

# A rural laboratory in the Austrian alm—Tracing the contingent processes fostering social innovation at the local level

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## Abstract

With social innovation being promoted to address the challenge of rural areas, there is a need to understand how processes of social innovation emerge and evolve at the local level. Rather than focusing on singular socially innovative projects, this article argues for an increased focus on how social innovation ecosystems and infrastructures are crucial for fostering and supporting the emergence of new perceptions, aims and practices. Using the metaphor of ‘laboratory’ as a conceptual frame to view rural development, the article outlines the emergence and long-term evolution of social innovation at the local level with a case study from the Austrian region of Mühlviertel and demonstrates how changes in perceptions and new ideas for local development are institutionalised and linked with intra-regional governance networks in a temporally contingent process linking incremental and radical social innovations.

## KEYWORDS

leader programme, neoendogenous rural development, regional development, rural development, social innovation

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## INTRODUCTION

At the EU policy level, ‘social innovation’ has increasingly been introduced and discussed as a model for novel instruments to provide ‘innovative fixes’ to both local and global challenges through bottom-up processes initiated and advanced by local actors (Schubert, 2018, p. 381). Notably, scholars have brought social innovation forward as a way to address the challenges of rural areas (cf. Bock, 2016; Neumeier, 2012, 2017; Noack & Federwisch, 2019) through local actors starting to take up innovative ideas and ‘experimenting with new solutions and slowing down the downward spiral’ (Christmann, 2016, p. 265). While rural planning rationality initially has focused on promoting an agenda of ‘intensive, industrially based and expansionist agriculture with state support’ (Lowe et al., 1993, p. 221; see also Ward et al., 2008), the continued impact of urbanisation, demographic changes and the decline of the traditional rural economic base has spurred a need to reinvent rural planning schemes (Scott, Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019a). Especially concerning shrinking and declining rural regions, which are disproportionately ‘left behind’ (cf., e.g., Shucksmith & Brown, 2016), it is clear that some regions have been able to reshape themselves while others have found themselves ‘locked’ into particular development pathways (Beer et al., 2020).

While social innovation is promoted as a ‘message of salvation’ to solve economic, demographic and sociocultural challenges, disadvantaged rural regions face (Noack & Federwisch, 2020, referring to Howaldt & Jacobsen, 2010) a lack of a ‘viable link between top-down and bottom-up in terms of the selection, financing, and scaling of local social innovations’ (Schubert, 2018, p. 382), which subsequently inhibits the implementation of new socially innovative ideas due to inadequate links between locally organised groups and macro-level governance frameworks. Many studies highlight an inimical relation between social innovation and rural development actor constellations: For example, Dargan and Shucksmith’s (2008) research on *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l’Économie Rurale* (LEADER) and innovation, disagreements between stakeholders with different agendas (e.g., Noack & Federwisch, 2019) or institutional differences (Chatzichristos & Nagopoulos, 2020). The ESPON project ESCAPE (Copus et al., 2020) recommends adjusting policies to reflect broader societal objectives besides economic growth by instigating locally made strategies that include holistic, integrated and locally tailored aims and the devolution of implementation capacity to local and regional levels in multilevel governance structures with innovative partnership arrangements. These elements are similarly stressed by Domanski, Howaldt & Kaletka (2020), who stress the importance of social innovation ‘ecosystems’ and ‘infrastructures’, meaning the ‘interfaces and collaborations of the so far differentiated and largely separate self-referential societal sectors’ and ‘their corresponding rationalities of action and regulation mechanisms and at the associated problems and problem-solving capacities’. Social innovation is thereby broadened to include ‘innovation in relations between agents and organizations existing at various spatial scales’ (Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005, p. 62). For example, how cooperation between LEADER and other local and regional initiatives can promote social innovation and neoendogenous development in rural areas to achieve area-specific impact (cf. Dax et al., 2016). Therefore, research needs to focus on how local capacities for social innovation can be enhanced (cf. also Bock, 2016) by determining what factors foster ‘opportunities or constraints beyond the responsibility of the actors involved in the participation process’ (Neumeier, 2017, p. 38).

This article outlines this issue by tracing the evolution of the local development association ‘Mühlviertler Alm’<sup>1</sup> and its institutional setting. Here, local development consists of three separate but (now) intertwined tools: (1) the EU’s LEADER programme (from 1995 onwards),

(2) the Local Agenda 21 (LA21) community consultation process (since 2001), which remerged in the 1992 UN Rio Declaration and (3) the ‘social festival’ ‘Tu was, dann tut sich was’ (German for approximately ‘do something, then something happens’; from 2013 to 2015). These three ‘tools’ for fostering local development are all encapsulated as bottom-up development approaches and present three different frameworks for how this takes place, what is supported and how or in what way the community can be involved. As also seen in other Austrian regions (Lukesch et al., 2020), the local action group (LAG; i.e. the association) has sustained continuous social innovation by combining different frameworks and funding schemes into an innovative path. With this as the point of departure, this article explores (1) the emergence and long-term evolution of social innovation locally and (2) how new perceptions and ideas locally are embedded in institutionalised intraregional governance networks.

The next part introduces the theoretical considerations of (i) a neoendogenous approach to rural development as well as (ii) the EU’s LEADER programme and its aim to foster social innovation laboratories, followed by (iii) the call to consider social innovation ecosystems and infrastructures. Second, the case study and research design are presented along with the (iv) data collection and analysis. The third part outlines the historical developments in Austria in the decades prior to EU accession and presents the emerging ideas (v), regional development actors programmes (vi) and outcomes (vii). The fourth part presents the analysis of the case study by highlighting the local change from (viii) a focus on projects to (ix) the initiation of LA21 and new ‘holistic’ aims and (x) the development of interprogram synergies. The last part presents concluding remarks regarding the process of fostering social innovation locally.

