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**Social innovation strategies for the development  
of rural areas. Case studies in agricultural  
cooperatives of Formentera (Balearic Islands)  
and Solsonés (Catalonia)**

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## ARTICLE SECTION

### **Social innovation strategies for the development of rural areas. Case studies in agricultural cooperatives of Formentera (Balearic Islands) and Solsonés (Catalonia)**

*Abstract:* Rural areas are one of the most prominent subjects of development policies with a territorial approach. In recent years, social innovation has been explicitly introduced in this approach and also in ruralist public agendas. Through social innovation, the importance of promoting new social relations and their contribution to rural development processes is recognised. This article aims to identify social innovation processes in rural areas and to detect the most strategic elements that explain its to the sustainable territorial development of rural areas. To this end, a mixed methodology is used and two case studies linked to agricultural cooperatives located in Catalonia and the Balearic Islands are selected. The results point out the context of innovation, its origins, and the main socially innovative elements that contribute to the local development of the respective rural areas. The configuration of heterogeneous networks and new forms of collective action concerning Social Economy entities are some of the most outstanding elements of social innovation illustrated by this work.

*Key words:* rural development; governance; social capital; social relations; Social Economy; LEADER; public policies.

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## IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. La innovación social es un fenómeno que siempre ha estado presente en varias iniciativas de desarrollo local en áreas rurales.</li><li>2. A través de la innovación social los territorios rurales encuentran nuevas formas de interacción entre actores públicos, entidades de la economía social y sociedad civil.</li><li>3. La innovación social es una forma de generar nuevas iniciativas agrarias de carácter sostenible e inclusivo, con fuerte arraigo local y vinculadas a los recursos específicos del territorio.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Social innovation has always been present in several local development initiatives in rural areas.</li><li>2. Through social innovation, rural territories discover new ways of interacting between public actors, social economy entities and civil society.</li><li>3. Social innovation can generate new sustainable and inclusive agricultural initiatives, locally embedded and linked to the specific resources of the territory.</li></ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. La innovació social és un fenomen que sempre ha sigut present en diverses iniciatives de desenvolupament local en àrees rurals.</li><li>2. A través de la innovació social els territoris rurals troben noves formes d'interacció entre actors públics, entitats de l'economia social i societat civil.</li><li>3. La innovació social és una manera de generar noves iniciatives agràries de caràcter sostenible i inclusiu, amb fort arrelament local i vinculades als recursos específics del territori.</li></ol> |
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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, the notion of social innovation has been recovered in rural studies. It refers to processes where social relations are reconfigured in a novel way in order to solve needs and/or take advantage of territorial opportunities in the territory. However, social innovation is not an entirely new phenomenon. It has always been present in various processes of local development in rural areas, although it is an emerging research topic. Social innovation is still a "black box". We knew about its existence and importance, but we do not know what it consists of or how to support it. This work aims to identify social innovation processes in rural areas and detect the key elements that explain the contribution of social innovation to sustainable territorial development in rural areas.

Rural studies usually describe social innovation as a process i) based on collective actions and transformations in social relations, ii) where the main changes and results are produced on intangible elements, iii) whose originality or novelty is relative to the context in which they are developed and in which they are developed, iv) and in which civil society is involved to varying degrees. Taking all these premises into consideration, in this article we define social innovation as a process of reconfiguration in social relations between actors of a given territory -also with actors outside the territory- that leads to new forms of action that pursue collective objectives, whose main result is the creation of social value. Thus, social innovation is a means to find new and more effective solutions to traditional rural problems, such as the lack of equipment and services or the existence of governance mechanisms that are poorly adapted to the reality of these areas. At the same time, social innovation is an end in itself that allows rural societies to be reconnected internally and externally.

In this work we select two case studies in two Spanish rural areas of different configuration. On the one hand, the case of Cooperativa del Camp, on the island of Formentera, Balearic Islands. The other case study is the Biolord cooperative, in Vall de Lord, Solsonés, Catalonia. These cases are selected because they are located in rural territories that face similar challenges, such as the progressive abandonment of agricultural activity, and are based on initiatives linked to agricultural cooperatives. At the same time, they represent areas with very diverse geographic characteristics and socioeconomic dynamics. Data collection for the case of Cooperativa del Camp was carried out between November 2017 and January 2018. In the case of Biolord it took place in November 2018. In total, 39 interviews were conducted, 29 in Cooperativa del Camp and 19 in Biolord.

The analytical process of the research was based on the triangulation of the information generated from the documentary analysis in combination with the analysis of the data from semi-structured interviews, participant observation and structured interviews. Qualitative data was examined using the technique of qualitative content analysis. Quantitative data from the structured interviews were analyzed through the Social Network Analysis approach.

The main results of the article show, in the case of Cooperativa del Camp (Formentera), the potential of local governments, when they are endowed with sufficient powers and budget, to activate and lead socially innovative processes. This initiative illustrates the role of innovation in creating sense of place through new hybrid alliances, in this case between local administration, an agricultural cooperative and civil society. The

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<sup>1</sup> Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

reactivation of local agriculture, the recovery of the rural landscape and the search for synergies between agriculture and tourism are some of the aspirations of the actors involved. This process also exemplifies the need to incorporate civil society in local development processes with new forms of participation and governance mechanisms. Social creativity and leadership are determining factors in finding new solutions that involve a critical mass of actors sufficient to activate initiatives with strong impact. Likewise, Social Economy entities, such as cooperatives (in their different formulas), allow hosting plural actors and grant the necessary flexibility to experiment with new social interactions and organizational modes.

In the case of Biolord, the findings are a bit from those derived from Cooperativa del Camp. In this case the role of the local or supra-local public administration (both the local action group and the municipalities or associations) was completely null. This is an example of how society, especially the Social Economy, is capable of facing a change the economic paradigm with its own tools and resources. Part of these resources comes from the involvement of Biolord members in different non-profit entities, which has provided them with numerous sources of information and support for the creation and dissemination of the initiative. This cooperative is an example of how heterogeneous networks –an essential characteristic of social innovation– provide wealth and social capital to the territory. They expand the effect of their network by including more social groups and, of course, greater territorial scope. Likewise, the findings illustrate that the development programs to promote the creation of cooperatives, such as AraCoop, can generate synergies with other entities participating in the project. In other words, the program has led AraCoop to be established as a comprehensive rural cooperative with great impact locally. Therefore, rural communities should take these results into account and envision new programs for creating rural cooperatives and connecting heterogeneous rural actors -also from outside the local area-.

To sum up, the article points out the need to pay greater attention to social innovation in rural development studies and policies. It is a complex, intangible and diverse phenomenon. This complicates its understanding, but also makes the design of support instruments much more difficult. In any case, these initiatives require positive contexts for creativity, experimentation and, ultimately, innovation. More participatory forms of local democracy, improvements in social and civil liberties, and/or decentralized and less concentrated forms of government are useful ideas that can promote the emergence of socially innovative initiatives and, therefore, contribute to the sustainable, inclusive and territorially-balanced development of the rural areas.