

# Conceptual Framework: Enhancing Social Inclusion in Rural Areas via the Social and Solidarity Economy

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**Abstract:** This factsheet presents an initial conceptual framework aimed at understanding how the social and solidarity economy (SSE), through social innovation (SI), can promote social inclusion, a good life, resilience and sustainability in rural contexts. Based on a literature review, the framework highlights the challenges of vulnerability and social exclusion that rural communities often face. The study highlights the transformative potential of SSE and SI in this context. By promoting empowerment and community development, these approaches can create structures and systems that ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities, thereby improving social inclusion and good life. Finally, they can contribute to building resilient and sustainable rural communities.

## Introduction

The Deliverable 1.1 provides an initial integrated conceptual framework (IICF), which sets the scene of SERIGO's objectives and guides further research activities. The report outlines the pathway of SSE according to its requirements and potential in how to strengthen the visions, especially social inclusion in rural areas. The IICF builds on a comprehensive literature review and seeks to answer the following questions:

- How can the challenge of vulnerability and social exclusion be defined in rural areas and what are the relation between them?
- How can visions of social and spatial justice be achieved through social inclusion, resilience, good life, and sustainability?
- How can these visions be achieved through the potential of SSE?

## Challenges

SERIGO aims at identifying and analyzing the diverse drivers of social exclusion and the challenges addressing disparities and marginalization in rural areas in Europe as well as gaining a better understanding of the needs of and challenges faced by people in vulnerable situations in various rural areas across Europe. However, there is no agreed definition of "rurality" and there are ongoing debates about how best to define the concept. The IICF bases on a combination of the OECD (2016) classification and the triple model according to Halfacree (2006). Hence, peripheral areas are far away from urban centers and regarded as interconnected with socio-cultural and socio-economic networks, which also reflects the threefold of rurality: localities, representation and lives.

Furthermore, also the concept of vulnerability misses clear definitions. However, it can be loosely defined as a state of susceptibility to harm from stresses that derive from a variety of dimensions, such as the social, economic, political, and institutional dimension (Peroni & Timmer, 2013). It also tends to reflect a state of powerlessness and marginality, and a lack of capacity to adapt (Adger, 2006).

Social exclusion, in turn, is intertwined with the concept of social inclusion. Their relationship could be described as a continuum, where people experience varying degrees of participation and unequal access to resources, rights, and capabilities (Boardman et al., 2022). Social exclusion is understood as a dynamic process, whereby individuals and groups may face exclusion in different aspects of life (Levitas et al., 2007; Madanipour et al., 2022).

To sum up, vulnerability and social exclusion are closely linked, especially in rural areas where limited access to resources and opportunities can exacerbate both. Both concepts are influenced by many sources affecting the degree of vulnerability and social exclusion. When vulnerability is high, individuals or groups may face higher risks of social exclusion due to their inability to access essential services or participate fully in community life. For example, without access to quality education or job opportunities, individuals may struggle to escape poverty, leading to further marginalization. Conversely, social exclusion can deepen vulnerability by denying individuals or communities access to critical resources and opportunities needed to thrive.

## Visions

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There are several visions within SERIGO, which are also embedded in the rural vision of the EU (European Commission, 2021) and underpin the quest for justice and equality.

From sociological perspective inclusive societies strive for greater social justice, equality, and collectivism in response to the systematic and global oppressions embodied and perpetuated by exclusionary societies (Allman, 2013). Social justice is closely linked to democracy and it requires social inclusion, which in turn represents the grade of participation of people in society (Farrington & Farrington, 2005). Social inclusion also improves individuals' capabilities to fulfil socially expected roles, widening connections based on respect and acknowledgment, and strengthening social connections, cohesion, integration, or solidarity (Silver, 2015).

Closely linked to social inclusion is also the vision of resilience, which is a dynamic process that involves drawing from various sources of strength and resources to enable individuals to face and overcome challenges over time and trajectory, and interacting with adversity and life changes (Kirmayer et al., 2009). Furthermore, SERIGO wants to achieve a good life and sustainability in rural areas. Good life is also impacted by many socio-demographic factors interrelating with economic factors (Blanchflower, 2021; Huijsmans & Piti, 2020; Zitelny et al., 2022), and sustainability includes the capacity to support, maintain or endure. Achieving sustainability requires information and knowledge that actors may not fully possess or accept, and additionally may not be able to afford (Kopnina & Shoreman-Ouimet, 2015).