## NEOENDOGENOUS RURAL DEVELOPMENT

In many European countries, rural politics have imposed that rural planning should be implemented through an engagement with ‘participatory planning methods involving local citizens in the forming and implementation of physical changes in the villages’ (Johansen & Chandler, 2015, p. 13). Rural development strategies have thus followed the general changes in planning paradigms from ‘government to governance’, moving from ‘top-down, exogenous models to wholly endogenous approaches and now increasingly locally led approaches characterised by mixed endogenous-exogenous dynamics’ (Bosworth et al., 2016, p. 427). To achieve successful neoendogenous development, there is a need for the participation of the local population and to identify their own development objectives and the internal and external resources and opportunities (De Rubertis, 2020, p. ix; see also Esparcia & Abbasi, 2020). Furthermore, as the governance discourse has focused on concepts of community, social capital and civil society, the emphasis on communities and partnership promotes new relationships between citizens, policymakers and agencies (Taylor, 2007). This ‘neoendogenous’ approach combines local resources and local participation with interactions and learning from their wider environments and places ‘networks at the heart of development; [with] networks becoming the dynamic mechanisms through which actors can draw on combinations of local and extra-local knowledge to respond to local need’ (Bosworth et al., 2016, p. 444). Through these policy developments, rural development has become a mix of informal activism and formalised local planning processes and constituted by ‘a mix of programmes and projects (and framing directives), initiated at different scales by a broad range of actors’ (Gallent & Gkartziou, 2019, p. 25). In particular, marginal rural areas are affected by the diminished state support, and consequently local communities now play an increasing role in maintaining vital services (Bock, 2019); for example, in the form of residents who grasp the

opportunity to form a village association or other types of community-level action that can play a part in shaping local development.

The role of social innovation in addressing questions regarding how to improve the quality of life of citizens in rural areas puts social innovations at the core of neoendogenous rural development (Neumeier, 2017) but at the same time highlights the need to examine the programmes and regional development programmes that are supposed to act as a catalyst for and encourage social innovation (Dax et al., 2016). The relationship between local actors, governance, and social innovation thus becomes relevant as these programme and project constellations become to constitute frameworks where innovation takes place—either as (a) innovation within the framework or (b) as innovation of the framework itself, albeit the last is not often considered (Garcia, Anglada & Pradel, 2010). Thus, it becomes clear that territorial disparities or stigmatisation processes and social innovation dynamics, while maybe located at the local level, are inevitably embedded in a broader ‘geographical scaffolding’ (González, Moulaert & Martinelli, 2010).

## **Fostering social innovation laboratories through LEADER**

Established in 1991, the LEADER programme is the European Commission’s attempt to initiate a participatory, institutionalised ‘bottom-up’ approach to rural development in the member countries and has, since its establishment, increasingly promoted endogenous, territorial and integrated local approaches (Scott, 2004, p. 49; see also Scott, Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019b). The initiative aims to accomplish this by establishing rural development action groups, which work with a substantial degree of flexibility in implementing initiatives at a local level with the support of grants to enhance innovation and quality of life in rural areas (Dax & Oedl-Wieser 2016, p. 31). Moreover, the participation of local-level actors means an emphasis on community-based strategies (Lapping & Scott, 2019), with the strategic decisions to be made by actors who are familiar with local needs (Pollerman, 2014). The bottom-up principle at the core of LEADER aims to increase social capital building and enhance (social) innovation in rural areas (Dax & Oedl-Wieser, 2016).

Bock (2019, p. 103) writes that the shift from government to governance in the 1990s, the changes in the governing of rural areas make them ‘considered as natural laboratories for testing and understanding the opportunities and limits of multilevel governance’<sup>2</sup> due to the way active citizens play an increasingly important role. Brown and Shucksmith set forth the argument that there is a promise of exploring how place-based communities can overcome challenges and provide viable solutions by an ‘effective combination of local resources (social, economic, political, and institutional), plus effective linkages with external institutions, organisations and power centres’ (2016, p. 187). As outlined by Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005), the organisation of innovation processes to develop (or imagine) the future of society and its communities are suggested to be ‘laboratories for social capital’, which promotes learning beyond-scientific knowledge and community-solidarity culture.

This is also present in the policy language used to describe LEADER, where the metaphor of a ‘laboratory’ is used to describe the LAGs’ effort to ‘search for innovative ideas that not only would assist socioeconomic vibrancy in the locality but also serve a demonstrative function for other participating territories’ (Ray, 2000, p. 166). Furthermore, it is employed in the official rhetoric, as exemplified in the statement by (former) EU Commissioner Franz Fischler, who asserted how LEADER must be a ‘laboratory for rural development to encourage the emergence and testing of integrated and sustainable development approaches’ (as quoted in High

& Nemes, 2007, p. 108). This idea has also found resonance on the local level, for example, where the local development office was depicted as a ‘chemical laboratory’, with LEADER as a framework for ‘bringing people together and letting them react with each other’ and the subsidies as the ‘catalysts so that the reaction can take place at all or is accelerated’ (Greindl, 2007, p. 2; own translation).

While some studies propose EU programmes, through bottom-up approaches, ‘have lent support to local initiative, funding partnerships that promote “integrated, high-quality and original strategies for sustainable development”’ (Gallent & Gkartzios, 2019, p. 25), for example, LEADER has also been a target of much criticism for being ‘a change more of style than of substance’ (Navarro, Woods & Cejudo, 2016, p. 16; see also Bosworth et al., 2016, for a comprehensive review). While the LEADER approach has led to many positive developments in rural areas, there are indications that it has lost significance due to a distinct agricultural orientation in applications with less focus on innovative projects and the initial idea of an area-based bottom-up approach declining due to a growing set of regulations (Dax et al., 2016). Thereby, specific political-administrative discourses favouring, e.g., centralisation, have reduced autonomy for LAGs and are at odds with a bottom-up approach (cf. also Dax et al., 2016; van der Ploeg et al., 2000). This article continues the discussion of LEADER and general rural development frameworks, not per se through a critique of any failure in LEADER to engage with the community (or to get local communities to engage with LEADER), but rather in showing the limitation of the LEADER initiative’s ability in—alone—promoting long-term innovative and sustainable development processes on a local level.

