but only one of them (Sauka A. and Rivza B., 2014). A special attention in rural development should also currently be paid to some rural people's ability to skilfully operate all aspects of life.

Kudins (2012) emphasizes that in order to achieve socially desirable outcomes, people should be able to organize themselves, to face the challenges, identify their needs and priorities and try to satisfy them by (1) self-organisation in groups; (2) local resource mobilization, and (3) by attracting other resources. However, according to the results of research conducted in various countries, not every community\* is able to meet these challenges. The most common reasons why the best intentions of community's initiatives do not reach their goals are lack of education, experience and communication skills and incapability to consolidate different target groups for actions that could improve the lives of each group of individuals and communities as a whole.

Serious problem is fragmentation of rural population and its criticism about collaboration due to the negative experience gained from Soviet collective farms. Moreover, rural communities are not homogeneous as consist of agents<sup>†</sup> representing different social and economic groups (farmers, youth, pensioners, entrepreneurs), of which most active groups are commercial farmers and women's organizations. Significant forms that organize and consolidate rural agents are NGOs and partnerships (Sumane S., 2010).

According to the early classification of Mosher (Mosher A.T., 1966) the development of agriculture is favoured by a number of "accelerators" and "essentials", which are mainly all economic and a few political factors. In 2009 a group of scientists under the guidance of Professor Hoffmann (Hoffmann V. et al., 2009) supplemented this classification emphasizing apart from agricultural development also the importance of rural development, which resulted

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\* The term "community" means a group of people, which is characterized by common territorial, economic, social or cultural interests.

† The term "agent" refers to an independent entity, which has the ability to achieve the goal. Social agent is an agent for a given social system.

in supplementing the economic factors of Mosher's (1966) classification with several social factors, int. al. rural advisory and training services (Table 1).

Table 1

**Economic and social elements favouring agricultural and rural development**

Elements	Economic and social <b>essentials</b> for agricultural and rural development promotion	Economic and social <b>accelerators</b> for agricultural and rural development promotion
Factors of the elements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sound rural development policy</li> <li>• Basic education</li> <li>• Democracy and peace</li> <li>• Health services</li> <li>• Legal certainty and reliability of institutions</li> <li>• Credit availability</li> <li>• Basic infrastructure specifically for agriculture:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Rural markets for farm products (which includes demand for farm products at local, national, regional and international level, a marketing system and farmers' confidence in the working of the marketing system and reliability of fair prices)</li> <li>- New technologies to increase production</li> <li>- Local availability of supplies and equipment</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extension services</li> <li>• Education and training</li> <li>• Self-help promotion</li> <li>• Community development work specifically for agricultural development:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Production incentives (subsidies)</li> <li>- Conserving, improving and expanding agricultural land</li> <li>- Farmers' organizations (associations, groups, co-operatives)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Source: Mosher A.T., 1966; Hoffmann V. et al., 2009; Grinberga-Zalite G., 2011**

The society is a dynamic system which transforms and evolves. Changes can be encouraged by technological development, demographic changes, new features for individual lifestyles etc. However the consequences may result in further social inequalities in society (Macionis J.J., 2004). In Table 1, education, training and self-help promotion factors listed in the "accelerators" group are regarded as factors which enhance rural economic and social development.

Scientists from various countries have shown that self-organization of society and targeted involvement in socially significant initiatives are an essential prerequisite for harmonization of interests of various members of society (Barnes H.S., 2006; Yaojun L. and Marsh D., 2008; Petrova T. and Tarrow S., 2007; Habermas J., 1995; Kruzmetra M. and Rivza B., 2014). Pelse in her doctoral thesis, which deals with the assessment of social capital aspects in Latvia countryside, emphasizes that economic and social development in Latvia countryside cannot take place without human resources, i.e. without human capital and social capital provision. Human capital is the talents and acquired skills: knowledge, qualification, experience, and skills that can be used for productive economic activity which promotes overall progress (Pelse M., 2006). Whereas social capital is institutionalized informal norms that facilitate co-operation between two or more individuals (Fukuyama F., 1995).

## **Characterization of opportunities and hindrances to the development of social innovation in marketing of Latvian food and agricultural products**

Each social innovation is based on a good idea but not all good ideas are implemented in case if the idea does not reach the response from its target group. The reason of this is the fact that in any social system stability is very important for people, whereas innovation is often caused by changes, thus people are often more concerned about potential change than possible benefits that would occur owing to these changes. For example, Latvian farmers are very cautious in engaging in new market models - consumer cooperatives. This is due to the fact that in the relatively recent past, farmers invested both considerable material resources and their time in traditional cooperation models (e.g. established long-term agreements with the production intermediaries), thus it seems quite difficult for them to switch over to another cooperation model. In addition, any social system strengthens people's consciousness in the form of assumptions, values, and norms; and the better the existing system works by giving people confidence in its being safe and prosperous; the stronger it will strengthen people's confidence that it is the best and most appropriate for them. Therefore, people are often sceptical, for example, to different (sustainable) shopping methods, because their previous experience in shopping in hypermarkets fully meets their needs but vague consequences in a distant future perspective do not cause special distress. Finally, there is also the relationship barrier for the implementation of social innovation. The creation of innovative ideas and putting them into life both in business and public sectors depend on social ties and relationships between people; if for some reasons they fail to establish good relationships, there will be barriers to the implementation of the change planned.