All of these visions are deeply interconnected. For instance, improving social inclusion will also impact on the well-being of individuals and communities and increase their resilience to cope with transitions and difficulties. These collective capacities to respond to change can enhance sustainability, supporting the current needs of the community while ensuring their future.

## Pathway

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SERIGO's way of achieving all these lies in the potential of the Social and Solidarity Economy

(SSE). SSE has emerged as a paradigm and provides a framework for addressing the multifaceted issues such as social inequality challenges in the world. A key aspect of SSE is its inherent link with Social Innovation (SI), which can stimulate new solutions to social problems. SI in the context of SSE emphasizes collaborative approaches, community participation, and the co-creation of value, thus providing a pathway to mitigate vulnerability and social exclusion.

By fostering an environment in which marginalized groups can actively participate in economic and social processes, SSE and SI together can provide a dynamic mechanism for Community Development (CD) and empowerment at individual and collective levels. CD is a long-term, value-based process that aims to promote social justice (Gilchrist & Taylor, 2016) and empowerment is a process of gaining the capacity to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999).

At the collective level, SI forms the foundation for fostering social capital, which is crucial for community development. Moreover, CD itself enhances social capital, which in turn leads to SI. At the both individual and collective levels, SI can develop capability, while at the same time its development depends on existing capabilities. Strengthening capabilities provides the resources and agencies needed to empower vulnerable and excluded individuals and communities, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging and contributes to enhance the CD. Therefore, by engaging with diverse stakeholders, promoting collaborative efforts and SI, SSEs not only address social needs, but also facilitate CD and empowerment that are necessary for social inclusion.

## Initial Integrated Conceptual Framework

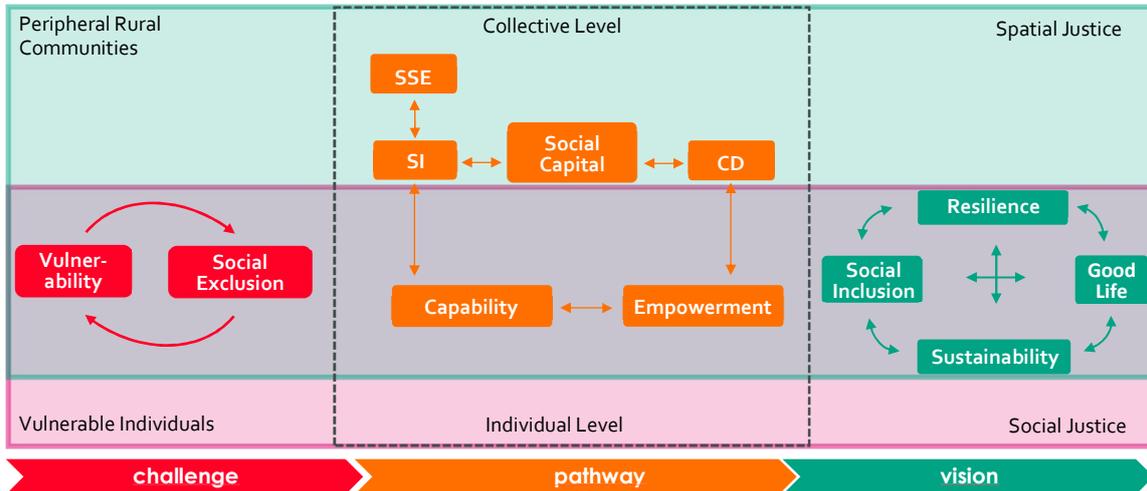
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Addressing the challenges of social exclusion and vulnerability in rural areas requires innovative solutions such as SSE as initiator and implementer of SI. By leveraging the potential of SSEs through the pathway of SI, empowerment and CD at both individual and collective levels in a rural context, it is possible to move towards a vision of social inclusion, resilience, a good life, and sustainability. This framework not only contributes to understanding of the potential of SSEs to enhance social inclusion in rural areas, but also supports the conduct of empirical research in SERIGO.

The integrated conceptual framework (Figure 1) shows how SSE can through SI to address vulnerability and social exclusion at both individual and collective levels in a rural context. The levels of analysis in this model are shown in two colors: green and pink, with their overlap shown in grey. The framework is divided into three sections:

challenges, pathway, and visions. The challenges section illustrates the link between vulnerability and social exclusion. The pathway section outlines the steps to achieving the visions through SSE and SI. Finally, the vision section presents the ultimate goals and the relationship between them.

Figure 1: IICF



Source: Own work based on the literature review.

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