## **Social innovation, ecosystems and infrastructures**

In this article, the base element of social innovation is primarily a term for new ways of organising social processes to find new ways of achieving objectives, be it new forms of organisation, lifestyles or regulations (Christmann et al., 2018). A component for ‘success’ is understood ‘as the development of a new form of attitude, behaviour or perception that shows a high rate of adoption as it proves to be superior to ‘traditional’ attitudes, behaviours or perceptions’ (Neumeier, 2017, p. 34). It should be noted that while ‘social innovation’ is not per se interchangeable with ‘social change’ or ‘societal change’, these distinctions are nonetheless blurred. Lukesch et al. (2020, p. 4) link the two processes with ‘social innovation initiatives [...] considered as molecular processes coalescing into societal change towards more sustainable societies’. Thereby, social innovations can be categorised as either incremental or radical innovation: The first category being the most common, with incremental, evolutionary, stepwise improvements to existing ideas, products or processes, and the latter is ‘the development and adoption of new combinations of ideas, products, or processes that challenge or disrupt the broader institutional framework’ (Biggs, Westley & Carpenter, 2010, Social Innovation and Transformation, para. 2).

There are three groups of important factors that contribute to social innovation: ‘(1) the trigger or impetus for innovation, (2) “bricolage” and the sources of new ideas and approaches, and (3) “diffusion”, whereby new ideas and approaches became adopted and implemented’ (Biggs, Westley & Carpenter, 2010, Key Factors Underlying Innovation Across the Case Studies, para. 1). These do not necessarily occur in a fixed sequence but might appear concurrently and with multiple iterations among the different components, depending on the reframing of perspectives, stakeholders and institutional support. Furthermore, the cross-scale effect of social innovations plays a significant role, for example, radical innovations at the local scale leading to transformations

at larger scales or the other way around (Biggs, Westley & Carpenter, 2010). While current policies propagate social innovation and bottom-up approaches as at the core of rural development, rural residents or rural areas are commonly not associated with innovation and new ideas (Noack & Federwisch, 2019). While the 'prevalent opinion' of rural regions emphasises the backwardness of rural life, its lack of innovation and resistance to change, recent studies show how innovation potential can be identified (Noack & Federwisch, 2019). This negative framing of rural communities inhibits local agency development as people feel 'unwelcome' or 'unfit' to participate. Furthermore, any lack of positive development might be translated into 'local cultures' causing the problems and thus blamed mainly on the people living there (Eriksson, 2010; see also Plüschke-Altorf, 2017) rather than problematising policy and rural development frameworks. For example, when a trend researcher was asked about rural municipalities suffering from outmigration, lack of funds and infrastructure in an Austrian national newspaper, the reply was, 'There are now great programs to promote projects in the regions [...] It is often the ideas that are lacking, lack of insight into what it would take to hold or retrieve people' (Der Standard, 2017; own translation).

The ESPON project EDORA asserts and problematises the role and use of stereotypes and generalisations as also a prominent feature in rural development policy literature and design. Rather than perceiving social innovation as occurring in a 'void' (see Martinelli, Moulaert & González, 2010), the focus should be on the relationship between the role of 'soft factors' that can mobilise 'social capital' locally and the governance relationships at multiple scales that together can promote cooperation among public, private and third sector actors (Copus et al., 2011). Hence, greater attentiveness is needed towards the 'ecosystems' and 'infrastructures', which act as the greater 'environment' wherein social innovations emerge and are sustained (Domanski, Howaldt & Kaletka, 2020). Moulaert and Nussbaumer (2005) emphasise that 'social innovations' cover not only single 'projects' but also extend to relations within communities, cities or regions or relationships between localities and governmental institutions. Thereby, the notion 'culture' becomes essential as 'the conditions for social innovations are not restricted to the level of actors, but understood as emerging within an ecosystem' in which social innovations can develop (or disappear; Domanski, Howaldt & Kaletka, 2020, p. 463). While local communities are presented as an essential arena for social innovation, there has been an increasing focus on developing supporting intermediary infrastructures, for example, social innovation laboratories, centres or incubator initiatives.

The article thus situates social innovation as mechanisms of change residing at and between the micro- and meso-level with the evolution of social innovations in community initiatives emerging through continuous interaction between them and governmental institutions (see also Ubels, Bock & Haartsen, 2019a). The question here is how challenges of rural areas are defined, that is, regarding the issues, causes and especially possible solutions are determined by the 'intrinsic logic' of problem-solving in a particular place (see Barbehön & Münch, 2017; Baur & Hering, 2017). Within the study of social innovation processes in spatial development (in this case, rural development), we should be attentive to how actors take into account and reflect on the consequences of their actions directed at planning for the future together with how new ideas for planning processes emerge and become institutionalised as networks and practices (see Christmann et al., 2018, 2020). Regional and rural development thereby becomes a question of understanding (1) how local and regional 'traditions of action' and associated courses of development have evolved and (2) which specific constellations of actors and tried-and-tested forms of cooperation within a framework of collective processes steer the course of development (Reimer & Blotevogel, 2012).



## METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The contribution draws on research<sup>3</sup> conducted in rural Austria through an analysis of the evolution of the local development association of Mühlviertler Alm.<sup>4</sup> The case study is a successful (Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich, 2008) self-initiated regional development association, and since 1995, the LEADER region has been in the hilly and mountainous northeastern part of the region of Mühlviertel in Austria.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the 1980s, the local communities found themselves in adverse conditions, with few regional jobs and poor conditions for the agricultural sector (Verband Mühlviertler Alm, 2009). These factors led to outmigration and ‘a feeling of hopelessness and resignation among the community’ (I:1 association’s founder). To overcome this, the association was founded in 1993 to establish regional cooperation between eight communities to initiate a local ‘self-help movement’ rather than ‘wait for help from the outside’ (Gradl, 2003, p. 2). This makes it different from, for example, LEADER region Donau-Böhmerwald located in the western part of Mühlviertel, which, even though they have worked together as a model region for sustainable climate and energy transition since 1991, only got LEADER status through the top-down decisions by the provincial government with the 2007 mainstreaming of LEADER (I:8 LAG Donau-Böhmerwald). While all of Upper Austria and Mühlviertel are covered by LEADER regions and LA21 is implemented both as intermunicipal collaborations or in single municipalities, the case study is particular in being the only association that participates in both. For example, in the other LEADER regions, LA21 is not implemented on the regional level but is instead carried out by individual communities independently, and these consultation processes are perceived as a separate tool disconnected from LEADER (I:6 LAG Perg-Strudengau). Therefore, other actors recognise the case study in the Mühlviertel as something special (I:7 LAG Mühlviertler Kernland). Therefore, the specific local development association was selected as a case study due to its pronounced focus on developing new perceptions among the local community to foster practices that could support its positive development, specifically with the ‘social’ dimensions of local development in mind. Furthermore, with the community being able to sustain this process for over 20 years and to have ‘reinvented’ it through the integration of different frameworks, the case becomes appropriate for studying the ‘connection between historical trajectories, local patterns and social innovation’ towards advancing theoretical development in this field of rural and regional development (see Moulaert & Nussbaumer, 2005, p. 63).

The research was designed to capture two dimensions of the evolution of the local development actions: The first, the temporal dimension, was covered by interviewing actors who took part in the initiation of the association along with the *Almpost* publications, which covered the period 2003–2019. The second was the scalar dimension, meaning a design that could distinguish local and regional processes. The interview questions, as well as the focus of text analysis, concerned first, the challenges for the region as well as proposed solutions and projects initiated to address these. Second, it considered regional development practices and frameworks, and third, the dynamics within the local development association and governance dynamics between the association and other institutions (e.g., regional development management offices, neighbouring LAGs, etc.). The research design thereby follows a methodology of tracing and mapping the conditions (see Hillier, 2011) to reconstruct the ‘sociogenesis’ (see Elias, 2000) or ‘evolution’ (cf. Ubels, Bock & Haartsen, 2019b) of the local development process and the linked concepts, structures, relations and institutions (see Hergesell, Baur & Braunisch, 2020). This approach follows more recent work towards a multidimensional approach to studying social innovation and territorial development by emphasising the ‘context-specific and path-dependent strategies taking into account the historical trajectory and the territorial and institutional

setting' by considering both innovations in process and content (see Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016, p. 132).

## Data collection and analysis

The data collection was done through face-to-face semistructured interviews and field visits in the autumn of 2018. Furthermore, written sources were analysed. The interviewed persons consisted of two groups: (1) key actors ( $N = 5$ ) with extensive knowledge of how the local development association has developed since its founding (e.g., the association's founder, the LAG manager, private and public consultants who support the community) and (2) actors involved in local or regional development in the region or the province ( $N = 10$ ). While the first group provides insights into the implementation in the case study, the latter corroborates the specificities of these against the other LEADER regions in Mühlviertel as well as the historical and present-day regional developments. The names of interviewees are omitted, but functions are kept to indicate their positions in the network of actors.<sup>6</sup> The text corpus consisted of process-generated data (see Baur & Lahusen, 2005), for example, newspapers, websites, pamphlets, magazines and other documents from the regional and local levels. Especially, the editorials from the magazine published by the local development association 'Almpost' ( $N = 56$ ) were analysed, together with articles from this publication ( $N \approx 150$ ).

The interviews were all recorded, transcribed and, along with the text corpus, imported into MAXQDA software and analysed through qualitative content analysis<sup>7</sup> (see Mayring, 2010). While the data amounts to the reconstruction of the broad outline of the processual development of the local development association, it is limited to the 'official' or 'public' narrative told rather than any counter positions or conflicts that took place since its founding. Two notes should be made here: As the following section will show, the historical developments at the national and provincial levels had an extensive impact on local development but were not mentioned either in the fieldwork or in the data sources. Therefore, this process has been reconstructed from other sources. Nonetheless, the dependencies on historical developments in Austria and regionally are apparent at closer scrutiny. Before presenting the analysis of the specific case study region, this following part will attempt to outline these as they emerged chronologically.

## TOWARDS (NEO)ENDOGENOUS DEVELOPMENT

In the period between 1945 and 1960, several institutions, ministries and programmes at the federal and provincial levels in Austria became involved in regional planning (Berentsen, 1985) with the aim of decentralised economic growth, reduction of inequalities and countering out-migration and out-commuting from rural regions (Berentsen, 1978). The regional policies of the 1960s and 1970s primarily aimed at economic growth and the reduction of centre-periphery disparities through the modernisation and industrialisation of underdeveloped rural regions. Dissatisfaction with the lack of results of earlier policies developed into a paradigm shift towards 'bottom-up' approaches inspired by activities at the regional and local levels (Dax, 2004), which had seen a push for a transition from planning as state-led social reform to self-determined development, social learning and social mobilisation (Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016). Despite 'the top-down nature of the national government's agenda, [...] alternative development became popular at the margins of the political system', and the 1970s saw many institutional reforms to broaden citizenship (Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016, p. 137).



## New ideas emerge

In the growing debate on agriculture and the continued survival of farms in Austria in the 1980s, new concepts emerged, such as the ‘eco-social market economy’, which aimed to counter the challenges faced by the sector due to its small farm sizes and generally unfavourable climatic situation (Narodoslawsky, 2001), which, in Austria, eclipsed the concept of sustainable development (Narodoslawsky & Grabher, 2001, p. 208). While regional disparities already appeared in the Austrian policy debates in the 1920s, due to the increasing difficulties faced by farmers in mountainous areas (Dax, 2004), the debate now saw the challenges in agriculture coalesced with general economic concerns. In a country dependent on tourism, the decline of agriculture was seen as having detrimental influences on the landscape quality and, therefore, possible trigger unforeseeable economic and societal consequences (Narodoslawsky, 2001). This spurred a call for a change in values towards more social ideals and for the general population to ‘stand shoulder-to-shoulder’ with the farmers (see Waldert, 1992). As a result, it was proposed to adopt a more ‘comprehensive approach to local and regional development, that integrated economic, social and ecological goals’ combined with a ‘call for further development of democracy to ensure active involvement of citizens’ (Narodoslawsky, 2001, p. 227). This spurred many local initiatives and laid the groundwork for many rural communities to engage in activities related to village renewal and sustainable development.