In rural areas of Latvia, the development of social innovation ideas can be both endogenous and exogenous. As a positive example of how social innovation agents from the city see the potential for possible development with a farmer in one of the Latvian rural areas proves increasing popularity of "direct purchase groups" in Latvia. In these groups people receive food directly from farmers without intermediaries. A few years ago such a movement began in Riga but today new groups are emerging also in regional cities. Direct purchase movement provides an opportunity to prevent the danger of extinction of rural farms and help those small farms, so that such an idea is considered not only as an alternative and fresher products' shopping opportunity but also as a social innovation which basically contributes to the common goals of the society. Currently, there are 10 such groups in Riga and 16 – in all Latvia. The association "Latvian Friends of the Earth" estimates that there are at least 600 families in Latvia that are active weekly shoppers of such schemes (Latvijas Zemes draugi, 2014). The distribution of number of people incorporated in such schemes looks like the following: Sigulda – 80, Valmiera – 50, Smiltene, Ikskile and Cesis – 15-20 people in each. There are new groups in the development stage as well in Jelgava and Ogre (Kas ir tiesas..., 2014). Currently direct purchase groups are the most active in Riga and Vidzeme, and, in general, this movement in Latvia is still at an early stage of development. At the same time, after examination of the

ordering rules of the direct buying groups, the authors consider that there are many serious obstacles for such social innovation, which are difficult to deal with. Firstly, people prefer cheaper products because of their purchasing power and lack of knowledge about the nutritional benefits of local food. Secondly, since the principle of the delivery of the direct purchase groups implores preliminary ordering of the products and the waiting until they are supplied, people do not want to devote more time to such a shopping scheme than it could be spent in traditional shops. Thirdly, in order to be able to maximize the benefit from the direct purchase, buyers should be able to plan the necessary product range and volume well in advance, which is also an additional burden. Fourthly, such purchase schemes demand voluntary work from the buyers who should be on duty for ordering food for a whole group of people. Of course, of the utmost importance and responsibility for ensuring the functioning of the direct buying group lies on the supplier that is on the agricultural producers. Such models of cooperation often break down because the farmer is unable to ensure the order fulfilment according to the terms of the agreement; this reduces the reliability and trust of buyers to this model.

Pelse (2006) in her study of the development of farmers' social capital opportunities in Zemgale found that farm development indicators were influenced positively by farmers' participation in professional associations, unions and various public organizations of agricultural character as well as cooperatives. Therefore, those farmers who have established cooperation with other agents for ensuring their stability can better succeed in their business. It should be noted that in recent years, the promotion of cooperation in agriculture at the state level is defined as priority axis which emphasizes the need to: promote cooperation between farms, organization of a common sales points and increase farmers' awareness of the benefits of such co-operation (Development of Cooperation..., 2012).

As it was already highlighted, food and agricultural products account for a significant part of Latvian export / import balance, and the agricultural industry enterprises are important employers. The success or failure of their activities determines whether or not the rural residents will have workplaces near home. According to the Latvian food and beverage producers' point of view, the most serious factors that hinder innovation are high innovation costs and the fact that the market is dominated by influential players.

In 2010, approximately 20% of respondents representing food and beverage manufacturing companies claimed that in their enterprises innovations were hindered by the lack of both internal and external financial resources. At the same time, Figure 1 shows that in terms of exogenous motivation for the creation of social innovation 45% of companies are interested in introducing innovations to reduce their company's impact on the environment but 40% - in order to improve their employees' health and safety (Pilvere I. et al., 2014). Accordingly, representatives of business are interested in introducing technological innovation that would

also generate social benefits, because it is an essential prerequisite for ensuring sustainable consumer markets (Pilvere I. et al., 2014).