## New programmes and actors instigating rural development

Out of these new debates grew a new endogenous development discourse where the potential of regions became the focus (Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001) with the development programmes increasingly carried out by civil society actors at regional and local scales supported by consultants and only the resources mainly provided by the central state (Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016). An example of this is the ‘Special Action for the Strengthening of Developmentally Weak Areas in Mountainous Regions’ (*Sonderaktion zur Stärkung entwicklungsschwacher Räume in Berggebieten*) from 1979, which later developed into the ‘Promotion Action for Independent Regional Development’ (*Förderungsaktion für eigenständige Regionalentwicklung*–FER) in 1986. It aimed to strengthen the potential to ‘independently’ overcome regional economic problems through self-help movements and the exploration of regional development potentials through the population’s participation. Furthermore, it supported innovative pilot projects, which could later be transferred to other communities. In later phases, it also promoted cooperation between multiactor constellations (Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001).

This development brought with it new job profiles and training facilities that could support local initiatives, and many initiatives transformed themselves into for-profit organisations. The consequence was that social innovation ‘was channelled into predefined directions’ (Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016, p. 140) and mainly became the field of professionals in third sector organisations and consultancy firms rather than something developed from below together with help from outside. One such organisation was the ‘Austrian Working Group for Endogenous Regional Development’ (*Österreichische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Eigenständige Regionalentwicklung*), which was founded in 1983 as a consultancy, but smaller local groups also appeared like the ‘Study association for projects to renew the structure’ (*Studiengesellschaft für Projekte zur Erneuerung der Strukturen*–SPES), founded between 1979 and 1982. It aimed to support ‘A sustainable renewal of our structures through meaningfulness and future orientation’. It aimed to provide an

impetus for 'sustainable positive development' (spes.co.at/a) by promoting 'self-responsibility and self-organisation' and 'cooperation and partnership' (spes.co.at/b). In 1986, these principles were put into practice when they, as external consultants, supported the community of Steinbach an der Steyr<sup>8</sup> by implementing a local participation process to formulate a common vision for local sustainable development in the sense of LA21 (OÖ Verein für Entwicklungsförderung, 2006, p. 30; see also Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich, 2018). While the notions underpinning LA21 were thus already in place in Austria decades before the implementation in the case study and 'many of the factors deemed important for the early success of LA21 processes were in place' (Narodoslawsky & Grabher, 2001, p. 206), the country was nonetheless a latecomer to LA21 implementation. Although it played an active role in the preparatory phase leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit where the LA21 document was formulated, the focus nationally on the eco-social market economy prevented widespread implementation of LA21 processes, and the few pilot projects were influenced more by international examples than by national support or strategies (Narodoslawsky & Grabher, 2001, p. 210).

## Regional development 'by irritation' and EU membership

The implementation of new ideas was often disputed because the initiatives took a 'counterposition' to mainstream regional policy by explicitly seeking to 'irritate a stubborn system' (Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001, p. 105). With little acceptance in many regions, many actions were disadvantaged by insufficient anchoring in the regions and few links and mutual coordination between regional institutions between 1982 and 1995 (ÖAR-Regionalberatung, 2009, p. 23) and until the implementation of the LEADER (see Dax & Hovorka, 2002, p. 11). Nonetheless, the FER succeeded in initiating new development processes and enabled 'regional awakening' that produced both projects and a more supportive environment for project initiation. While some Austrian regions saw the limited embrace of the new paradigm and low project densities, other regions saw high project density and the exchange of ideas between projects (Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001). In the region of Mühlviertel, many initiatives emerged in the fields of agriculture, ecology, culture and social employment between 1983 and 1995 (ÖAR-Regionalberatung, 2009), and project density indicates that the FER contributed to the emergence of an endogenous development discourse regionally (Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001).

Eventually, many of the ideas developed in this period were 'pushed aside on the national level by the discourse about Austria's accession to the European Union' (Narodoslawsky, 2001, p. 228). However, ideas such as the eco-social market economy had a long-lasting influence on the progress of sustainable development in Austria by making environmental concerns perceived as interwoven with economic and social issues. It was thereby both an initial hindrance to LA21 implementation in Austria and a long-term facilitator (Narodoslawsky & Grabher, 2001). Furthermore, the experiences made with FER regarding endogenous development and the creation of regional strategies, smaller regional groups and networks to create an innovation-friendly climate (see Gerhardter & Gruber, 2001) were helpful for the later preparation of regional strategies needed for the implementation of EU programmes (Dax, 2004).

With EU membership in 1995, the federal chancellery initiated regional management offices in most districts to provide support for local actors, and the accession became a catalyst for regional development (ÖAR-Regionalberatung, 2009). The implementation of the EU's LEADER programme in Austria is described as successful, with considerable impact on regional identity-building in many rural areas and considerable impact on regional identity-building in many rural

areas (ÖROK, 2002; Oedl-Wieser, Strahl & Dax, 2010). Here, it has provided the possibility for people to take ‘responsibility for their own development’ by bringing people together to carry out their own projects and fostering networks (I:15 ELARD). Furthermore, the requirements for accessing European funding fostered the need for developing regional agendas as well as the creation of new regional structures between the provincial and the local community level and forced small communities to unite into associations (see Narodoslowsky & Grabher, 2001, p. 221).

## FROM VILLAGE(S) IN DECLINE TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In the case study, a similar transformation took place. Here, the funding available through LEADER set in motion the idea of establishing ‘a region’ before EU membership was effectuated. For the community, the initiation of the association in 1993 is seen as a ‘foundation stone’ (Verband Mühlviertler Alm, 2009). A recurring storyline encountered in the fieldwork was that a new attitude towards self-help and responsibility and new ideas for regional development through cooperation instead of ‘silo thinking’ caused a turnaround for the local development. This is reflected in the emblematic quote of one of the pioneers of the Mühlviertel region: ‘not against each other, not beside each other, but only with each other’ (I:1 Association’s founder). As in other studies (see, e.g., Ray, 1997), we can observe how a spatially related collective identity (cf. Bürk, Kühn & Sommer, 2012; Gray, 2000; Lee et al., 2005) is linked to a shared community narrative of ‘self-help ethos’ (see Kroehn, Maude & Beer, 2010).

Locally, LEADER is perceived as a crucial part of the framework for local action, not only regarding financial support but also as an ‘an instrument that gives a region [...] self-responsibility and strengthens its self-confidence’ (Greindl, 2007, p. 2; own translation). What is noticeable is the change in attitude regarding local responsibility and a change in behaviour towards more collaborative ways of acting. While identity construction in the presented case seemed to have both importance and potency for being used in the construction of a positive self-image (as in response or to overcome negative discourses), the initiation of it mainly relates to it being a ‘meeting point’ (Lee et al., 2005) for the community as an association that enables as a recognised actor. As Martinelli, Moulaert and González (2010) describe concerning urban areas, the EU programmes performed an enabling role in the emergence of local social innovation, and the construction of intermediate levels (e.g., LEADER regions or NUTS III regions) fostered by the EU has created appropriate units between the provincial and community level with the capacity to implement strategic planning (see Narodoslowsky & Grabher, 2001). Thus, the ‘local scale’ is socially and politically produced through social innovation. as a consequence of the collective action-taking that developed into ‘place-building’ and specific institutional dynamics and network-building (González, Moulaert & Martinelli, 2010).

### Development ‘by projects’ and the loss of local anchoring

The idea of local development spurred on by LEADER became to design and implement projects. As the association’s founder described it: ‘it was like regional development by projects. It was the main topic: as many projects as possible’ (I:1). In the beginning, this was seen as a success, and many agricultures and tourist offers were financed through LEADER (Holzmann, 2019). However, after the initial period, the motivation and spirit of working together began to disappear. As local residents became caught up in the projects they had developed themselves, the idea of

overcoming the local ‘crisis’ through ‘community action’ was lost: ‘If you are participating but are only doing your project, and that’s it, the egoism is rising. There are no connections, and the social contacts are missing since everyone is doing his or her own project. This is not enough for regional development’ (I:1 Association’s founder).

While the 1980s saw organisational diversity, the EU membership propagated that not-for-profit organisations and grassroots initiatives ‘had to reinvent themselves in a business-like structure if they wanted to be eligible for subsidies’ (Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016, p. 140), and consultancy became focused on business support without broader societal aspirations. The review of LEADER by Convery et al. (2010) highlights the criticism that the programme can act as a ‘conservative force’ moderating more radical rural ideas (Bruckmeier, 2000, in Convery et al., 2010, p. 373) as well as the implemented projects lacking an endogenous nature. Consequently, LEADER is limited concerning initiating fundamental change in the wider processes of social organisation (Barke & Newton, 1997 in Convery et al. (2010: 373). Observed was how the implementation of LEADER entailed a ‘local process of Europeanisation’ (see Luukkonen, 2011), where local development aims were not only arising from local needs but also entailed aligning with prevailing objectives of the rural policies propagating agriculture and tourist projects (see also Kumpulainen, 2017). While agriculture and tourism might provide economic development, the obfuscation of ‘community’ and ‘community needs’ in the development aims initiated the identification of a need to change direction from regional development pivoting around agriculture and tourism towards a socially orientated aim for local development (I:5 Mühlviertler Alm regional development association).

## LA21 and new ‘holistic’ aims

The community saw a need for external support to aid the change of development aims, and here, SPES were employed. As the consultants had also done 15 years earlier in Steinbach a der Steyr, it was suggested to implement a community consultation process. As the LEADER framework did not fund external support for this type of participation, funding was instead found at the provincial level. Inspired by the Rio Declaration, the government of Upper Austria developed a new sustainability strategy between 1992 and 1995, and when searching for inspirational examples and experiences, they studied the implementation in Steinbach a der Steyr. With these future processes as a role model for the wider development of LA21 (see Agenda 21-Netzwerk Oberösterreich, 2018, p. 2), they contacted interested local communities and engaged process facilitators. From 1998 onwards, LA21 was implemented at the provincial level to ‘develop the state in a systemic, holistic way’ through empowering communities to see local potentials and come up with new innovative solutions rather than only focus on (rural) decline (I:4 Zukunftsakademie Oberösterreich). The consultants here functioned as ‘embedded intermediaries’ who connected the communities with supra-regional networks (see Richter, 2019) ‘brokering’ (see Ubels, Bock & Haartsen, 2019b) and facilitated knowledge exchange between the local community and other spatial scales. This has been emphasised in other studies where key individuals have been key in promoting sustainability agendas (Echebarria, Barrutia & Aguado, 2009).

In Mühlviertler Alm, LA21 is described as supporting the communities in developing orientation and visions for local development (I:2 regional development consultant). The process is designed by external consultants and spans approximately 1 and a half years, with the idea to repeat this every 10 years. In the participatory process, each municipality is invited to put forward topics important to them. For example, they focused on young people in one municipality, while in another municipality, it was culture. The consequence of LA21 implementation was that rather

than the usual focus on economic development, new and more holistic topics became apparent to the community:

We came to topics like social projects, for example, a project for young people in the region. We spoke about women because sometimes our region is a little bit conservative. [...] Now they have begun to speak about the elderly people in our region. (I: 5 Mühlviertler Alm regional development association)

In the so-called ‘future profile’, which is the output of the LA21 processes, the ‘future’ is not explicitly related to specific projects but rather a proposal for broad principles or priorities. Hence, it works as a framework for articulating more idealistic ideas about local development goals (I:13 local stakeholders and active members in local initiatives in Mühlviertler Alm), for example, to expand one’s perspective to include the greater community rather than ‘just’ oneself (see, e.g., Holzmann, 2018, p. 2). Rather than being a ‘shopping list’ of projects, it equals a ‘village development strategy’ that acts as ‘a useful tool to prioritise the things that must be done by the constituent civil society groups in the village’ (Murray, 2019, p. 383). For example, it is expressed that they want to ‘pay more attention to their region’ and develop towards a ‘caring society’, taking more responsibility, with conscious participation and independent action (Verband Mühlviertler Alm, 2013).