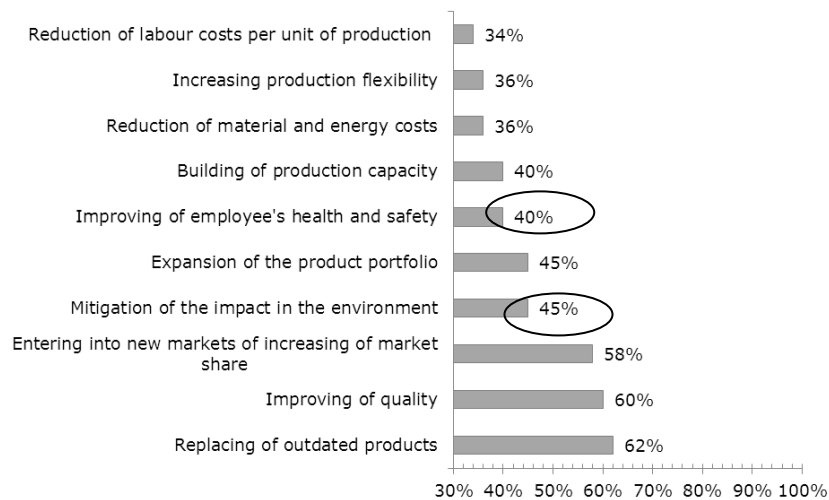


Figure 1. **The most important objectives of technological innovation in Latvia food production, 2010 (% of the number of technological innovations)**

**Source: Pilvere I. et al., 2014**

In addition to the above mentioned obstacles resulting from scarcity of financial resources that hinder invention of innovation in the company, 14% of respondents indicated that they were unable to find partners necessary for implementation of innovation. In authors' opinion, these results confirm that former traditional models of cooperation, in which participants engage in only because of their material gain, are gradually forced to change and should additionally look for more holistic approaches. It is explained by the fact that in the result of the increasing competition, retention of the market share and sustainable food consumption\* all in all play an important role. Consequently, involvement of the purchaser into the product value chain development becomes the topic of the day.

In Latvian food production, the most important sources of information for innovation initiative are: the company itself or the group of companies to which it belongs; material and equipment suppliers; the company's customers and competitors (Pilvere I. et al., 2014). Consequently, Latvian food manufacturers' competitiveness can no longer be achieved only by target-oriented investor's attraction but also by company's ability and openness to build mutually beneficial and sustainable relationships with consumers. Therefore, companies should concentrate not only on profit maximization but also contribute to the common goals of society. If social innovation idea is viable, it is essential to obtain support and public interest expressed by

\* Sustainable food consumption – the result of deliberate or unconscious actions of consumers focused on purchasing sustainable products to balance consumption and reduce waste, thereby affecting the environment as little as possible by their actions and contributing to the local economy and social responsibility by their choices (Dzene S., Eglite A. and Grinberga-Zalite G., 2014)



willingness to buy this product; sponsors and patrons should be willing to provide material contribution; whereas public sector should provide support in product procurement.

Tidd and Bessant (2010) characterize such cooperation model by comparing it with symbiosis that exists in the nature between bees and trees. In the context of social innovation, bees associate with small organizations, groups of individuals who are mobile, able to fast reaction and most importantly – they have new ideas. In nature, bees act as pollinators of the trees. Whereas trees associate with large public institutions or organizations that do not inhere special creativity, however they can be good implementers, they have resources and necessary power for influencing, which all in all enables them to develop the idea. Both parties need each other to enhance implementation of innovation in reality (Tidd J. and Bessant J., 2010).

## **Conclusions, proposals, recommendations**

1. Despite the fact that approximately 30% of all Latvian residents live in rural areas, and agriculture with its related industries account for about 3.7% of the Latvia's GDP, the social gap between rural and urban inhabitants is increasing every year. Such situation requires searching for new innovative approaches to various social issues in rural areas in order to reduce further stratification of society. Rural development of Latvia is largely determined by rural agents' ability to organize themselves in order to achieve socially desirable outcomes, which can be achieved by self-organization of the population, as well as by mobilizing local resources and attracting skilled help from the outside. Therefore, the social innovations can currently be encouraged by finding unusual ideas for obtaining multidimensional support, including the assistance provided by policy-makers and involving local agents in voluntary work and charity.

2. Although customers prefer to purchase agricultural products of Latvian origin, they are often sceptical to alternative purchase organisation schemes, because their previous experience of shopping in hypermarkets fully meets their needs. The consequences of this comfort may cost a lot to agriculture and rural development of Latvia as the local producers may not survive in this competition. It's a challenge for the whole society, especially for the Ministry of Agriculture who are to educate and motivate buyers to support the creation of short food chains. Such approach would encourage customers to engage in finding socially innovative solutions and ensuring the effective work of these chains throughout Latvia.

3. In order to strengthen sustainable local food consumption in Latvia, it is necessary to continue promotion of co-operation at the national level, i.e. between: local food producers via creation of joint marketing platform; already existing direct buying groups' activities by benchmarking the best practices. This would motivate buyers and policy makers to become involved more actively in the creation of new logistic chains, which would not be driven only by material gains but also by proactive attitude and popularization of healthy lifestyle.

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