## The development of interprogram synergies

With LEADER and LA21 situated within different institutional frameworks, linking the two is key to fostering local development. In Mühlviertler Alm, the implementation is explicitly organised into two different groups: the LEADER group, which puts together ‘what kind of projects to choose’ and the LA21 group, which focuses on the ‘visionary part’; but with the two groups working together to ensure synergy:

It is the use of the LA21 to know where we want to go, to have objectives [...] for the LEADER strategy. Both sides are very important: the project-orientated LEADER funding and on the other side LA21 [to produce topics] because it is the balance, the working together, that is very important. (I:1 association’s founder)

This attitude is echoed at the regional (Mühlviertel) and provincial (Upper Austria) levels, where there is a similar idea about linking the two programmes. Here, the regional management office actively supports finding suitable funding sources (I:3 regional management office for LA21), and likewise, there is continuous contact between the offices for LEADER and LA21 on the provincial level to ensure coordination (I:4 Zukunftsakademie Oberösterreich). The historical developments of the region thus become apparent, for example, in the framework of consultancy and the interregional spread of novel ideas (i.e. from the SPES and the support structures established through FER).

The emergence and value of interprogram synergies are furthermore apparent in the community’s participation in the ‘social festival’ ‘Tu was–dann tut sich was’.<sup>9</sup> Similar to LA21, the idea of applying to host the festival was a suggestion by the external consultants working with the community. It aimed to ‘increase gross regional happiness’ (local residents cited in OÖ Nachrichten, 2014; own translation) by ‘invit[ing] and encourag[ing] citizens to take the initiative’ and offering

residents a ‘better possibility to say yes to their region by doing things together and experiencing a new community’ (Gradl, 2013, p. 2; own translation). It fostered 74 projects,<sup>10</sup> all smaller than those typically implemented through LEADER. It thus lowered the barrier to project initiation, leading to the participation of people who had never or rarely participated in regional development (LAG Management Mühlviertler Alm, 2017, p. 76). As the LEADER framework aims to fund innovative and novel projects, it means that the two tools ‘played very well together’ (I:2 regional development consultant).

Social innovation thus expands into the innovation of the institutional framework at the local scale. While LEADER gives possibilities for structured development through formalised project applications and strategies and the LA21 process invites locals to develop visions for the future, the festival underlined that all rural residents are ‘welcome participants’ in local development (see Edwards-Schachter, Matti & Alcántara, 2012). With and increased government LEADER criticised for its bureaucracy control, which limits the autonomy of LAGs and deters marginalised groups from participating (Navarro, Woods & Cejudo, 2016), the social festival opened up possibilities for citizen engagement in local development. This rationality of Tu was integrated into the latest LEADER strategy plan (LAG Management Mühlviertler Alm, 2017). Notable here is the amalgamation of funding sources *and* development discourses (i.e. from LEADER, LA21 and Tu were) into one plan for local action. While ‘networked rural development’ implementation was already clearly observed in the case study, the creation of the new synergies shows how dissolving boundaries between public, private and civil society actors (see Baker & Mehmood, 2015) and different funding bodies interlink the emergence of social innovation with the development of social innovation infrastructure. This assessment echoes other Austrian studies where successful social innovation is fostered by actors generating innovative action by mixing diverse funding streams from various European and state-based support schemes (see Lukesch et al., 2020; Narodoslowsky & Grabher, 2001).

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE PROCESS INSTIGATING SOCIAL INNOVATION AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

As rural residents have become involved in bottom-up approaches to local development in an attempt to shape their future, it is clear that they are dependent on external funding and the formation of partnerships (Murray, 2019, p. 383). This article traced this process temporally and spatially using the case study of Mühlviertler Alm to understand the emergence of social innovation at the local level as it is shaped by the ‘context’ of different discourses or institutions (see Wuthnow, 1993) and the emergence of new ‘cultural formations’ (see Hicks, Janoski & Schwartz, 2005, p. 10) fostering the promotion of new ideas among local actors. By mapping developments from the initiation of rural development policies in Austria and forward, it becomes clear that the path to the holistic discourse focused on both economic as well as social dimensions of local development through innovative and participative practices is not a predictably or strongly non-linear process (see also Biggs, Westley & Carpenter, 2010). Furthermore, a detailed analysis shows that innovation in local practices emerged out of a coalescence of contextual factors without clear linear ‘cause-effect relationships’ (see Moore, Westley & Nicholls, 2012). For example, the emergence of holistic, sustainable and endogenous development in the 1970s and 1980s, together with ideas related to local participation supported by consultancy networks, had already emerged long before the founding of the case study. While crucial for developing institutions and regional support structures regionally, it only (re)emerged locally decades later together with the emergence of



local discourses of crisis, self-responsibility and the linking of independent communities through the construction of the new regional structure required for LEADER implementation.

While the concepts of radical and incremental social innovation function well as theoretical lenses towards differentiating processes, the case study thus shows how radical innovations emerge locally after incremental innovation processes of institutional changes and learning processes. Therefore, the success of local social innovation is not the implementation of, for example, LEADER alone but instead the successful development of interrelations and synergies with other local and regional actions and frameworks. Similarly, while LA2I, or individual projects carried out as part of Tu, could be analysed individually as social innovations, it is in the amalgamation of incremental changes over time into a 'bricolage' of new ideas and approaches (see Biggs, Westley & Carpenter, 2010) in a contingent process comparable to a series of palimpsests (see Baur & Hering, 2017) traversing geographical and scalar boundaries and connecting different ideas, actor groups and institutions that fostered radical social innovation locally. These findings thereby propose to see radical and incremental social innovation as inherently interlinked.

This further means that the search for catalysts in development processes should be expanded beyond any initial delineation of 'local' case studies and revise the dualisms of 'top-down and bottom-up' and 'state and civil society' (see also Novy, Hammer & Leubolt, 2016, p. 143). Instead, we should engage with methodological and analytical approaches that understand singular social innovations as part of larger movements within local/regional/supra-regional ecosystems and infrastructures with the layering of relations between different levels towards fostering social innovation locally. Returning to the idea of the laboratory as a lens through which to view local change and the emergence of new practices and concepts, the fulcrum must be not just the idea of bringing people together as many development approaches propagate. Instead, rural development policies must work to foster tools and processes that together can act to develop regional frameworks *that catalyse and sustain local* social innovation processes. Then, like others have recognised (see, e.g., Baker & Mehmood, 2015; Christmann, 2016; Moulaert et al., 2010), the local level *can* become pivotal for local initiatives to overcome negative development trajectories.

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Interview research data are not shared.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>An 'alm' is a 'seasonal mountain pasture' utilised in the Alps.
- <sup>2</sup>For its use in urban studies see, for example, Dorstewitz (2014), Hirvonen-Kantola et al. (2015) and Karvonen and van Heur (2014, p. 380).
- <sup>3</sup>The research was undertaken as part of the project RurAction: Social Entrepreneurship in Structurally Weak Rural Regions: Analysing Innovative Troubleshooters in Action (2016-2021), funded by the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No. 721999. This project was coordinated by the Leibniz Institute for Research on Society and Space and investigated the conditions under which socially innovative solutions to rural problems emerge and how they can be supported.
- <sup>4</sup>The Mühlviertler Alm has approximately 18,000 inhabitants and covers more than 450 square km. The region is located in the Central European middle mountains at an altitude varying between 500 to 1,000 m, which, in parts, defines it as a mountainous region (the Austrian minimum is 700 m; EEA, 2010, p. 27) with hills and valleys dominating the landscape.
- <sup>5</sup>At the times of discourse changes both in policy and among local actors, the region of Mühlviertel ranked as one of the regions in Austria with the lowest gross regional product, with a score of less than half of the Austrian average in 1988 (Lichtenberger, 2000, p. 416). The high plateaus of the Mühlviertel are disadvantaged, with a harsh climate both in summer and winter, compared to most other regions in the country (Lichtenberger, 2000, p. 154).
- <sup>6</sup>The full list of interviews is included in the Appendix.
- <sup>7</sup>The key themes which emerged were 1: The 'historic' developments of the region and the change from negative to positive outlook. 2: the necessity of 'networked' rural development, cooperation and external support. 3: the importance of development programmes like LA21 and LEADER. 4: A focus on 'holistic' aims. 5: the identification of local participation and responsibility as key for local development. For a more comprehensive presentation of text analysis see Stoustrup (2021).
- <sup>8</sup>Additionally, located in Upper Austria but south of Linz and approximately 60 km from the case region.
- <sup>9</sup>The festival was first initiated in 2010 by the academic Prof. Clemens Sedmak to 'break out of this academic ivory tower' and 'revive local knowledge and preserve it through exchange' (Sedmak quoted in Die Furche, 2014). It is designed to move from region to region and combines an organisational framework and project consultancy with financial means to realise projects. It took place in Mühlviertler Alm from 2013 to 2015.
- <sup>10</sup>Examples of projects are clubs for eating together, reading clubs to bring young and older people together, community run book sharing facilities and dating events for people in the region, as well as many others. Common for the projects is that they are based on 'ideas for a good life together, to bridge the borders between different cultural origins, between young and old, between poor and fortunate' (Tu was, dann tut sich was, 2013; own translation).

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## APPENDIX I: LIST OF INTERVIEWS

- I:1 Former mayor and founder of the regional development association (2018). Personal interview. In person, Mühlviertel, Upper Austria.

- I:2 Consultant formerly working with the regional development association (2018) Personal interview. In person, Vöcklabruck, Upper Austria.
- I:3 Regional management office in charge of LA21 in Mühlviertel (2018) Personal interview. In person, Freistadt, Upper Austria.
- I:4 Zukunftsakademie Oberösterreich; in charge of regional development and LA21 (2018) Personal interview. In person, Linz Upper Austria.
- I:5 LAG manager Mühlviertler Alm regional development association (2018) Personal interview. In person, Unterweißenbach Upper Austria.
- I:6 LAG manager Perg-Strudengau (2018) Personal interview. In person Waldhausen im Strudengau, Upper Austria.
- I:7 LAG manager Mühlviertler Kernland (2018) Personal interview. In person, Freistadt, Upper Austria.
- I:8 LAG manager Donau-Böhmerwald (2018) Personal interview. In person, Linz, Upper Austria.
- I:9 LAG manager Urfahr West (2018) Personal interview. In person, Puchenu, Upper Austria.
- I:10 LAG manager Sterngartl Gusental (2018) Personal interview. In person, Linz, Upper Austria.
- I:11 Member of Provincial Parliament of Upper Austria (2018) Personal interview. In person, Ottensheim, Upper Austria.
- I:12 Member of Provincial Parliament of Upper Austria (2018) Personal interview. In person, Linz, Upper Austria.
- I:13 Local stakeholders and active members in local initiatives in Mühlviertler Alm (LA21 and OTELO) (2018) Personal double interview. In person, Silberberg, Upper Austria.
- I:14 Representative in ELARD and Austrian LEADER Forum (2018) Personal interview. Written interview. Per email.
- I:15 Representative Austrian LEADER Forum (2018) Personal interview. In person, Eferding, Upper Austria.